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Socio-Economic Status as a Determinant of Academic Achievement in South African Schools

ABSTRACT: Educational outcomes in South Africa continue to be strongly influenced by socio-economic inequality despite post-apartheid reforms aimed at improving equity and access to quality education. Disparities in household income, parental education, living conditions, and school resources continue to affect learner academic performance across communities. This study investigated the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement in diverse South African school contexts, with a focus on schools in Gauteng Province. A mixed-methods approach combined quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative interview findings to explore how socio-economic factors shape educational outcomes. Participants included learners, parents, and educators from schools representing various socio-economic backgrounds. Findings revealed that socio-economic status affects educational outcomes through interconnected structural, environmental, psychological, and institutional factors. Although resilience, teacher support, peer encouragement, and parental motivation served as protective influences, they were insufficient to fully overcome systemic inequalities. The study concludes that academic achievement must be understood within broader socio-economic contexts and highlights important implications for educational policy, equitable resource allocation, teacher development, and inclusive learner support systems in South Africa.

KEY WORDS: Academic Achievement; Educational Inequality; Parental Involvement; Resilience; Socio-Economic Status; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Educational inequality continues to be one of the most significant challenges faced by the South African education system. Even though access to schooling has improved since the start of democracy in 1994, educational opportunities and academic outcomes continue to be influenced significantly by socio-economic conditions (Spaull, 2013).

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Numerous reforms aimed at promoting and improving educational equity, including curriculum transformation, no-fee schooling, school nutrition programmes, and increased access to education, have been implemented by the South African government. Despite numerous efforts, disparities with regard to schools situated in affluent communities in contrast to schools in historically disadvantaged areas continue to persist (DBE, 2023).

These inequalities continue to influence learner academic achievement, school dropout rates, access to higher education, and long-term social mobility. Learners who come from households with greater financial resources often benefit from access to educational enrichment programmes, private tutoring, technological resources, stable home environments, and parental support. Many of these learners attend well-resourced schools which provide modern facilities, highly qualified teachers, smaller class sizes, and extracurricular activities. However, learners from disadvantaged communities often experience financial hardship, food insecurity, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate educational resources, and unstable family environments (Clercq, 2020).

Numerous schools in lower-income communities continue to struggle with limited access to digital technologies, inadequate teaching materials, insufficient infrastructure, and higher learner-to-teacher ratios. These structural inequalities contribute to significant differences in educational experiences and academic outcomes across different socio-economic groups.

International research has proven that socio-economic status has a direct influence on academic achievement. Learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds generally perform better academically. This can be attributed to greater learning resources, socio-economic stability, and greater educational support (OECD, 2023).

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), in 2024, indicated that socio-economic conditions have an influence on parental education, access to technology, nutrition, household income, and emotional well-being of learners, which in turn influence academic achievement. Research indicates that the COVID-19 (Corona-Virus Disease 2019) pandemic significantly widened educational inequalities as disadvantaged learners were unable to access online resources for continued learning (cf UNICEF, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

In South Africa, the historical legacy of the apartheid-era educational policies continues to be closely connected to socio-economic inequality. During the apartheid era, education was deliberately unequally funded, which resulted in unequal educational opportunities, school infrastructure, and teacher quality (Christie, 2020).

Many historically disadvantaged schools continue to experience the long-term effects of social inequality and systemic underfunding, even after democratic reforms. Schools in underprivileged communities face persistent challenges regarding poverty, crime, unemployment, a lack of municipal services, and limited parental educational attainment (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019).

These conditions negatively impact learner attendance, motivation, concentration, and psychological well-being. Recent research indicates the relationship between poverty and poor academic performance in South Africa. The Department of Basic Education and Statistics South Africa found that learners from disadvantaged communities consistently perform lower in numeracy, literacy, and matriculation outcomes than learners from wealthier communities (DBE, 2023; SSA, 2024).

Both national and international assessments, including the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), have indicated significant achievement disparities related to socio-economic status. According to the 2021 PIRLS findings, South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning, specifically learners from disadvantaged schools (Mullis *et al.*, 2023). These findings, thus, indicate that there is an urgent need to address educational inequalities and improve foundational learning outcomes.

Parental education also significantly influences learner achievement. Parents with higher academic qualifications tend to be better equipped to help their children with homework, provide educational encouragement, and become involved in their children's school (Bourdieu, 1986).

Household income influences access to resources, such as internet, transportation services, educational books, private tutoring, and safe study environments. Financial instability causes emotional stress, instability, and conflict, which in turn negatively impact learner motivation and concentration (Clercq, 2020).

Socio-economic conditions also have an emotional and psychological impact on learners. Learners who experience poverty, family stress, food insecurity, and community violence often experience emotional stress and anxiety. They also have reduced self-esteem, which negatively impacts academic performance (Theron, Ungar & Höltge, 2022).

Educational psychology research indicates that learner confidence and emotional well-being significantly influence academic success. A supportive school climate, positive learner-teacher relationships, and peer support function as protective factors, which may minimize some of the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage (UNESCO, 2024).

The importance of technology in education has highlighted concerns regarding educational inequality. Access to digital resources, such as

computers, internet, and digital learning platforms, became significantly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many disadvantaged South African learners could not access these resources, which caused interrupted learning, which widened educational gaps even further. Statistics South Africa, in 2024, indicated that digital inequality continues to remain a major concern, especially in disadvantaged schools (*cf* UNICEF, 2023; SSA, 2024).

Even though extensive studies have been done regarding educational inequality, a need for contextually grounded mixed-methods research remains. Mixed-methods research integrates statistical evidence with the lived experiences of learners, parents, and educators. Quantitative studies provide statistical correlations between socio-economic variables and academic achievement, whereas qualitative studies focus on the lived experiences underlying these patterns.

According to J.W. Creswell & V.L. Plano-Clark (2018), mixed-methods research provides a comprehensive understanding of complex issues as numerical evidence is combined with personal, lived experiences (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). This study, therefore, aimed to examine the socio-economic factors influencing academic achievement and to explore how these factors shape educational opportunities within South African schools. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the research sought to provide deeper insight into the structural, environmental, psychological, and institutional mechanisms through which socio-economic inequality affects educational outcomes.

Literature Review. The existing literature demonstrates that socio-economic status influences academic achievement through multiple interconnected mechanisms rather than through financial resources alone. Recent educational studies conceptualize educational inequality as being multidimensional. This involves environmental, structural, psychological, and institutional factors (OECD, 2025; WB, 2025).

International studies have consistently identified a connection between parental education, household income, and learner performance. There is, however, limited understanding of how these factors interact within a country, such as South Africa with highly unequal educational contexts (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025).

Recent scholars have shifted focus from merely examining isolated socio-economic indicators towards studying school climate, educational resilience, learner well-being, and social support systems as mediating variables (Theron, Ungar & Höltge, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). Furthermore, there remains a shortage of mixed-methods studies that integrate quantitative evidence with the lived experiences of learners, parents, and educators.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the interaction between socio-economic conditions, educational experiences, and academic achievement within diverse South African school contexts.

Theoretical Framework. This study adopts an integrated socio-ecological perspective to understand the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement. Rather than examining educational outcomes through a single theoretical lens, the study draws on complementary theoretical traditions that conceptualize learning as the product of interactions between individuals and their environments.

In this context, U. Bronfenbrenner (1979)'s Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework for understanding how family, school, community, and societal systems influence learner development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). And A. Bandura (1986)'s Social Cognitive Theory contributes to an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between environmental conditions, self-efficacy, and academic behavior (Bandura, 1986); while L.S. Vygotsky (1978)'s Social Development Theory highlights the role of social interaction and environmental support in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

The integration of these perspectives enables a comprehensive analysis of how structural inequalities, social relationships, and psychological processes collectively shape educational experiences and academic achievement within South African schools.

Main Research Question: What are the most significant socio-economic factors that influence academic achievement, and how can knowledge of these factors be utilized to promote equal educational opportunities for all South African learners? Sub-questions: (1) *How is the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement described in existing literature?*; (2) *Which socio-economic factors most significantly influence academic achievement in South African schools?*; (3) *How do family, school, and community contexts interact to influence learners' academic outcomes?*; and (4) *What recommendations can be made to reduce educational inequalities associated with socio-economic disadvantages?*

METHODS

The study employed a mixed-methods research design situated within a post-positivist paradigm. A post-positivist approach was considered appropriate, because the study sought to investigate measurable relationships between socio-economic variables and academic achievement, while also exploring the subjective experiences of participants within their educational contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the complex socio-economic

factors influencing learner achievement. Mixed-methods research has become increasingly more important within educational research, as statistical data is combined with insights received from participants and their lived experiences (Plano-Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

In this study, the quantitative component provided measurable data regarding socio-economic conditions and academic performance, while the qualitative component explored the experiences of learners, parents, and educators regarding educational inequality and school support systems.

Data Collection. Quantitative data was collected through structured Google Forms questionnaires distributed electronically to learners, parents, and educators. There were 346 learners (between the ages of 13 and 19 years), parents, and educators who participated in the Quantitative section of the research. Online questionnaires provided a practical and cost-effective means of collecting data from participants across diverse school contexts within Gauteng Province.

R.B. Johnson, L. Christensen & L.A. Turner (2024) state that digital survey platforms are highly efficient and accessible, which makes it an effective tool to use in educational research. The questionnaires included demographic questions and items relating to parental education, household income, educational attitudes, learner confidence, and academic achievement. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses (Johnson, Christensen & Turner, 2024).

There were 378 learners (between the ages of 13 and 19 years), parents, and teachers who participated in the Qualitative section of the research. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to discuss their experiences in greater depth while allowing the researcher to maintain focus on key research themes. K. Maree (2023) indicates that semi-structured interviews allow flexibility while also maintaining consistency, which makes it an effective method for exploring educational experiences (Maree, 2023).

Participants were selected from affluent, middle-income, township, and LSEN (Learners with Special Educational Needs) schools within Gauteng Province to ensure representation across diverse socio-economic contexts. Gauteng was selected, because it represents one of South Africa's most socio-economically diverse provinces, containing schools that vary considerably in terms of infrastructure, resources, and learner demographics. Purposeful sampling ensured that participants represented a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and educational experiences (Spaull, 2013).

Data Analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Descriptive statistics summarized

participant demographics and identified trends relating to socio-economic variables and academic achievement. Correlation analysis examined relationships between parental education, household income, learner confidence, and academic performance.

According to A. Field (2023), quantitative analysis provides the researcher with objective evidence, which can be used to inform educational policy and interventions. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic coding procedures (Field, 2023). Responses from interviews and open-ended questionnaires were reviewed, coded, and grouped into recurring themes relating to financial stress, educational resources, emotional well-being, parental involvement, learner motivation, and school support systems. V. Braun & V. Clarke (2022) argue that thematic analysis is a valuable method to use within educational research as researchers can interpret complex social experiences systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethical principles were carefully maintained throughout the study. Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection, informed consent was secured from adult participants, and parental consent and learner assent were obtained for participants under eighteen years of age. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected throughout the reporting of findings. Participation remained entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty (BERA, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed significant relationships between socio-economic status and academic achievement within participating schools. Consistent with both South African and international research, learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds generally demonstrated stronger academic performance, higher levels of confidence, and greater access to educational support systems than learners from disadvantaged communities (OECD, 2025; Spaul, 2013).

The findings reinforce the argument that educational achievement cannot be understood independently of the broader social and economic conditions within which learners live and learn.

Parental Education and Learner Performance. One of the most significant findings was the positive relationship between parental education and learner performance. Learners whose parents possessed secondary or tertiary qualifications generally reported higher academic achievement, stronger motivation, and greater confidence in their academic abilities. Parents with higher educational attainment were more likely to provide homework assistance, educational guidance, and

emotional encouragement. They were additionally more likely to communicate effectively with teachers and schools regarding learner progress. These findings align with educational research that indicates that parental education significantly impacts study habits, academic aspirations, and learner self-efficacy (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025).

Parental education showed a positive correlation with learner academic performance ($r \approx .65$), with 77.6% of parents having secondary to tertiary education, and 84.3% of learners achieving average to high academic performance. Participants emphasized the importance of educational success, with learners stating: *“My parents always tell me to study hard, so that I have a better future”*; and *“I want to be one of the top achievers in my grade”*.

Household Income and Educational Opportunities. The study further revealed that household income significantly influenced educational opportunities and learner outcomes. Learners from middle- and high-income households reported greater access to textbooks, computers, internet connectivity, private tutoring, and quiet study environments. Financial stability also enabled families to enrol learners in extracurricular programmes and enrichment activities that positively contributed to learner development and engagement. According to SSA (Statistics South Africa), in 2024, household income remains closely associated with access to digital technology and educational support (SSA, 2024).

Household income was positively associated with learner academic performance ($r \approx .58$), while 59.7% of households fell within the middle- to high-income categories. Participants linked income directly to educational opportunities, stating: *“My child has to go to a bad school, because I cannot pay the school fees”*; and *“I can afford to send my child to a high-performance school”*. See figure 1.

Figure 1 demonstrates that household income is positively associated with access to educational resources, digital connectivity, tutoring, and enrichment opportunities, which in turn contribute to improved learner academic performance ($r \approx .58$) and educational outcomes.

Financial Stress and Learner Well-Being. Financial stress emerged as another major factor influencing academic achievement. Learners from lower-income households frequently reported anxiety related to household finances, food insecurity, unemployment, and family instability. Some participants indicated that financial difficulties negatively affected their emotional well-being and reduced their ability to focus on academic tasks.

Others described situations in which parents struggled to afford school uniforms, transport costs, stationery, or internet access.

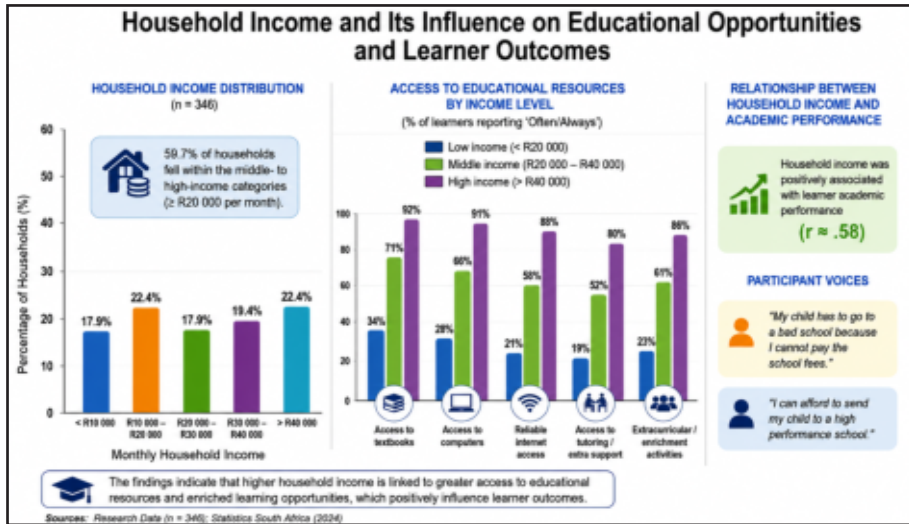


Figure 1:
Household Income and its Influence on Educational Opportunities and Learner Outcomes

According to SSA (Statistics South Africa), in 2024, poverty has a significantly negative impact on learner well-being and educational participation (SSA, 2024).

Financial stress was common, with 20.1% of participants always worrying about money or basic needs and a further 25.4% often worrying about these issues. Learners and parents described significant emotional strain, including: *"It is very difficult because sometimes we don't even have bread in the house"*; and *"It is very stressful, because sometimes my child has to go to school hungry"*.

Several participants indicated that financial hardship contributed directly to emotional distress and reduced concentration in school. Learners described worrying about unemployment, food insecurity, household finances, and the inability to afford school-related expenses. Research conducted by the WB (World Bank), in 2025, similarly found that chronic financial stress negatively affects cognitive functioning, anxiety levels, and academic motivation (WB, 2025).

Access to Educational Resources. It is consisted of two things, namely: (1) *Learning Materials and Educational Support*; and (2) *Digital Access and Internet Connectivity*. The explanation is as following here:

Firstly, *Learning Materials and Educational Support*. Access to educational resources emerged as a critical determinant of learner achievement within the study. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of adequate learning materials, reliable internet connectivity,

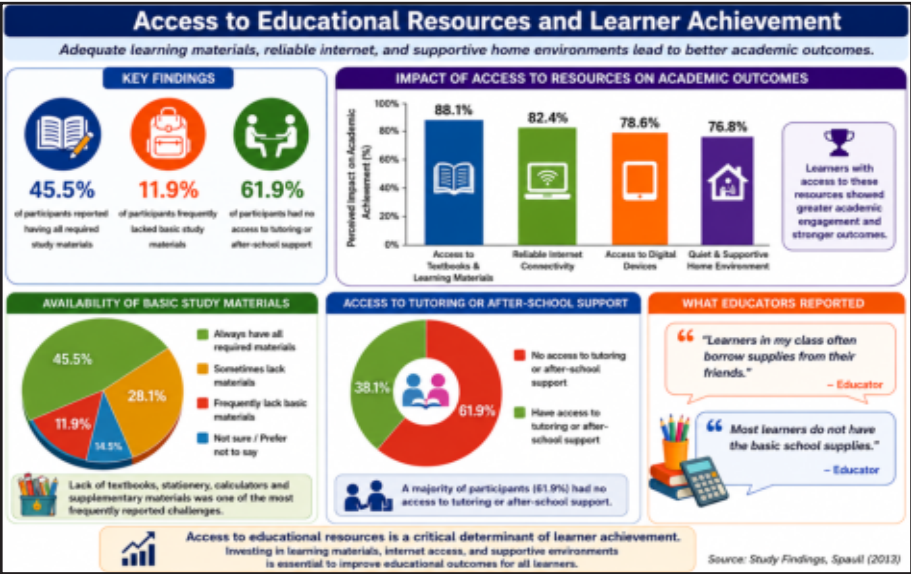


Figure 2:
Access to Educational Resources and Learner Achievement

and supportive home environments for successful academic performance. Learners with access to textbooks, digital devices, stable internet connections, and quiet study spaces generally demonstrated greater academic engagement and stronger educational outcomes.

One of the most frequently reported challenges involved the lack of basic study materials. Several learners indicated that they did not always have access to textbooks, stationery, calculators, or supplementary educational materials needed to support effective learning. Some schools experienced textbook shortages requiring learners to share resources during class time. Financial constraints additionally prevented some families from purchasing learning materials or accessing private tutoring services.

These findings align with research indicating that resource shortages remain prevalent within many low-income schools despite educational reforms (Spaull, 2013). See figure 2.

Although 45.5% of participants reported having all required study materials, 11.9% frequently lacked basic materials, and 61.9% had no access to tutoring or after-school support. Educators reported resource shortages, noting that: “Learners in my class often borrow supplies from their friends”; and “Most learners do not have the basic school supplies”.

Secondly, *Digital Access and Internet Connectivity*. Access to internet connectivity emerged as a particularly important factor influencing

academic achievement. Learners from financially stable households generally experienced fewer disruptions to online learning and educational communication. Conversely, learners from disadvantaged communities frequently reported difficulties accessing online learning materials due to limited connectivity, insufficient data, or the absence of digital devices. Participants from middle- and high-income households generally reported consistent internet access and regular use of digital learning platforms. Some participants relied on shared family phones or intermittent mobile data to complete assignments.

While 64.2% of participants had continuous internet access, 20.9% relied solely on mobile internet, and 14.2% only had intermittent access. Limited connectivity was highlighted through comments, such as: *"I only have Internet on my phone"*; and reports that some learners relied on shared devices or mobile data for schoolwork.

And A. Naidoo (2025) similarly found that digital inequality remains a significant barrier within South African education. The importance of digital access has increased substantially, due to the growing integration of technology into teaching and learning. Since the COVID-19 (Corona-Virus Disease 2019) pandemic, schools have increasingly adopted blended and online learning approaches, making internet connectivity and digital literacy more important than ever before (Naidoo, 2025).

Also M. Thaanyane & J. Jita (2026) emphasise that the digital divide continues to reinforce broader socio-economic inequalities, particularly within rural and township schools. Digital inequality continues to strengthen broader educational inequality, specifically within disadvantaged township and rural schools (cf WB, 2025; Thaanyane & Jita, 2026).

Home Environment and Study Conditions. Participants additionally highlighted the importance of supportive and quiet study environments. Many learners from affluent households reported having private bedrooms and structured environments conducive to learning. Conversely, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently described overcrowded living conditions, household instability, and noise that made studying difficult.

Some learners also reported household responsibilities, caregiving duties, or part-time work that reduced the amount of time available for academic activities. Although 53.7% of participants always had a quiet study space, 14.2% reported having no quiet place to study, while 35.1% sometimes and 35.8% often or always had to complete chores before homework. Learners described challenging study environments, stating: *"It's noisy; I live behind a tavern"*; and explaining that overcrowding and household responsibilities made studying difficult.

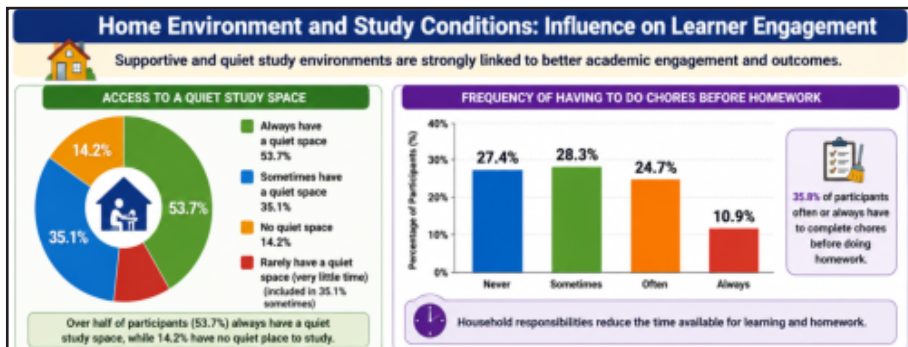


Figure 3:
Home Environment and Study Conditions: Influence on Learner Engagement

These findings support previous research demonstrating that home environments significantly influence educational engagement and learner performance. D. Francis & E. Webster (2019) found that overcrowding and household stress negatively affect concentration, sleep quality, emotional well-being, and academic motivation (Francis & Webster, 2019).

Also I. Pillay (2021) indicates that overcrowded household conditions negatively impact learner concentration and educational focus. Educational achievement is, therefore, shaped not only by school resources, but also by broader household and community conditions (Pillay, 2021). See figure 3.

Educational Enrichment Opportunities. Participants further reported that socio-economic disadvantage frequently limited opportunities for academic enrichment beyond formal schooling. Learners from wealthier households were more likely to access private tutoring, extracurricular programmes, educational software, and cultural enrichment activities. In contrast, learners from lower-income communities frequently depended solely on school-based instruction and had limited exposure to additional educational opportunities. OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), in 2025, similarly emphasises that access to enrichment opportunities enhances learner confidence, problem-solving skills, and long-term academic achievement (OECD, 2025).

Only 12.7% of participants had regular access to tutoring or after-school programs, while 61.9% had no access to additional academic support. Participants highlighted unequal access to enrichment opportunities, with wealthier families able to afford: “private tutoring, extracurricular programs, educational software, and cultural enrichment activities”.

Psychological and Emotional Impact. The findings further demonstrated that learner confidence positively correlated with academic performance.

Participants who reported stronger academic self-confidence generally demonstrated higher levels of classroom participation, educational engagement, and academic achievement. Learners with greater confidence in their academic abilities were more likely to complete assignments, ask questions during lessons, and persist when encountering academic challenges.

OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), in 2025, similarly found that learner self-confidence and self-efficacy play an essential role in shaping educational success (OECD, 2025). Learner confidence was moderate to high for 67.1% of participants, yet 32.9% reported lower levels of academic confidence. Emotional difficulties were evident in statements, such as: *“My daughter sometimes cries, when she must go to school. She struggles”*; and *“My son is not confident about learning at school”*.

The relationship between learner confidence and academic performance is particularly significant within unequal educational contexts, such as South Africa. Learners who experience repeated academic success often develop stronger self-esteem and positive attitudes toward learning, while learners exposed to ongoing educational disadvantage may internalise feelings of inadequacy and low academic worth (UNESCO, 2024).

Learners from affluent educational environments frequently expressed confidence in their ability to succeed academically and pursue future opportunities. Conversely, learners experiencing socio-economic disadvantage frequently reported reduced academic confidence and heightened emotional stress. Many participants described feelings of anxiety, discouragement, and uncertainty regarding their academic abilities and prospects.

Learners lacking access to educational resources, stable home environments, and adequate support often expressed concern about falling behind academically. L.C. Theron, M. Ungar & J. Höltge (2022) similarly found that poverty and educational inequality negatively affect learner self-esteem and emotional well-being (Theron, Ungar & Höltge, 2022).

The findings additionally revealed important psychological consequences associated with resource inequality. Many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds described feelings of frustration, anxiety, embarrassment, and discouragement when comparing their educational circumstances with those of more privileged peers. Some participants reported feeling excluded from classroom activities requiring digital participation or online research. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), in 2024, explained that repeated exposure to educational disadvantage may contribute to reduced self-

esteem, lower academic aspirations, and decreased learner motivation (UNESCO, 2024).

Qualitative findings reinforced the quantitative results by illustrating how financial stress, overcrowding, and institutional inequalities negatively influenced emotional well-being and academic engagement. Learners attending under-resourced schools frequently reported feelings of hopelessness and frustration when comparing their educational experiences with those of learners attending affluent schools. These findings reflect broader concerns regarding the persistence of educational inequality in South Africa despite extensive reforms (Van der Berg *et al.*, 2016).

School Inequality and Institutional Challenges. Participants additionally described significant disparities in school infrastructure, teacher availability, classroom resources, and learner support services across different socio-economic contexts. Learners attending disadvantaged schools frequently reported overcrowded classrooms, limited access to libraries and computer facilities, and shortages of textbooks and teaching materials.

Conversely, learners attending affluent schools generally described supportive learning environments characterised by smaller class sizes, modern facilities, and greater access to educational technologies. Educators reported that 79.2% of learners experienced academic challenges often or always, while household income showed a negative relationship with academic difficulties ($r \approx -0.65$). Participants identified school-quality disparities, commenting: “The school close to our house is not very good”; and “The school does not provide extra opportunities”.

These disparities indicate persistent structural inequalities within South Africa’s education system, where historically disadvantaged schools continue to be under-resourced.¹ According to S. Van der Berg (2008), socio-economic status continues to influence achievement gaps within South African schools (Van der Berg, 2008).

Teachers participating in the study similarly expressed concern regarding unequal resource distribution across schools and communities. Educators from disadvantaged schools reported difficulties implementing technology-based learning strategies, due to insufficient infrastructure and limited learner access to digital devices. Some teachers additionally described challenges associated with large class sizes, inadequate teaching materials, and insufficient departmental support.

The WB (World Bank), in 2025, similarly identifies unequal school infrastructure and resource allocation as major contributors to educational

¹See, for example, News on “In South Africa, International Tests Shine a Light on Massive School Inequalities” in *Le Monde Africa*, 14th January 2025.

inequality. Educators participating in the study acknowledged that socio-economic conditions significantly affected classroom performance, attendance, learner behaviour, and motivation (WB, 2025).

Teachers reported that learners experiencing poverty often struggled with concentration, emotional regulation, punctuality, and consistent attendance. And S. Gwabeni & Z. Seleke (2025) similarly found that poverty contributes to reduced learner participation, absenteeism, and poor academic outcomes (Gwabeni & Seleke, 2025).

Resilience and Support Systems. Despite these challenges, the study identified several protective factors contributing positively to learner achievement. Teacher encouragement, parental motivation, peer support, and learner resilience emerged as important sources of academic support.

Some learners from disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrated strong determination to succeed academically despite difficult socio-economic circumstances. Educational importance was highly valued in 81.3% of households and positively related to learner confidence ($r \approx .50$). Despite adversity, participants demonstrated resilience through statements, such as: *"I have to do well, so that I can study what has always been my dream"*; and *"My teachers always try to help me"*.

Recent South African studies also found that positive teacher relationships, supportive school environments, and learner motivation may minimise some of the negative effects of socio-economic challenges (Francis & Webster, 2019). However, while resilience and support systems improve learner outcomes, they remain insufficient to eliminate broader structural inequalities.

The findings also revealed examples of resilience and adaptation among learners, educators, and families. Some participants described using public libraries, community centres, or shared internet facilities to access educational materials and complete assignments. Others relied on peer support groups and teacher assistance to overcome resource limitations. Community libraries and digital resource initiatives have increasingly been recognised as important support structures for learners within under-resourced communities (Adedokun & Zulu, 2022).

Also D. Francis & E. Webster (2019) found that some learners succeed academically despite adverse socio-economic conditions, due to strong internal motivation and supportive social relationships (Francis & Webster, 2019).

Many educators demonstrated considerable adaptability and commitment in supporting disadvantaged learners. Teachers reported implementing instructional strategies aimed at reducing educational barriers and improving learner confidence. Several educators provided

additional tutoring sessions, simplified complex content, and offered individual support to learners experiencing academic difficulties.

Emotional support emerged as another important strategy used by educators to support learners facing socio-economic challenges. Teachers described encouraging learners, building positive classroom relationships, and creating supportive learning environments aimed at strengthening learner confidence and motivation. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), in 2024, emphasises that supportive teacher-learner relationships improve learner resilience, self-esteem, and academic engagement (UNESCO, 2024).

Implications for Practice. The findings highlight the multidimensional nature of educational inequality within South Africa. Socio-economic status influences academic achievement not only through access to material resources but also through emotional well-being, environmental conditions, educational support systems, and institutional opportunities. These findings support research emphasising that meaningful educational transformation requires broader socio-economic interventions alongside school-based reforms (OECD, 2025; WB, 2025).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that access to educational resources remains a central factor shaping learner participation and academic success within South Africa. Socio-economic disadvantage restricts educational engagement through interconnected material, technological, environmental, and psychological mechanisms. Learners lacking access to textbooks, internet connectivity, quiet study spaces, and enrichment opportunities face substantial barriers to academic achievement. Meaningful educational transformation, therefore, requires targeted investment in educational infrastructure, digital inclusion, learner support systems, and broader socio-economic development initiatives.

Learner confidence, emotional well-being, and academic achievement are deeply interconnected within socio-economically unequal educational contexts. Socio-economic disadvantage affects not only learners' access to material resources, but also their psychological well-being, motivation, and sense of academic capability. Financial stress, overcrowding, and institutional inequalities contribute significantly to emotional distress and reduced educational engagement. Supportive teacher relationships, adaptive instructional strategies, and learner resilience may partially mitigate these challenges.

The findings have important implications for educational policy and practice. Addressing educational inequality requires targeted investment in disadvantaged schools, improved access to digital technologies, strengthened learner support systems, and interventions aimed at reducing poverty and household instability. Educational policies must,

therefore, recognise that learner achievement is shaped not only by individual effort, but also by broader socio-economic realities.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that socio-economic status significantly influences academic achievement within South African schools. Educational outcomes are shaped not only by individual learner ability, but also by broader structural, social, emotional, and institutional factors influencing access to educational opportunities. Despite significant reforms introduced since the end of apartheid, inequalities related to poverty, household income, school infrastructure, and resource distribution continue to affect learner performance across diverse educational contexts.

The findings revealed that learners from affluent households generally benefited from better access to educational resources, technology, private study spaces, and academic support systems. Conversely, learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds frequently experienced overcrowded living conditions, financial stress, limited internet access, and shortages of educational materials. The findings similarly found that socio-economic inequality remains one of the strongest predictors of educational achievement globally.

Parental education and household income emerged as important determinants of learner success. Parents with higher educational qualifications were generally better equipped to provide homework assistance, educational guidance, and emotional support. Financially stable households were more likely to provide access to books, internet connectivity, private tutoring, and enrichment opportunities. Whereas financial hardship often contributed to emotional stress, reduced educational participation, and lower academic confidence among learners.

The findings further highlighted the relationship between emotional well-being and academic achievement. Learners experiencing socio-economic disadvantage frequently reported heightened anxiety, stress, and reduced self-confidence. Financial instability, overcrowded home environments, and institutional inequalities negatively affected concentration, motivation, and classroom engagement. However, teacher support, parental encouragement, peer relationships, and learner resilience emerged as important protective factors.

It is similarly emphasized that supportive school climates and positive teacher-learner relationships strengthen learner resilience and educational engagement. Although resilience and support systems may reduce some of the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage, these factors alone remain insufficient to overcome broader structural

inequalities. Learners attending under-resourced schools continue to face substantial barriers related to inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, limited technological access, and unequal educational opportunities.

The study concludes that meaningful educational transformation within South Africa requires sustained efforts aimed at promoting equity across schools and communities. Policymakers and educational stakeholders should prioritize equitable resource allocation, improved school infrastructure, expanded digital access, and strengthened learner support systems. Teacher development programs should additionally equip educators with strategies for supporting learners experiencing socio-economic hardship.

Stronger collaboration between schools, families, and communities is also essential for addressing the broader social and emotional challenges affecting learner achievement. By addressing both the structural and human dimensions of educational inequality, South Africa may move closer toward creating a more inclusive and equitable education system capable of supporting the success of all learners regardless of socio-economic background.

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