Social Inequality and Access to Quality Education: A Sociological Analysis of Class Differences

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Abstract. Social class is a strong indicator of access to quality education worldwide. However, the processes by which such inequalities develop in developing countries such as Nigeria remain poorly understood. This paper explored the connection between social categorisation and educational access among 512 families with school-going children across three geopolitical areas (South-West, South-East, and North-Central). A cross-sectional survey design was employed, in which respondents provided information on family income, parental education, occupational status, wealth indicators, school quality, academic achievement, preparation for higher education, home learning environment, parental involvement, cultural capital, and educational barriers. The results showed strong correlations between indicators of social class and educational outcomes ($r = -.67$, $p < .001$), with parental education and family income as the strongest predictors. Hierarchical regression indicated that social class accounted for 26.8% of the variance in academic achievement, along with demographic and mediating variables, which together accounted for 57.5% of the total variance. According to the ANOVA results, there were significant differences across income groups, with high-income families obtaining higher-quality schools and better academic results (0.34 -0.38). Mediation tests indicated that workplace quality of schools, family learning condition, and cultural capital were partial moderators of the impact of social status, with 30 35% of the reported relations. The research laments the widespread educational inequalities and calls for multifaceted interventions in areas such as school funding equity, access to early childhood education, family economic stability, and institutional-level practices to reduce inequalities and enhance educational outcomes.

Keywords: social inequality; educational access; social class; educational equity; socioeconomic status; achievement gaps; school quality; educational opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

Educational inequality is one of the most endemic forms of social stratification in modern societies, which inherently conditions life paths and recreates cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. Quality education can be another crucial factor in social mobility, economic opportunity, and civic engagement, but deep inequalities persist along social class lines [1]. Such disparities not only affect the availability of educational institutions but also the quality of education, access to resources, curriculum, and the accumulation of credentials that lead to benefits in the labour market [2, 3].

The connection between social stratum and educational performance lies in a complex interplay of material resources, cultural capital, social networks, and institutional practices. Richer households are spending on educational benefits such as private education, tutoring, school enrichment activities, and residential areas with high-performing schools, whereas poorer households have limited access to education [4, 5]. Another issue is that modern educational systems, although they claim to be based on meritocratic principles, reproduce rather than challenge existing class structures, and in many cases, educational achievement is highly determined by the socioeconomic status of the family [6, 7]. These differences are acute in Nigeria, where there are considerable differences between children from wealthy, urbanised families and those from low-income rural and urban populations across six geopolitical regions (South-West, South-East, South-South, North-Central, North-East, and North-West).

Statement Research. Sociological approaches are interested in the functioning of schools as part of broader systems of social stratification and in their role in doing more than simply passing on knowledge, performing social sorting, and reproducing culture [8]. Empirical studies also report a consistent high level of achievement disparity between students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds in examinations of standards, graduation, and education [5]. These discrepancies indicate differences in school quality, with schooling for low-income students marked by larger class sizes, less-skilled teachers, and the absence of advanced studies [9, 10].

Although education reform has been underway for decades, social class continues to significantly influence educational access and achievement. Poor children have significantly less access to educational opportunities than their wealthy counterparts, and these gaps are evident in early childhood education, schooling, academic success, and postsecondary attendance [11, 12]. The achievement gap between high- and low-income students has increased over the last several decades, indicating that class-based educational inequality is a growing aspect of stratification [3. 6].

The educational situation in Nigeria has its own set of challenges, shaped by socioeconomic stratification and geographic differences between the northern and southern regions, urban and rural areas, and access to good schools. Schools in low-income neighbourhoods tend to have inadequate infrastructure, such as poor classrooms, no electricity or clean water, few teachers, and a lack of teaching materials, compared to those in a single privately owned school attended only by middle- and upper-income families. These disparities are further aggravated by economic factors such as high unemployment rates, high informal-sector employment, and high wealth inequality across social classes. The differences are very pronounced in the regions of the country where school attendance rates are lower in the north and education attainment rates are higher in the south.

The knowledge gaps are critical and hinder a holistic understanding of the mechanism that sustains educational inequality. Although research reports indicate inequality in outcomes, little attention has been paid to the effects of various aspects of social class on educational access [13]. Secondly, little literature examines the interactions among macro-level policies, institutional practices, and family-level processes in shaping educational opportunities.

Research Aims and Significance. This paper is a comprehensive analysis of the correlations between social status and access to quality education and explores how class disparities determine educational access. Precisely, this study will examine:

a) the relation between social class dimensions and education access indicators,

b) contextually important influences between these variables,

c) intervening processes, such as school quality, family processes, and cultural capital, as well as

d) barriers to educational equity faced by lower socioeconomic families.

This study fills important gaps by explaining the interplay between family socioeconomic status and educational opportunities across several dimensions in the Nigerian context. The results will be used to develop educational policies and interventions to minimise class-based inequalities in the education sector in Nigeria. At the societal level, the study discusses urgent issues related to social mobility and economic opportunities in Nigeria, where educational equity is a precondition for achieving sustainable development goals, eradicating poverty, and inclusive development [14, 15]. It is important to understand these dynamics within Nigeria's unique socioeconomic

and cultural context so that the country can implement contextually relevant interventions that account for the federal structure, diverse ethnicities, and varying educational capabilities across states.

Literature Review

1) Theoretical Frameworks. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital remains foundational, as it holds that cultural knowledge and dispositions shaped by the socialisation patterns of the middle and upper classes are rewarded by educational systems, which also benefits privileged students [16, 17]. Social reproduction theory views education as a process that perpetuates class formations across generations, despite the apparent meritocratic selection [18]. The perspectives of conflict theory highlight how dominant classes use educational institutions to sustain privilege, and credentialism is used to block access to elite jobs [19, 20]. Critical theories focus on how institutional practices, such as tracking and differentiated curricula, support stratification by placing students into hierarchical streams [21, 22]. All these frameworks help shed light on the systemic benefits to privileged students in educational practices that often appear neutral.

2) Social Class and Educational Access. The concept of social class has several interdependent dimensions that affect education. As family income directly determines investment in education, poverty is a limiting factor for quality education [11, 23]. Parental education has an impact because it transmits knowledge, educational values, and useful support strategies [24]. Occupational status influences access through income security and occupational networks [25]. Wealth enables investing in education by owning a home in a prestigious district and insuring against financial crises [26, 27].

These vast differences in the quality of schooling systematically educate students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, and the inequalities in resources cut across funding, staffing, facilities, and curriculum [10, 28]. Local property-based school funding systems create enormous disparities, placing high-poverty schools at a disadvantage even though they face greater per-pupil challenges [29]. The quality of teachers depends on the socioeconomic structure of the school, and in high-poverty schools, it is difficult to find experienced teachers [30, 31].

The family's socioeconomic background influences outcomes through home learning conditions, parental engagement, and educational expectations [32, 33]. Wealthy households develop a higher-quality home environment with greater access to educational resources than low-income families, who are constrained by financial constraints [5, 34]. The number of parents participating in the classes also differs, with middle- and upper-class parents engaging in intensive forms of participation, such as homework support and educational advocacy [35].

Inequality gaps form during early childhood and continue to increase with schooling, and inequality can be observed even before the school-age [32, 36]. Higher-quality early childhood education offers essential developmental preconditions, but access differs by family socioeconomic status by more than a factor of four [37]. Higher education access is significantly influenced by social class, and college-going rates are differentiated by it, with low-income students disproportionately underserved in selective institutions [38, 39].

3) Conceptual Framework. According to the literature, this paper will propose a conceptual framework in which the dimensions of social class (income, parental education, occupational status, wealth) affect educational access and quality through a mediating variable. The education outcomes, such as academic achievement and higher education preparation, are mediated by school quality, family processes (home learning environment, parental involvement), and cultural capital in the relationship between social class and educational outcomes. This conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.
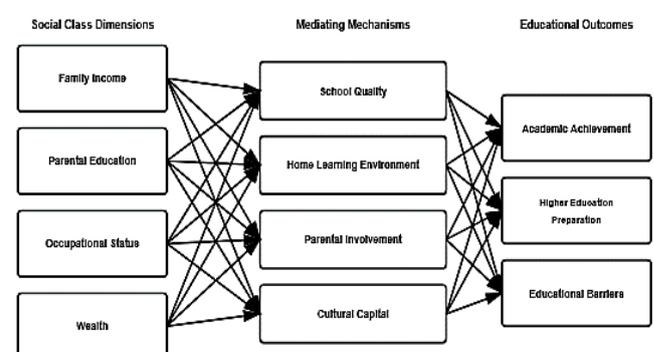

Figure 1 – Theoretical Model Showing the Correlation between Social Class and Availability of Quality Education

According to the framework, social class dimensions (Family Income, Parental Education, Occupational Status, Wealth) cause mediating mechanisms (School Quality, Home Learning Environment, Parental Involvement, Cultural Capital), which, in turn, have an impact on educational outcomes (Academic Achievement, Higher Education Preparation, Educational Barriers).

METHODS

Research Design and Sampling. The present study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate correlations between the two dimensions of social class and educational access among parents of school-going children (ages 5-18 years) in urban and rural areas of Nigeria. The researchers conducted the study across three geopolitical zones—South-West, South-East, and North-Central—to ensure broad representation of the educational context in Nigeria. They collected data in Lagos State and Oyo State (South-West), Enugu State (South-East), and the Federal Capital Territory and Niger State (North-Central). The researchers used stratified random sampling to ensure representation across income levels, parental education, geographic location (urban centres in Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu, and Abuja; and rural communities in Oyo, Enugu, and Niger States), school type (public and private), and children's educational level (primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary). Recruitment used partnerships with local public and private schools in the selected states, community organisations, parent-teacher associations, online parent forums, and snowball sampling to reach families across different socioeconomic statuses in Nigeria [40, 41].

The power analysis revealed that 384 participants were the minimum sample size to detect a medium effect ($r = 0.30$) with a power of 0.80; this was established at 550 to ensure representation across all socioeconomic levels [42]. The data were collected using online and paper-based questionnaires, to be completed over four months (September-December 2024) in selected urban and rural areas throughout Nigeria.

Measures

Social Class Indicators: The family income was quantified in terms of categorical ranges based on the economic scale of Nigerian society and converted into approximately equivalent naira ranges: low (= less than 600,000 naira/year), lower-middle (= 600,000-2400,000 naira/year), upper-middle (= 2400,000), and high (= above 400,000 naira). The most significant educational attainment in the Nigerian system was parental education, ranging from no formal education to postgraduate degrees. Occupational status was measured using an adapted version of the ISEI-08 framework, adjusted to the Nigerian labour market, where most jobs are informal (i.e., trading, artisanry, commercial transport). Home and car ownership, access to electricity, and household assets and educational savings/investments were viewed as wealth indicators [26, 43].

Access and Quality of Education: School Quality Index (18 items, $_0.87$), academic achievement (parent-reported grades) and Higher Education Preparation scale (12 items, 0.84) (Baker et al., 2016).

Intermediary Constructs: Home Learning Environment Scale (15 items, 1 = 0.88), Parental Involvement in Education Scale (20 items, 1 =0.91), and Cultural Capital Scale (16 items, 1 =0.86) [35, 44].

Barriers: 25-item checklist evaluating financial, institutional, information, and social-psychological barriers [45].

Data Analysis. IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29 was used in the analysis. There were descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, correlation analyses, hierarchical regression, mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro, and ANOVA comparing income groups. The researchers set the level of statistical significance at 0.05 [46, 47].

Ethical Considerations. The study was approved by the IRB (Protocol 2024-EDU-487) and complied with ethical principles, including informed consent, data confidentiality, minimisation of risks, and equity in participation [48].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sample Characteristics. The data collection process yielded 587 responses, of which 512 were retained after screening (87.2% usable rate). The sample was socioeconomically representative across income, parental education, geographic context, and demographics (Table 1).

Table 1 – Sample Demographics and Socioeconomic Characteristics (N = 512)

Variable	Category	N	%
Family Income	Low (<₦600,000)	115	22.5
	Lower-Middle (₦600,000–₦2,400,000)	138	26.9
	Upper-Middle (₦2,400,001–₦4,000,000)	135	26.4
	High (≥₦4,000,000)	124	24.2
Parental Education	High school or less	94	18.4
	Some college	126	24.6
	Bachelor's degree	159	31.1
	Graduate degree	133	26.0
Geographic Setting	Urban (Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu, Abuja)	298	58.2
	Rural (Oyo, Enugu, and Niger States)	214	41.8
Child's Stage	Elementary (K-5)	180	35.2
	Middle School (6-8)	167	32.6
	High School (9-12)	165	32.2
Race/Ethnicity	Yoruba	142	27.7
	Igbo	128	25.0
	Hausa	89	17.4
	Other Southern minorities (Edo, Delta, Rivers, etc.)	87	17.0
	Other Northern minorities(Kanuri, Tiv, Nupe, etc.)	46	9.0
	Mixed/Other	20	3.9

Table 2 – Coefficients in Multi-Item Scale Reliability

Measure	Items	α	Interpretation
School Quality Index	18	0.87	Good
Higher Education Preparation	12	0.84	Good
Home Learning Environment	15	0.88	Good
Parental Involvement Scale	20	0.91	Excellent
Cultural Capital Scale	16	0.86	Good

Table 3 – Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	M	SD	Range
School Quality Index	3.42	0.89	1.00-5.00
Academic Achievement (GPA)	3.18	0.74	1.00-4.00
Higher Education Preparation	2.87	1.15	1.00-5.00
Home Learning Environment	3.56	0.94	1.00-5.00
Parental Involvement	3.78	0.76	1.25-5.00
Cultural Capital	2.98	1.12	1.00-5.00
Educational Barriers (count)	4.73	3.28	0-15

Correlation Analysis. The analyses of correlations showed significant associations between the social class indicators and educational outcomes (Table 4). All dimensions of social class showed strong positive correlations with educational indicators (r = .38- .67, p < .001), with parental education showing the strongest. The quality of schooling, home learning environment, parental involvement, and cultural capital were found to be significantly correlated with social class and educational outcomes, providing evidence for their conceptualisation as mediating mechanisms.

Reliability and Descriptive Statistics. The scales had good to very good internal consistency (Table 2). Descriptive statistics showed a significant difference in the educational indicators, with mean school quality ratings of 3.42 (SD = .89) on a 5-point scale (Table 3).

Table 4 – Correlation Matrix of the Key Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Family Income	-								
2. Parental Education	.64***	-							
3. Occupational Status	.71***	.69***	-						
4. Wealth Indicators	.78***	.58***	.66***	-					
5. School Quality	.58***	.61***	.54***	.52***	-				
6. Academic Achievement	.47***	.52***	.44***	.43***	.66***	-			
7. Higher Ed Preparation	.56***	.59***	.52***	.51***	.69***	.71***	-		
8. Home Learning Env.	.55***	.58***	.51***	.49***	.62***	.64***	.67***	-	
9. Cultural Capital	.61***	.67***	.59***	.56***	.57***	.58***	.63***	.72***	-
10. Parental Involvement	.42***	.48***	.43***	.38***	.54***	.59***	.61***	.68***	.64***

Notes: ***p < .001.

Socioeconomic Differences in Educational Access. The ANOVA showed significant differences in all education indicators across income groups (Table 5). The school quality was significantly greater among high-income families (M = 4.12) than low-income families (M = 2.78), F (3, 508) = 87.43, p <.001, 87.43- 2.13=.34. The same trends

were observed regarding academic achievement, higher education preparation, and family processes with medium to large effect sizes. Educational barriers showed an inverse relationship: low-income families reported significantly more barriers (M = 7.89) than high-income families (M = 2.34), F(3, 508) = 102.56, p < .001, eta = .38.

Table 5 − Educational Indicators: Family Income Level.

Variable	Low Income M (SD)	Lower-Middle M (SD)	Upper-Middle M (SD)	High Income M (SD)	F	η^2	Post-hoc
School Quality	2.78 (0.89)	3.21 (0.82)	3.67 (0.78)	4.12 (0.67)	87.43***	.34	H>UM>LM>L
Academic Achievement	2.78 (0.81)	3.12 (0.71)	3.34 (0.65)	3.56 (0.58)	34.21***	.17	H>UM>LM>L
Higher Ed Prep	1.98 (0.98)	2.45 (1.03)	3.12 (1.02)	3.89 (0.89)	95.67***	.36	H>UM>LM>L
Home Learning Env.	2.89 (0.98)	3.34 (0.89)	3.78 (0.81)	4.23 (0.72)	68.92***	.29	H>UM>LM>L
Cultural Capital	2.12 (0.94)	2.67 (1.01)	3.23 (1.06)	3.89 (0.98)	79.45***	.32	H>UM>LM>L
Educational Barriers	7.89 (3.12)	5.67 (2.98)	3.45 (2.67)	2.34 (2.01)	102.56***	.38	L>LM>UM>H

Notes: ***p < .001; L = Low Income, LM = Lower-Middle, UM = Upper-Middle, H = High Income.

Hierarchical regression to predict academic achievement has shown that demographic controls account for 12.3% of the variance (Table 6). The inclusion of social class predictors added 26.8 with parental education (=.28) and family income (=.24) significantly predicting the variation. School quality and family process variables contributed 18.4, with the most significant effects being school quality (=.31) and home learning environment (=.23). The last model accounted for 57.5 per cent of the variance.

Predictor	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Mediating Mechanisms			
School Quality			.31***
Home Learning Environment			.23***
Parental Involvement			.16***
Cultural Capital			.14**
R²	.123***	.391***	.575***
ΔR²	.123***	.268***	.184***

Notes: ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.

Table 6 −Hierarchical Regression to Predict Academic Achievement

Predictor	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Demographics			
Child's Age	-.08	-.06	-.04
Gender (Female)	.14**	.12**	.10*
Race/Ethnicity (Minority)	-.18***	-.09*	-.06
Special Education Status	-.22***	-.19***	-.15***
Geographic Setting (Rural)	-.11*	-.07	-.04
Social Class			
Family Income		.24***	.18***
Parental Education		.28***	.21***
Occupational Status		.15**	.11*
Wealth Indicators		.12*	.09*

Mediation Analysis. Mediation tests were conducted to assess the mediating effect of school quality on the relationship between social class and educational outcomes (Table 7). The overall impact was significant (B = 0.42, p < .001) for parental education and academic achievement. The analysis showed that parental education predicted school quality (B = 0.38, p < .001), which in turn predicted academic achievement (B = 0.34, p < .001). The indirect impact via school quality was substantial (B = 0.13, 95% CI [0.09, 0.17]), explaining 30.9 per cent of the overall impact. The direct effect was also significant (B = 0.29, p < .001), indicating partial mediation. The same trends occurred in the home learning environment (28.6% mediated) and cultural capital (35.2% mediated).

Table 7 – Mediation Analysis Results (Parental Education, Parent School Quality, Academic Achievement)

Path	B	SE	95% CI	p
Total effect (c)	0.42	0.04	[0.34, 0.50]	<.001
Parental Education → School Quality (a)	0.38	0.04	[0.30, 0.46]	<.001
School Quality → Achievement (b)	0.34	0.03	[0.28, 0.40]	<.001
Direct effect (c')	0.29	0.04	[0.21, 0.37]	<.001
Indirect effect (ab)	0.13	0.02	[0.09, 0.17]	-
Proportion Mediated	30.9%	-	-	-

Summary of Key Findings. This paper used a sample of 512 families to explore connections between social status and educational opportunities, revealing significant systematic disparities. All indicators of social class showed strong correlations with educational attainment (r = .38-.67), indicating that social class remains a potent predictor of educational opportunities. Hierarchical regression revealed that social class, parental education, and income accounted for 26.8% of the achievement variance beyond the demographic variables. The addition of mediating mechanisms explained 18.4%, and the ultimate model explained 57.5%.

Clear differences were also observed between the income groups in the sample, with high-income families reporting higher school quality, achievement, and college preparation than low-income families (η^2 = .34 to .38). Low-income families faced almost 4 times as many barriers to education. It is important to note that economic constraints compound the barriers. The results of mediation analyses showed that school quality, home learning environment, and cultural capital partially mediated the effects of social class (30-35% of the total relationships), suggesting that several pathways operate simultaneously.

Theoretical and Practical Implications. These results confirm the Bourdieuian model of cultural capital and expand it to consider various aspects of classes and the intermediary processes [16]. Findings indicate that educational inequality is a systematic form of inequality in which underprivileged children are limited by resources, op-portunities, and institutional structures that benefit their advantaged counterparts. These mediation patterns substantiate the argument of the social reproduction theory that systems of education reproduce hierarchies by seeming to be meritocratic but rewarding class-based privileges [4].

The systemic measures needed to create equity in education in Nigeria are interventions in the federal system. The policies would provide fair school funding to all states and the FCT, with disadvantaged schools receiving extra funding, especially in the FCT and northern and rural LGAs. They should be priority investments in infrastructure (classrooms, electricity, water, sanitation, furniture, and instructional materials) and teacher distribution by recruiting teachers, training them, offering incentives, and developing their professionalism to deploy experienced teachers to urban areas [9, 10].

Schools must have systematic initiatives to incorporate families with diverse backgrounds by offering flexible meeting times, providing translation services, and fostering cultures that value various forms of involvement. The policy interventions must also tackle structural determinants such as poverty, residential segregation, and economic insecurity by investing in family economic security and affordable housing [11, 15].

Limitations and Future Research. There are a few limitations to consider. The cross-sectional nature also makes causal inference impossible, even though theoretical grounds indicate that social class plays a role in educational achievement. Longitudinal studies of families over time would clarify which factors are changing and which points of intervention are critical [49]. Parent self-report may introduce bias; a multimethod evaluation involving administrative data and objective achievement measures is the best way to confirm the results [50].

The sample was restricted to English-speaking, well-literate parents with internet access, which may have left out very marginalised families. The future study must use culturally responsive approaches and community collaborations to ensure that all vulnerable populations are included [51]. The research did not consider individual mechanisms through which wealth affects outcomes or differentiate between short-term and long-term economic conditions [26, 27].

Future studies must use longitudinal research designs that follow children from early childhood through educational attainment, thereby enabling causal inference and defining crucial intervention phases [52]. Rigorous experimental designs in intervention research ought to test comprehensive programs that address multiple dimensions of inequality simultaneously [14]. A comparative study of national settings would help clarify how various education systems and policies shape the links between class and education [53].

CONCLUSIONS

This paper reveals that access to education in Nigeria is highly dependent on social class, with the quality of schools, teaching materials, and cultural knowledge within families varying by social class. Though guaranteed by the constitution, the system makes favourable decisions to privileged children, which continues the inequality across generations. The effect of social class on education accounted for 26.8% of the total variance, and high-income families had an almost four times lower barrier factor than low-income families, underscoring the urgency of a policy response to the needs of the federal structure of Nigeria, regional diversity, and developmental issues.

Countering educational inequity in Nigeria requires systemic changes at a broad level, beyond the limited scope of measures, such as resource distribution among states and LGAs, coordination among the federal states, differences between public and private schools, the lack of rural infrastructure, and institutional cultures that breed privilege. These effective interventions include equitable funding with clear formulas, universal early childhood education, support for families in the informal sector, teacher recruitment and retention in underserved locations, development of rural infrastructure, minimisation of regional disparities, re-entry programs for out-of-school children, and anti-corruption measures to ensure resources reach schools.

Equity in education is not only a moral duty but also a prerequisite for social unity and economic development in Nigeria, as well as for SDG 4 (Quality Education). Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with a median age of 18 years; it should transform its population into human capital by providing equal and quality education. Dispersal of structural barriers across federal, ethnic, religious, and regional settings must be the focus of policies and research so that all children can have access to education that allows them to participate fully in national development, independent of their background, region, or socioeconomic status. Federal and state governments, the civil society, international partners, and the private sector should take urgent steps.

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