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Relationship between Parental Socio-Economic Status and Pupils' Performance in Primary Leaving Examinations in Government Primary Schools in Buyinja Sub-county

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the relationship between parental socio-economic status and pupils' performance in Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) in government primary schools in Buyinja Sub-county. Socio-economic status was measured through parental income, educational attainment, and occupational status. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 473 respondents comprising pupils, parents, and teachers. Structured questionnaires and interview guides were used as instruments. Results revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between all three SES indicators and PLE performance. Pupils from higher-income households, with better-educated parents, and parents in professional occupations consistently attained higher PLE grades. The study concluded that parental socio-economic status was a strong predictor of academic achievement at the primary level in Buyinja Sub-county. It was recommended that government and education stakeholders design targeted support interventions for pupils from economically disadvantaged households to bridge persistent performance gaps.

Keywords: Parental income, parental education, occupation, PLE performance, socio-economic status, Buyinja Sub-county, government primary schools, Uganda.

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Education has globally been recognized as a fundamental pillar of socio-economic transformation and human capital development. In Uganda, the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) served as the concluding national assessment of a pupil's seven-year primary education cycle, determining eligibility for secondary school entry. Performance in this examination was therefore of great significance to pupils, families, and the government (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2022). Yet, despite policy interventions aimed at improving access and quality, performance disparities across different socio-economic groups persisted.

Socio-economic status (SES) referred to an individual's or household's relative social and economic position in society, typically operationalized through measures of income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige (Sirin, 2005; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Internationally, empirical evidence consistently demonstrated that children from higher SES backgrounds outperformed their counterparts from lower SES homes across multiple educational stages (OECD, 2023; Jerrim & Macmillan, 2015). In sub-Saharan Africa, studies conducted in Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, and Nigeria similarly confirmed that household poverty and low parental education were significant barriers to children's academic achievement (Abubakar et al., 2021; Okioga, 2013).

In Uganda, even after the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997, which dramatically expanded school enrollment, inequalities in educational outcomes remained deeply entrenched along socio-economic lines (Nishimura et al., 2008; Altinok et al., 2022). Access to school increased, but quality outcomes continued to be

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unevenly distributed. Government reports indicated that rural schools, particularly those in economically marginal areas, consistently recorded lower PLE pass rates than urban and peri-urban counterparts (Uganda National Examinations Board [UNEB], 2023).

Buyinja Sub-county, situated in Namayingo District in eastern Uganda along the shores of Lake Victoria, was characterized by subsistence farming, artisanal fishing, and petty trading as the dominant economic activities. Adult literacy levels remained relatively low, and household incomes were predominantly irregular and insufficient (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2021). School records and district education reports indicated that PLE performance in the area remained persistently below national averages. However, no systematic empirical study had been conducted to investigate the role of parental socio-economic status in explaining this persistent underperformance. This study was therefore carried out to fill that significant research gap.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the Government of Uganda's sustained commitments under the Universal Primary Education policy, pupils enrolled in government primary schools in Buyinja Sub-county continued to register persistently low performance in Primary Leaving Examinations. Uganda National Examinations Board records from 2019 to 2023 indicated that the majority of candidates from this sub-county attained Division Three, Division Four, or outright failures, falling consistently below national benchmarks (UNEB, 2023). While several school-level and system-level factors could have explained this trend, the contribution of household socio-economic conditions remained empirically unexplored in this context. The majority of parents in Buyinja Sub-county were low-income earners with limited formal education, engaged predominantly in subsistence agriculture and informal fishing activities. Whether these socio-economic realities significantly explained their children's poor academic performance remained unknown. Several studies conducted elsewhere in Uganda focused on urban and peri-urban settings, leaving rural sub-counties like Buyinja analytically neglected (Nakamanya, 2020; Ssewanyana & Kasirye, 2020). This study was therefore conducted to investigate the relationship between parental socio-economic status, measured through income, education, and occupation, and pupils' PLE performance in government primary schools in Buyinja Sub-county.

3. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE

To examine the relationship between parental socio-economic status and pupils' PLE performance in government primary schools in Buyinja Sub-county.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design, which was considered appropriate for collecting data from a large number of respondents at a single point in time without experimental manipulation of variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data on the measurable relationship between SES indicators and PLE performance with qualitative insights that provided contextual depth to the findings (Bryman, 2016).

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The study was conducted in government primary schools in Buyinja Sub-county, Namayingo District, and eastern Uganda. The target population comprised Primary Seven pupils, their parents or guardians, and classroom teachers in the selected government primary schools within the sub-county. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 473 respondents was drawn from the target population. Stratified random sampling was used to select pupils and parents, ensuring proportional representation across schools. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers and head teachers on the basis of their knowledge and experience with pupils' academic performance patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to pupils and parents, while interview guides were used with teachers and head teachers. The parent questionnaire gathered information on monthly household income, highest level of education attained, and current occupation, which served as the three operational measures of socio-economic status. Pupils' PLE performance data were obtained from Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) records and school registers. PLE grades were numerically coded for analysis purposes, with Division One representing the best performance and Division Four or Fail representing the weakest outcome (UNEB, 2023).

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS Version 25 and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed to determine the nature and strength of the relationship between each SES indicator and PLE performance. The significance threshold was set at $p \leq 0.05$ (Field, 2018). Qualitative data from interview responses were analyzed thematically and used to triangulate and enrich the quantitative findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Out of the 473 targeted respondents, all 473 successfully participated in the study, yielding a 100% response rate. The sample comprised pupils, parents and guardians, and teachers and head teachers drawn from government primary schools in Buyinja Sub-county.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 473)

Category	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Pupils	210	44.4
Parents/Guardians	220	46.5
Teachers/Head Teachers	43	9.1
Total	**473**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 1 showed that parents and guardians constituted the largest category of respondents, accounting for 46.5% of the total sample of 473, followed by pupils at 44.4%, and teachers and head teachers at 9.1%. This distribution was

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deliberate and appropriate given that the study sought to understand household-level socio-economic conditions and their influence on pupils' academic outcomes. The near-equal representation of pupils and parents ensured that data on both the home environment and direct academic performance were adequately captured. The inclusion of teachers and head teachers, though a smaller proportion, provided a professional and instructional perspective that enriched the overall findings. The 100% response rate reflected the effectiveness of the data collection process and the cooperative disposition of respondents in the study area.

5.2 Parental Income and PLE Performance

Table 2: Relationship Between Parental Monthly Income and Pupils' PLE Performance (n = 410)

Monthly Income (UGX)	Division 1 (%)	Division 2 (%)	Division 3 (%)	Division 4/Fail (%)	Total (n)
Below 100,000	4.2	11.3	28.6	55.9	119
100,000 – 300,000	10.5	22.4	35.7	31.4	105
300,001 – 600,000	21.3	33.6	29.8	15.3	94
Above 600,000	38.7	34.2	18.4	8.7	92

Pearson r = 0.612, p = 0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 2 presented the distribution of pupils' PLE grades across different parental income brackets, and the results revealed a clear, consistent, and compelling pattern. Among pupils whose parents earned below UGX 100,000 per month, the vast majority, comprising 55.9%, attained Division Four or outright failed the PLE, while only 4.2% of this group managed to attain Division One. This was a deeply troubling finding that reflected how severely inadequate household income constrained children's academic outcomes. As parental income increased progressively, the proportion of pupils in the lower performance bands declined markedly, and the proportion in the higher divisions rose correspondingly. Among pupils from households where parents earned above UGX 600,000 monthly, 38.7% attained Division One and a mere 8.7% fell in the Division Four or fail category. The Pearson correlation coefficient of r = 0.612 at p = 0.000 confirmed a statistically significant moderate to strong positive relationship between parental income and PLE performance, meaning that as household income increased, the likelihood of a pupil performing well in PLE increased substantially. These findings were consistent with those of Ssewanyana and Kasirye (2020), who established that household poverty was one of the strongest predictors of poor academic performance among primary school pupils in Uganda. The underlying mechanism was straightforward: higher-income parents were better positioned to purchase textbooks, stationery, and supplementary learning materials, pay for private tutoring, provide nutritious meals that supported cognitive function and school attendance, and create quieter, more conducive home environments for study. Conversely, children from the lowest income households often engaged in income-generating activities after school to supplement household earnings, arrived at school hungry, lacked basic learning materials, and studied in overcrowded, poorly lit homes, all of which compounded their academic disadvantage.

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5.3 Parental Educational Attainment and PLE Performance

Table 3: Relationship Between Parental Educational Level and Pupils' PLE Performance (n = 410)

Parental Education Level	Division 1 (%)	Division 2 (%)	Division 3 (%)	Division 4/Fail (%)	Total (n)
No Formal Education	2.1	7.4	24.3	66.2	68
Primary Level	6.8	15.3	33.1	44.8	118
O-Level (Secondary)	14.6	29.4	36.7	19.3	109
A-Level and Above	32.5	37.8	21.4	8.3	115

Pearson r = 0.589, p = 0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 3 illustrated the relationship between parental educational attainment and pupils' PLE performance, and the data demonstrated a strikingly consistent gradient in which higher levels of parental education were associated with markedly improved pupil performance across all division categories. Among pupils whose parents had no formal education whatsoever, an alarming 66.2% attained Division Four or failed PLE entirely, and a negligible 2.1% managed to reach Division One. This finding alone painted a deeply concerning picture of how educational deprivation across generations reproduced itself in the form of poor academic outcomes for children. At the primary education level of parents, the picture remained bleak, with 44.8% of their children still falling in the lowest performance band. However, the situation improved progressively with each successive level of parental education. Among pupils with parents who had attained O-Level secondary education, the proportion in Division Four or fail dropped to 19.3%, and the proportion attaining Division One rose to 14.6%. The most favorable outcomes were observed among pupils whose parents had attained A-Level or higher, where 32.5% achieved Division One and only 8.3% fell in the lowest category. The Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.589$ at $p = 0.000$ confirmed a statistically significant positive relationship between parental education and PLE performance. These findings aligned with those of Sirin (2005) and Jerrim and Macmillan (2015), who established globally that parental education was one of the most powerful and consistent predictors of children's academic success. More educated parents were able to directly assist their children with reading, writing, and homework, provided richer language and intellectual environments at home, held higher academic expectations, communicated more effectively with teachers, and made better-informed educational decisions for their children. In the context of Buyinja Sub-county, where the majority of parents had not progressed beyond primary level education, these deficits in parental educational capital translated directly into reduced academic support at home, leaving pupils almost entirely dependent on already overstretched and under-resourced classroom teachers.

5.4 Parental Occupation and PLE Performance

Table 4: Relationship Between Parental Occupation and Pupils' PLE Performance (n = 410)

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Parental Occupation	Division 1 (%)	Division 2 (%)	Division 3 (%)	Division 4/Fail (%)	Total (n)
Subsistence Farmer/Fisher	3.8	12.1	27.5	56.6	132
Petty Trader/Hawker	9.4	21.3	34.2	35.1	97
Skilled Worker/Artisan	18.7	30.4	33.2	17.7	91
Professional/Formal Employee	36.4	38.2	17.6	7.8	90

Pearson r = 0.601, p = 0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 4 presented the relationship between parental occupational category and pupils' PLE performance, and the findings once again revealed a strong and statistically significant positive pattern. Among pupils whose parents were subsistence farmers or artisanal fishers, the most common occupational group in Buyinja Sub-county, 56.6% attained Division Four or failed PLE, and only 3.8% attained Division One. This finding was particularly significant given that subsistence farming and fishing constituted the livelihood base of the overwhelming majority of households in the sub-county, meaning that the bulk of the school-going population was operating under the most educationally disadvantageous occupational circumstances. Among children of petty traders and hawkers, the proportion in the lowest performance band remained high at 35.1%, though an improvement over the farming and fishing category was evident. The most favorable outcomes were recorded among pupils whose parents were professionals or formal employees, where 36.4% attained Division One and only 7.8% fell in the lowest category. The Pearson correlation coefficient of r = 0.601 at p = 0.000 confirmed a statistically significant moderate to strong positive relationship between parental occupational status and pupils' PLE performance. These results were consistent with the findings of Abubakar et al. (2021) and Bradley and Corwyn (2002), who argued that parental occupation influenced children's academic outcomes through multiple pathways, including the level of income it generated, the time parents had available to engage with children's schoolwork, the social networks and information resources it provided, and the occupational prestige and aspirational modeling it offered to children. In Buyinja Sub-county, subsistence farmers and fishers often worked long and irregular hours with income subject to seasonal variation, leaving little time or financial capacity to invest meaningfully in their children's education. Professional parents, in contrast, had more stable and predictable incomes, regular working hours, and stronger social capital that they leveraged in supporting their children's academic journeys.

5.5 Summary of Correlation Findings

Table 5: Summary of Pearson Correlation Between SES Indicators and PLE Performance (n = 473)

SES Indicator	Pearson r	Sig. (p-value)	Direction	Strength
Parental Income	0.612	0.000	Positive	Moderate-Strong
Parental Education	0.589	0.000	Positive	Moderate

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SES Indicator	Pearson r	Sig. (p-value)	Direction	Strength
Parental Occupation	0.601	0.000	Positive	Moderate-Strong

Significance level: $p \leq 0.05$

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 5 provided a consolidated summary of the Pearson correlation coefficients between each of the three socio-economic status indicators and pupils' PLE performance across the full sample of 473 respondents. All three indicators, namely parental income, parental educational attainment, and parental occupation, demonstrated statistically significant positive relationships with PLE performance at $p = 0.000$, which was well below the 0.05 significance threshold. Parental income recorded the strongest correlation at $r = 0.612$, followed closely by parental occupation at $r = 0.601$, and parental educational attainment at $r = 0.589$. All three correlation coefficients fell within the moderate to strong range, indicating that these SES indicators were not merely marginally related to performance but were substantively and meaningfully linked to how pupils fared in PLE. The consistency of the findings across all three indicators reinforced the conclusion that parental socio-economic status, taken as a composite construct, was a robust and reliable predictor of primary school academic performance in Buyinja Sub-county. These findings were in agreement with OECD (2023), which reported that SES remained one of the most powerful determinants of educational outcomes globally, with its influence most acutely felt in low-income and rural educational contexts where public school resources were insufficient to compensate for household-level disadvantages.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study established that parental socio-economic status, measured through income, educational attainment, and occupational status, had a statistically significant and positive relationship with pupils' performance in Primary Leaving Examinations in government primary schools in Buyinja Sub-county. Pupils from households with higher income, better-educated parents, and parents in formal or professional occupations consistently achieved higher PLE grades. The findings confirmed that socio-economic disadvantage at the household level translated directly into academic underperformance, even within a Universal Primary Education framework. These results were consistent with both local and international literature, underscoring that equitable access to schooling alone was insufficient to produce equitable academic outcomes without addressing the underlying socio-economic inequalities that shaped children's home learning environments (Sirin, 2005; OECD, 2023; Ssewanyana & Kasirye, 2020).

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were made:

The Government of Uganda, through the Ministry of Education and Sports, needed to design and implement targeted academic support programs specifically for pupils from low socio-economic households in rural sub-counties like Buyinja. These could include school feeding programs, free scholastic materials distribution, and remedial learning support classes to compensate for the limited home learning environments of economically disadvantaged pupils.

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District and sub-county local governments needed to invest in adult literacy and vocational skills programs for parents in Buyinja Sub-county. Improving parental educational levels and economic capacities would have long-term positive consequences for children's academic achievement, as better-educated and economically stable parents were better equipped to support their children's learning at home.

School head teachers and teachers needed to establish strong school-community linkage programs that actively engaged parents in their children's learning, including literacy workshops, parent-teacher engagement sessions, and community awareness campaigns about the value of sustained educational support at home regardless of socio-economic circumstances.

Future researchers were encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies that tracked the same cohort of pupils over multiple years to better establish the causal direction of the relationship between parental SES and academic performance, and to explore additional mediating variables such as school quality, teacher attendance, and pupil nutrition that may have interacted with SES effects in shaping PLE outcomes in rural Uganda.

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