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The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Academic Achievement in Public Secondary Schools in Nigeria, Africa

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Abstract

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a major determinant of educational outcomes in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, driving persistent inequalities in secondary schools. Key factors include family income, parental education, occupation, and the home learning environment. High-SES students benefit from access to learning materials, technology, tutoring, and strong parental support, while low-SES students face limited resources and weaker academic support, leading to lower achievement, especially in mathematics and science. School-related factors such as infrastructure, teacher quality, and peer composition further influence these outcomes. However, psychosocial elements like student motivation and parental involvement can help offset disadvantages. Policy measures; such as scholarships, school feeding programs, teacher training, community engagement, and equitable resource distribution which have proven effective in reducing disparities. Theoretical frameworks like cultural capital and social reproduction explain how inequalities persist, targeted interventions addressing material, cognitive, and social gaps are essential for improving equity in education.

Keywords: *Socioeconomic Status (SES), Academic Achievement, Secondary Education, Nigeria and Educational Inequality.*

1.0. Introduction

The education in Nigeria and some other Sub-Saharan countries remains deeply unequal, where some, such as Nigeria still faces a learning deficiency, and only about 42% of boys and 36% of girls complete secondary school [17]. Socioeconomic status (SES) which is typically a function of parental education, family income, occupation and exposure are the major driver of these inequalities. Higher-SES students generally have access to better schools, learning materials, exposed to modern technology and facilities that enhance productive learning, while lower-SES students face resource constraints [1].

Research using large international assessments confirms that SES is a primary driver of learning differences in Africa [2]. Recently, Nigeria studies echo this pattern were meta-analyses and field studies have repeatedly showed that students from a "well-to-do homes" and more educated families tend to outperform those of the lower-SES [5; 16]. A nationwide meta-analysis reported that there is a moderate positive correlation ($r \approx 0.33$) that exist between parental SES and their ward's achievements [16].

Similarly, in Delta State, students who scored significantly higher grades in business studies were revealed to be of the high-SES compare to the middle- or low-SES peers [5]. In Abuja, higher parental education and income were also linked to better student performance [20]. They are key SES factors that contribute to parental education; parents support with homework, foster literacy, and value schooling [20]. They tend to provide just household income and resources, whereas wealthier families afford good and quality study materials, tutoring, which enhances stable and uninterrupted school attendance [16]. Based on school context; schools in affluent areas typically have better facilities and teachers, further amplifying achievement gaps [7]. These patterns are consistent and emphasize how socioeconomic factors such as family wealth, education, and community resources shapes secondary school achievement in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan African students. The remainder of this paper explores how social science theories explain these relationships, particularly cultural capital, human capital, and social reproduction theories.

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2.0. Theoretical Framework

Social science theories highlight mechanisms by which SES influences student success. They are basically three (3) dominant perspectives which are particularly relevant:

2.1. Cultural Capital Theory: [3] concept of cultural capital submit that children inherit non-financial assets, such as educational values, language styles, and cultural knowledge from their families. High-SES families typically possess more of this culturally valued knowledge and behavior, which are in line with their school's expectations. Meta-analyses have revealed that "cultural capital, accumulated by families from the higher social strata, tends to play a significant role in securing advantageous educational outcomes" [16].

In Nigeria, students from exposed and educated parents grow up with the habit of reading books, speaking the language of instruction, and receiving encouragement to pursue academic successes, from obviously successful parents and relative which gives them an advantage in school assessment and examinations. This theory also implies social reproduction: schools disproportionately reward those who possess cultural capital, perpetuating class inequalities [3; 16].

2.2. Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory views education as an economic investment. Families "invest in education with an expectation that the investment will provide benefits in the form of higher earnings" in the nearest future [7]. Parents with strong financial stability tend to be able to afford higher-quality schools, extra tutors, with quality and reliably learning materials. In Nigeria, financial comfortable parents often enrol their wards in high and quality private secondary schools, and even remedial lessons; what Cambridge schools call ''Intervention Programmes'', thus increasing their children's human capital (skills and qualifications). Conversely, low-income families may be unable to pay school fees or buy textbooks, limiting their children's educational investment [17; 7].

2.3. Social Reproduction Theory

In social reproduction theory, there is a close relativeness to the [3], which emphasizes on how education reproduces class structures. Educational systems are structured to reward those who possess cultural capital, thereby having the enablement to maintain social inequality amount [3; 16]. In Nigeria, elite families often send children to well-resourced secondary schools, thus preserving their advantage over working-class families. Within public schools, tracking and teacher expectations may reflect social class: teachers may favour students who share middle-class norms, reinforcing SES gaps. Studies reveal that attending schools with mostly low-SES peers is linked to lower achievement, reflecting community-level disadvantage [7]. Of course, according to [18] and [9], success is strongly influenced by the environment, with positive outcomes emerging when behaviors are shaped, reinforced, and supported through structured environmental conditions.

Together, these theories explain why SES consistently shapes academic outcomes. Cultural capital theory explains parental background and home environment influences, human capital theory highlights resource investments, and social reproduction theory underscores structural persistence of inequality. In Nigeria's secondary education context, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to continue trailing wealthier peers academically unless targeted policy interventions are implemented [2;16].

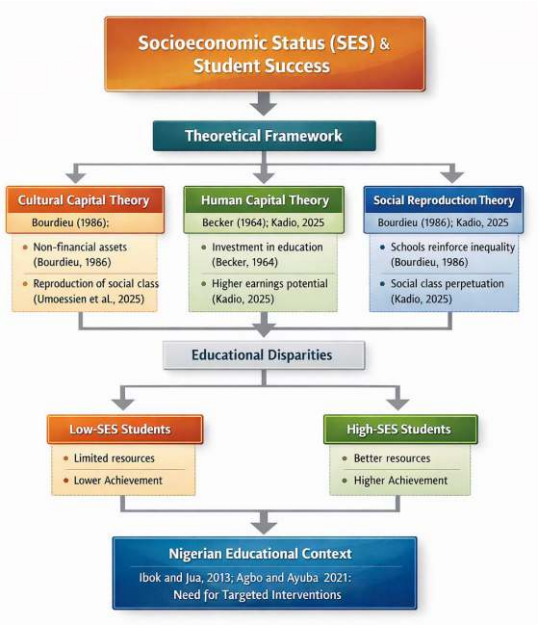

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Linking Socioeconomic Status (SES) to Student Success in the Nigerian Educational Context

3.0. SES Components and Academic Achievement

SES significantly influences educational outcomes through multiple mechanisms, which includes family income, parental education, and parental occupation. Research from Nigeria, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other contexts highlights these relationships and their impact on students' academic achievement.

3.1. Family Income

Family income has a direct impact in its access to quality and educational resources. Wealthier families tend to afford these learning materials, technologies, extra tutoring, and other enrichment programs, which all enhance their wards to high performance [16]. Recent studies in Nigeria and Ghana demonstrate strong positive correlations between parental income and students' performance in mathematics and science, indicating that economic resources significantly shape academic achievement [5; 7]. Higher household income enables stable school attendance and better nutrition, which indirectly improve cognitive function and learning outcomes [17].

3.2. Parental Education

Parental education is also a critical determinant of a student's achievement.

Higher levels of parental education are a contributing factor high academic expectation, effective homework supervisions, and greater encouragement of educational aspirations [20]. According to [17], students with educated parents are more likely to excel in schools. Educated parents often possess the knowledge and skills to support learning at home and are more likely to value schooling, further reinforcing the advantages of higher SES.

3.3. Occupation and Social Networks

Parental occupation shapes the social and academic environment of children. Parents in professional or skilled occupations often have networks that provide access to educational opportunities, mentoring, and academic guidance. Conversely, parents in low-skill or informal jobs may have limited time, financial resources, or exposure to networks that support academic growth [16]. In practice, this means that students from high-SES families not only benefit from material resources but also from social capital, which can supplement learning both inside and outside the classroom.

3.4. Home Learning Environment

Beyond parental background and financial status, the quality of home attention to their studies significantly influences academic achievement. The home environment includes access to books and home library, parental involvement in homework, quiet study space, academic stimulation and uninterrupted study session. Research indicates that structured home learning environments improve students' cognitive development, literacy skills, and examination performance [20].

In some Sub-Saharan African countries, the disparities in home learning environments are particularly visible during post-pandemic school disruptions, where students from the low-SES population lacked digital devices and internet access for remote learning [17]. These inequalities contributed to widening achievement gaps, particularly in mathematics and science.

Thus, SES influences not only material wealth but also the quality and consistency of academic support within the household.

3.5. School-Level Socioeconomic Context (Peer and Institutional Effects)

SES effects are not limited to household to the school environment, because students attending schools with high number of low-SES peers often experience lower academic outcomes due to limited institutional resources, larger class sizes, and reduced exposure to high-achieving peer models [7].

School-level socioeconomic composition influences teacher expectations, availability of instructional materials, and academic culture. demonstrated that resource-rich schools can mitigate SES disparities by providing equitable access to quality teaching and learning infrastructure. However, in many public secondary schools across Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, socioeconomic clustering amplifies inequality rather than reduces it [17].

Figure 2: SES Components and Academic Achievement Framework

4.0. Case Studies

Several studies provide consistent evidence that SES components strongly influence academic performance

Table 1: Recent SES and Academic Achievement Studies in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa (2018–2025)

Study (Year)	Sample / Region	Important Findings
[1]	500 students, Lagos, Nigeria	SES positively correlated with final exam scores; parental education was the strongest predictor.
[11]	300 students, Enugu, Nigeria	Students from low-income families scored approximately 20% lower in STEM subjects than peers from higher-income families.
[4]	Nationwide survey, USA	Income inequality explains significant variance in academic performance; resource-rich schools mitigate SES effects.
[17]	Global report	Persistent equity gaps in public secondary education; targeted interventions are essential for improving outcomes.
[6]	313 SHS students, Northern Ghana	SES positively correlated with achievement; parental income strongest predictor (r = .62); high-SES students scored higher in core subjects.
[13]	60 students, Ekiti State, Nigeria	Parental SES (income, education, occupation) significantly influenced Mathematics achievement (r = .85).
[15]	120 students, Bauchi State, Nigeria	Higher SES associated with better academic outcomes; attendance and aspirations mediated effects.
[14]	352 respondents, Plateau State, Nigeria	Low parental income and occupation limited access to learning, reduced motivation and engagement.
[12]	120 students, Lagos State, Nigeria	Parental SES not significantly related to achievement; gender was a stronger predictor.
[1-15]	Delta State, Nigeria	Parental SES significantly influenced academic scores across SES groups; high-SES mean scores higher.
[19;17]	Nigeria, Sub-Saharan Africa	Socioeconomic background shown to influence learning outcomes in region-wide studies.

Notes

1. Several Nigeria-specific studies confirm strong SES effects on student achievement.
2. Some studies such as [12] showed exceptions, likely due to strong parental involvement or gender effects.
3. Regional syntheses demonstrate persistent SES patterns across Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly linking parental income, education, and occupation to learning outcomes.
4. [13] and [6] showed correlation coefficients in quantitative strength of SES effects in subject-specific performance.

5. Mechanisms Linking SES to Academic Achievement

Scholars identify several pathways through which SES influences academic outcomes:

5.1. Material Access

Students from higher SES households typically have better access to textbooks and learning materials, technology and internet connectivity supportive study environments. [6] noted that high-SES students had significantly higher scores partly because of greater resource access.

5.2. Cognitive Stimulation

Parental education constitutes one of the strongest components of socioeconomic status influencing academic achievement in secondary schools. Higher parental educational attainment enhances students' cognitive stimulation through structured homework supervision, exposure to literacy materials, academic mentoring, and the development of educational aspirations [6; 13]. A study from Ekiti State, Nigeria, showed that parental education and involvement were significantly correlated with students' mathematics achievement, suggesting that home-based academic support strengthens subject-specific competence [13]. Similarly, research conducted in Northern Ghana demonstrated that parental education predicted student engagement and performance across core subjects, including Mathematics and English [6]. Beyond direct homework assistance, educated parents are more likely to cultivate early literacy experiences and academic discourse at home, thereby promoting higher-order cognitive skills necessary for secondary school success [14]. These findings are consistent with broader Sub-Saharan African analyses showing that family background significantly explains variation in learning outcomes even after controlling for school-level variables [7].

5.3. Nutrition and Health

Socioeconomic status also influences academic achievement through health and nutritional pathways. Students from low-income households are more likely to experience malnutrition, fatigue, and reduced concentration, all of which impair cognitive functioning and academic engagement [19]. Report from Kebbi State, Nigeria, revealed that school feeding programs significantly improved enrollment, retention, and classroom participation, thereby enhancing learning outcomes [10]. Improved nutrition contributes to better attention span, memory retention, and overall academic productivity. At the regional level, [17] reported that school feeding initiatives across Sub-Saharan Africa generate measurable improvements in attendance and learning continuity, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities. These findings suggested that nutritional interventions function as indirect SES equalizers by mitigating the health disadvantages associated with poverty.

5.4. Psychosocial Factors

Psychosocial mechanisms further explain the SES–achievement relationship. Parental support, academic encouragement, emotional stability, and self-efficacy significantly influence students' resilience and academic persistence [12]. Although some low-SES students outperform expectations due to strong parental involvement or intrinsic motivation, economic stress generally correlates with increased anxiety, reduced concentration, and lower academic focus [12; 14]. [12] reported that in Lagos State, while parental SES was not always a statistically significant predictor of achievement, psychosocial factors such as motivation and parental engagement played compensatory roles [12]. This suggests that psychosocial capital can moderate the negative effects of low socioeconomic status.

6. Policy Implications and Interventions

6.1 Scholarship and Financial Aid Programs

Targeted financial assistance is consistently recommended to reduce SES-related disparities in academic achievement. In Northern Ghana, [6] explicitly recommended scholarship schemes and conditional cash transfer programs to support students from low-income households. Similarly, [19] evidence indicates that financial support mechanisms improve school retention and performance by alleviating direct and indirect schooling costs.

6.2. School Feeding and Nutrition Initiatives

School feeding programs have demonstrated measurable positive impacts on enrollment, retention, and classroom engagement in low-income communities [10]. [17] further emphasizes that nutrition programs in Sub-Saharan Africa contribute to improved attendance and learning stability, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged regions. These interventions reduce SES-based disparities by addressing one of the core mediating mechanisms which are health and cognitive functioning.

6.3. Inclusive Teacher Training

Given that SES interacts with classroom dynamics, teachers in public secondary schools require professional development focused on inclusive pedagogy. Differentiated instruction, remedial support, and culturally responsive teaching practices can mitigate disadvantages associated with low SES [7]. Teachers in resource-constrained settings often serve as compensatory agents, helping bridge the learning gap created by family-level socioeconomic disparities.

6.4. Community and Parental Involvement

Strengthening school–community partnerships can enhance parental involvement, particularly in low-SES communities. Evidence from Lagos suggests that even when SES is low, strong parental engagement can sustain academic motivation and resilience [12]. Community-based academic mentoring and adult education programs can also improve parents' capacity to support learning at home [14].

6.5. Equitable Resource Allocation

Persistent inequalities in school infrastructure and learning materials exacerbate SES disparities in Nigeria and Ghana. Regional evidence shows that family background remains a strong determinant of learning outcomes even after accounting for teacher quality [7]. Therefore, policy reforms must prioritize equitable funding models that allocate greater resources to low-SES schools, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

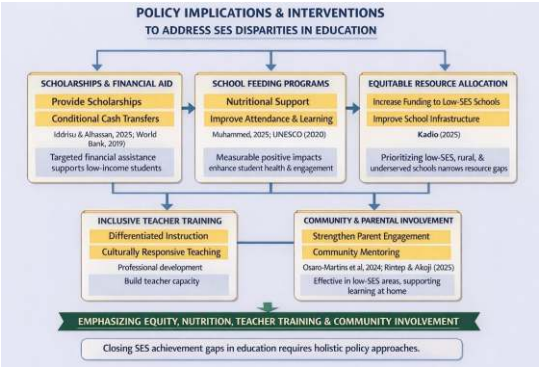

Figure 3: Policy Implications and Intervention Framework against SES Disparities in Education

7. Conclusion

The recent studies, they are clear indications that socioeconomic status continues to be a significant predictor of academic achievement in Nigerian public secondary schools and across parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. High-SES students generally outperform their peers due to advantages in material access, cognitive stimulation, and supportive environments. However, exceptions remind us that effective parental engagement and targeted interventions can partly mediate SES effects. Future policies should emphasize equity-focused education financing, school feeding and nutrition, teacher capacity building, and stronger community involvement to close SES-related achievement gaps.

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