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OBSTACLES PREVENTING HIGH ACHIEVERS FROM LOW
SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS TO ENTER
UNIVERSITIES: A REVIEW

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Abstract:

All students, regardless of socioeconomic status, deserve equitable access to universities. However, many high-achieving students are excluded from this privilege, most of whom come disproportionately from families on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. This study aims to identify the barriers that influence high achievers from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds to pursue higher education. A total of ten relevant articles from prominent publication databases were chosen for this review. The results show that the majority of researchers believe that parents' negative attitudes, parents' low expectations, first-in-family, vogue career identity, financial factor, and thinking style factor are the primary impediments to high achievers from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds attending university. The results also enable university career counsellors to assist high achievers from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds to overcome any obstacles to effectively join universities and fulfil their educational goals.

Keywords:

High Achievers, Key Barriers, Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds, University Career Counsellors

Introduction

Socioeconomic status (SES) refers to the social and economic position of an individual in a community (Campbell, 2013). An individual's salary is the basic measure of his or her SES. Income refers to the salary an individual will receive in their job. The median annual income for high SES is between 84,500 to 110,000 Swiss francs, while the median annual income for low SES is between 28,600 to 67,600 Swiss francs (OFS, 2016). SES can also be measured by parental education level (Marks et al., 2000). Educated parents impose value and the importance of education on their children compared to less educated parents, who consider money as their main priority. Educated parents will understand the requirements of education and assist their children in their daily school life (Marks et al., 2000). Educated parents will have a higher possibility to send their children to higher education. Different levels of parental education will affect an individual from attending higher education institutions.

High achieving students are often described as bright, curious, intelligent, motivated, and driven to accomplishment (Davis & Rimm, 2004). High-achieving students from low SES are found in rural areas. These students drop out of high school at very low rates, and more than 90 percent enter universities (Wyner et al., 2007). However, they face barriers to enrol into university and their consideration of choosing the right program is influenced by many factors.

The main objective of the review is to investigate the barriers that influence high achievers from low SES to pursue higher education. The issues of SES, including family background of the high achievers, and the factors which are considered by high achievers to choose their programs at higher education, are discussed in this review. Besides, we also investigate research on other countries for a counsellor to play a role in helping these low SES high achieving students to identify suitable programs for their higher education. The questions below are addressed:

1. What are the challenges faced by low socioeconomic students to have less aspiration to enter into higher education?

The question focuses on the challenges faced by low SES but high achieving students to have less aspiration to enter higher education. The publications reviewed help the reader to figure out the challenges for low SES students to enter into higher education.

2. What are factors involved for low SES but high achievers to consider their programs at higher education?

The question focuses on the internal and external factors which influence low SES but high achieving students to choose a program at higher education institutions.

3. How does a career counsellor help low socioeconomic but high achievers in choosing a suitable program?

The first two questions help the career counsellor to understand the challenges faced by low SES but high achieving students and the factors that influence them in choosing their programs at higher education institutions. Hence, the questions focus on the roles played by career counsellors to help the low SES but high achievers to enter into higher education by choosing a suitable program.

Methodology

The first step in this systematic review is to identify vital keywords and phrases in order to answer the research objectives. The keywords considered are "low socioeconomic", "high achieving students" or "high achievers", "higher education" or "university" or "universities"

and “career counsellor” or “career counsellors” or “career counselling”. The phrases considered are “barriers of low SES students getting into university” and “factors that influence high achievers in choosing their programs at higher education”, “the role of a career counsellor in helping low socioeconomic students”. The keywords and phrases were searched on UPM subscribed databases to obtain the relevant articles. Since the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the journals are valid and reliable, hence, we avoid author prejudgment, perception, bias and personal experience. The readers read the systematic review in a fair and objective manner.

The Search Strategy

The review was done by using the UPM Library subscribed databases. Ebscohost and Springer databases were used to identify the relevant research articles. Keywords like “low SES” and “high achievers” were used on the subscribed databases to obtain a list of the related studies. The first inclusion criterion was that articles should be in English. The next inclusion criterion was the year of the literature published. The timeframe considered was from 2019 to 2020.

There were a total of 1998 relevant articles found by searching low SES or socio-economic or income or social class and high achievers or high achieving students. To get retrieve relevant articles, the inclusion criterion, “career counselling/ career counseling”, was considered in the search process. There were 71 articles left after including the “career counselling/ career counseling” criterion. Timeframe is the next inclusion criterion, and there are 69 articles left. The author searched for the best 10 papers among the 69. All articles were downloaded as PDF format and saved in Google Drive for easy access by the author (see Tables 1, 2). All articles were reviewed and filtered. A brief summary of each article was included on next section. The steps for researching the best articles are presented in Figure 1.

Table 1: Inclusion Criteria of The Systematic Review

Inclusion Criteria	Particulars	Literatures identified	Remaining literature
Key terms	Low SES and high achievers	2073	2073
Language	English	2057	16
Year	2000 to 2018	1730	327
Keyword	Career Counselling	47	280

Table 2: Exclusion Criteria of The Systematic Review

Exclusion Criteria	Particulars	Literatures identified	Remaining literature
Subject area	Non-relevant area	10	37

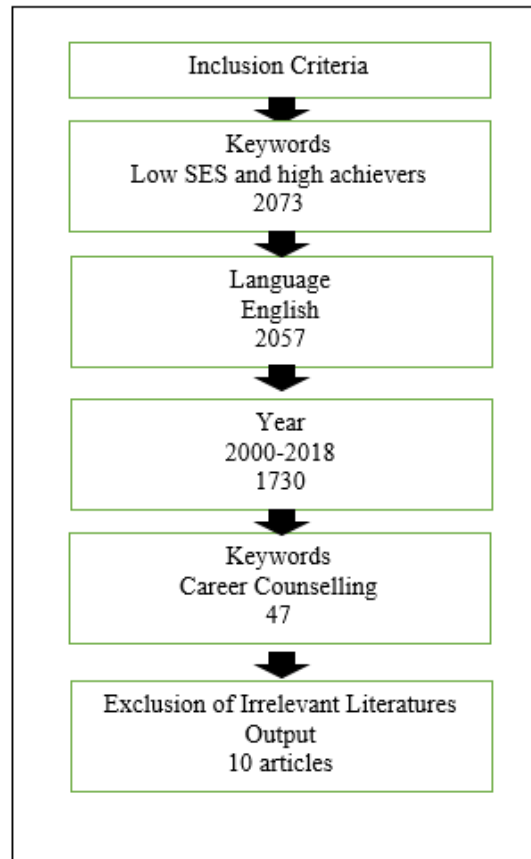


Figure 1: Flow Chart of The Systematic Review

Findings of The Review

Table 3: Finding of Literature Review

Author & Year	Title of Journal	Country	Relevant Findings
Gonzalez (2015)	Barriers to College Access for Latino/a Adolescents: A Comparison of Theoretical Frameworks	United States	Synthesizing the barriers literature briefly as a basis for comparing and evaluating possible frameworks for addressing barriers. The bridging multiple worlds model, social capital theory, and social cognitive career theory are 3 possible frameworks for addressing barriers to college access for Latinos/as.
Harless and Stoltz (2018)	Integrating Narrative Approaches with Early Recollections to Provide Career	United States	Students from low-socioeconomic-status backgrounds do not have the resources or opportunities to explore their career identity using traditional methods.

	Counseling With Low-SES Secondary Students		Therefore, it is important that school counselors provide individualized career counseling using a narrative approach to help such students address the work–life task and develop a clear career identity.
Kim (2011)	The Relationship Between Thinking Style Differences and Career Choices for High-Achieving Students	United States	The findings of this study demonstrated that the effect of program on the different thinking styles was statistically significant. The findings showed that external thinking style was a good predictor for choosing future careers.
Dar and Getz (2007)	Learning ability, socioeconomic status, and student placement for undergraduate studies in Israel	Israel	Choice of institution and field of study for a bachelor’s degree in Israel was found essentially meritocratic influenced by socioeconomic status (SES).
Fleming and Grace (2014)	Increasing participation of rural and regional students in higher education	Australia	Regional and rural students from low socioeconomic status in Australia face unique challenges when aspiring to higher education. These challenges reflect systematic disadvantage experienced by rural and regional populations as a whole.
Devlin and O’Shea (2011)	Directions for Australian higher education institutional policy and practice in supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds	Australia	Low socioeconomic status background students at one Australian university report have assisted them to manage and overcome the challenges of remaining at, progressing through and succeeding at university.
Stull (2013)	Family socioeconomic status, parent expectations, and a child’s achievement	England	This study investigates how a family’s socioeconomic status (SES) affects a child’s educational achievement and differentiates the direct effects of SES on these experiences from the indirect ones as they are mediated by the school.

Wilson and Adelson (2012)	College Choices of Academically Talented Secondary Students	United States	This study investigates the factors that contribute to the selectivity of the colleges by Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate students for application.
Walker (2014)	Identity, Status, and Culture: Examining Barriers of Success for Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds	United States	Discussing how integrating criticality and identity development into educational praxis will assist in creating inclusive, equitable practice prepared to meet the needs of learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
Fisher, and John (2008)	Economically and Educationally Challenged Students in Higher Education: Access to Outcomes	United States	Varying participation higher education between low-SES and high-SES students.

The discussion of the review involves answering the research questions and objectives. The discussion focuses on the challenges faced by low SES students in choosing higher education and the factors that influence them to choose their programs in higher education. After reading published journals, the author found that the challenges faced by the low SES students are mainly from family background, which includes parents' negative attitudes and parents' low expectations (Table 3). The following challenge is that the high achieving students are the pioneer in the family to enter higher education. The third challenge is students' vague career identity. Besides, the factors that impact high achievers from low SES in choosing programs are caused by financial issues and thinking styles

First Challenge: Family Background

Family is the closest person to an individual. A family is mainly where individuals form their value and get support. Hence, the elements of family background include parents' negative attitudes and low expectations, which hinder low SES but high achieving students' aspirations to enter into higher education.

Parents' Negative Attitudes

In the published journal articles, the author found that parents' attitudes are more likely negative towards pursuing higher education (James, 2001; Naylor, Baik, James, 2013). Parents are more inclined to overemphasize financial and distance barriers. The cost of programs at higher education institutions includes tuition fees and living expenses. The cost to send their children to study at higher education institutions is a burden for the low SES families. Besides, the distance between the student's home and the higher education institution would become a challenge for low SES students. The high achieving children have grown up physically and the parents expect their children to earn a living to support their family members, rather than leave their homes and study at higher education institutions. Meanwhile, parents need their children

to choose an occupation on the basis of benefits and costs, rather than for studying. Hence, the low SES students get no support from their families, and this causes them have less aspirations to enter into higher education.

Parents' Low Expectations

Past research conveyed that parent with low SES in rural areas have lower expectations for their children's future education than parents living in cities (Baxter et. al., 2011). Based on the data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Baxter and colleagues found out that high SES parents have higher expectations that their children would enter into higher education to obtain a degree, compared to low SES parents who live in rural areas, who have less expectations that their children obtain a degree. Therefore, the low SES but high achieving students have less motivation to enter into higher education.

Second Challenge: First-in-Family

Many low SES students are the first generation in their families to enter into higher education. The first-in-family students who enter into higher education institutions typically possess relatively lower levels of expertise; they cannot depend on their parents' advice to help them identify and resolve problems concerning higher education (Collier and Morgan, 2008). Besides, low SES students have limited with activities and preparation that forces them to work early. They are restricted by less revenue and resources. Hence, the low SES but high achievers face the challenge of getting information about education programs and programs that are eventually connected to their future careers.

Third Challenge: Vague Career Identity

Career identity is defined as how an individual express one's life themes, and based on these life themes, the individual can identify a specific occupation (Ashforth et al., 2008). The low SES students have more difficulty forming career identity because of other obstacles that interfere with their ability to develop a positive work identity (Furlong, Biggart & Cartmel, 1996). At the same, managers who are responsible for guidance have little or no vision regarding career guidance and counselling to develop career competencies and career identities. Hence, low SES students are confused and do not put in the effort to explore career opportunities at the labor market. This leads the low SES students' career identities to be vague in choosing a higher education program related to their future careers. This is a challenge that is commonly faced by low SES students.

The Factors in Choosing a Program in Higher Education

The low SES students consider many factors in choosing their programs in higher education. They need to consider the external factors such as financial issues and the internal factors such as their own thinking styles.

First Factor: Financial Factor

The choice of programs at higher education institutions is greatly influenced by the SES of a student (Dar & Getz, 2006). In the finding by Hearn (1991), high achievers but low SES students were found to prefer prestigious programs in less prestigious higher education institutions. As low SES students will consider the costs and demanding programs at the prestigious higher education institution, they have less time to earn money for their living support. Hence, the low SES students prefer financially rewarding programs (De Graaf, 1991; Davies & Guppy, 1997). Consequently, the low SES students prefer vocational programs, even though they are high

achievers, because these programs enable them to enter to the job market in order to support themselves and their families. Hence, the low SES but high achieving students consider their financial issues in choosing their program in higher education institutions.

Second Factor: Thinking Styles Factor

Many parents and teachers think that high achievers can take any program in higher education because of their high achievements in various subjects taken at school. The high achievers are confused about their abilities in choosing the bachelor's program, which is connected to their future potential career paths (Kim, 2011). Fan et al. (2018) emphasized on the individual differences and stated that identifying thinking styles will provide a basis to match the students' thinking styles with educational approaches. The high achievers have different kinds of thinking styles. Thinking style is defined as "a preferred tool to express and to use one or more abilities" (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995). These thinking styles cannot be separated from the structural consistency of personality. This means that by identifying the high achievers' thinking styles, we can also identify their personalities and abilities. Fan et al. (2018) proposed 13 thinking styles with five dimensions: 1) functions (legislative, executive, and judicial thinking styles), 2) forms (hierarchical, oligarchic, monarchic, anarchic thinking styles), 3) levels (global and local thinking styles), 4) scopes (including internal and external thinking styles) and 5) leanings (liberal and conservative thinking styles). Table 4 shows a summary of these thinking styles. There are different thinking style preferences which will result in choosing a program linked to students' future careers. This will allow the high achievers to choose a program that is based on their preferences, and this will eventually lead them to experience appropriate career development towards their identified career paths.

Table 4: Summary of Thinking Styles

Style	Characterization
<i>Functions</i>	
Legislative	Like to create and do new things and have little assigned formation
Executive	Like to follow disciplines and prefer to be in the existing structure
Judicial	Like to judge and evaluate people and things
<i>Forms</i>	
Monarchic	Like to do one thing at a time with devotion regardless of the situation
Hierarchic	Like to do many things at once through setting priorities for work
Oligarchic	Like to do many things at once without setting priorities for work
Anarchic	Like to take a random approach to problems; dislike systems, guidelines, and practically all constraints
<i>Levels</i>	
Global	Like to deal with a big abstract picture rather than focusing on details
Local	Like to deal with details and concrete examples rather than looking at abstract big goals
<i>Scope</i>	
Internal	Like to work alone and tend to be introverted
External	Like to work with others and be sociable
<i>Leaning</i>	
Liberal	Like to do things in ways and deny tradition
Conservative	Like to do things in traditional ways

Limitation and Directions for Future Studies

Most of the studies in this review were carried out by overseas researchers, but there is a lack of research carried out in the context of Malaysia. Hence, in the context of the cultural differences, the results for each country may be differ. Future work might look at the specified environment like governmental school systems that influence the decisions of choosing a program in higher education. Besides, further research can be done to determine the psychological changes within the low SES but high achieving students during their higher education studies. Future investigation can involve investigating the percentage of the low SES students graduates from higher education institutions.

Practical Implication

Without properly assisting high achievers in choosing suitable programs, they will become confused about their potential talents, and they would often change their majors and fail to develop their talents for their career paths (Simpson & Kaufmann, 1981). They are confused by their low SES family background, as they are the first high achievers in the family. However, high achievers are likely to contribute to society. Hence, career counselling can provide the right career choices which will be taken as the high achievers' programs in higher education. Programs to be taken in higher education will reflect the future and life of the students. Career counselling has systematic procedures to help this group of students and also considers factors such as thinking style and family background.

Counsellors can help the low SES but high achieving students (Li, 2007) in several aspects. First, the career should be recommended by a career information officer, who will collect and update information of all kinds of possible careers which are related to their higher education programs. Globalization and technological advancements nowadays lead to rapid changes in job markets. Hence, counsellors should be updated with the latest information in job markets.

Secondly, the counsellor needs to counsel the students individually or in a group in order to identify the challenges, strengths and needs in relation to possible career paths. The counsellor should explore the issues faced by the students and this allows them to know more about themselves. Besides that, counsellors can use Thinking Style Inventory to match thinking style with the future careers in the real world. The matching is used to help the individuals to maximize their abilities and interests. Consequently, high achievers from low SES will consider their values and abilities and interests that best match the programs to be taken in higher education.

Thirdly, the counsellor can act as a coordinator to liaise with other stakeholders like parents, employers, higher education institutions, and community organizations in order to harness social capital for the low SES but high achieving students. Since these students face financial issues, they are most likely to enter into higher education with the availability of scholarships. The counsellor can liaise with students' parents with negative attitudes and low expectations so students can have better communication with their parents regarding the programs to be taken in higher education.

Besides, the counsellor can explore self-concepts of high achieving students regarding the career-related programs in higher education. In the effort to explore self-concepts, the Hong Kong Association of Careers Masters and Guidance Masters (HKACMGM), in collaboration with the Curriculum Development Institute of the Education Bureau, had developed two

'individual student planning (ISP) tools', namely, Finding Your Colors of Life: NSS Subject Choices and the Development of Career Aspirations for junior secondary level (Ho et al. 2010) and Career Mapping: Career Development Tool for Senior Secondary Students (Ho et al. 2010). These tools are basically built on the Holland Theory. These tools are used to explore the high achievers' talents, aptitudes, an exploration effort of possible study and work opportunities, career choices, and personal goal setting.

Career-related higher education program decisions for Asian clients are rarely made without family advice (e.g., Nam et al., 2019). When the low SES high achievers attend to career counselling, it is important that counsellors know whether the involvement of their family is needed by the clients in their decision-making, in choosing the right program in higher education. The Assessment of Asian Family Influence Scale (Hui & Lent, 2018) can be used to assist counsellors to determine the level of involvement of family members. The counsellor can use these tools to determine factors such as the level of modernity of the family, the birth order of clients in their family, income in relation to the socioeconomic status of their family, education level, occupational status, and age. All or selected family members may attend each counselling session or only certain sessions. Before involvement of family members, it is important to discuss with the client the roles of each of the family members and to identify the most important person in the decision-making process. This person will need the most information and most deference when the client is ready to choose the program in higher education.

The low SES students with vague career identity will need more help with their personal and social, academic, and career development (Richard et al., 2007). To reach low SES students, counsellors should consider the additive measure of incorporating a narrative approach with existing career counselling approaches to help students experience activities that are related to work-life tasks (e.g., Savickas et al., 2009). Narrative career counselling is a story approach that enables the students to play the role of the author and expert of their own career story, thereby expressing their need for autonomy, self-reflection, and self-evaluation (Bujold, 2004). This approach provides a way for the students to face their fear by looking at problems related to careers, reformulating them, and looking at other ways to change their career story. Furthermore, this approach provides a framework for developing student career identity (Stoltz & Apodaca, 2017). Creating a career identity requires individuals to know their strengths, limitations, and goals in order to obtain a meaningful career. The low SES but high achieving students come to seek help from counsellors. Hence, the counsellors should be equipped with the latest career information to explore the values within the students and involve their supporting network.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion, the challenges faced by low SES but high achieving students and the factors influence them in choosing a program in higher education are clear. Most of the research shows us that the high achieving students face several challenges from their closest family members, as well as within themselves. These challenges will contribute to factors that influence them in choosing a suitable program in higher education. Consequently, by knowing the challenges and factors that influence the low SES but high achievers, this will provide valuable information for career counsellors to plan an intervention and assist them to choose a program in higher education in the systematic procedures.

After the low SES but high achieving students know their abilities of thinking styles and manage to identify their preferred future careers though career counselling, as a counselor in a multicultural setting, the counselors can bring in students' supporting network, which includes their parents, if necessary. All challenges and factors influencing the high achievers from low SES need to be resolved in order to engage in successful future careers.

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