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The Role of Parents' Socioeconomic Status on a Child's School Achievement

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This bachelor's thesis is a literature review of the current research regarding the role of parents' socioeconomic status on their child's school achievement. The aim of the research is to provide insight into which factors affect the role of parents' socioeconomic status (SES) on their child's school achievement and how significant this role may be. This thesis has one research question, which is: What role does the socioeconomic status of parents have on their child's school achievement?

The factors related to the socioeconomic status of parents and the school achievement of the child this thesis deals with are the resources the parents can allocate to their children, the development of a child's personality through SES, the genetics passed down via SES, the involvement of the parents in their child's education, the educational background of the parents, the cultural and social capital of the parents, and finally protective factors that the child may have. These aspects are all based on what current research defines as the most significant factors. Special emphasis is placed on role of the educational background of parents, as it is seen to be one of the most significant determinants of one's socioeconomic status and the parental involvement, as it has been extensively researched.

This topic is important from both a societal and educational perspective. The aim of this thesis is to educate its readers, especially teachers and educators, about the impact of this topic on students and, by increasing understanding of the topic, to alleviate its effect on increasing inequality and social reproduction. The educational attainment of a child is an important determinant of a child's future prospects and opportunities and it is important for educators to be aware of the multiple ways in which it affects the school achievement of a child.

Keywords: socioeconomic status, school achievement, parents, comprehensive school

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## 1 Introduction

In today's globalized context, where the economic gap is constantly growing and inequality between the rich and the poor is becoming more pronounced, the role of education is as important as ever. Our socioeconomic backgrounds play a significant role in the opportunities we have in life, and education is no exception. Hartas (2011, 893-894) explains that a multitude of studies point towards a strong link between poverty, children's cognitive abilities and social emotional competence, and evidence shows that an increase in family income has a positive impact on children. As the previous research indicates, underprivileged learning environments are likely to negatively impact children's cognitive and language development and parenting practices influenced by socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to affect the behavioural development of children (Hartas, 2011, 893-894).

According to Jerrim, Vignoles, Lingham and Friend (2015, 6-7), previous research strongly indicates that family background has a significant role in child development in general, particularly due to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of parents. The role that socioeconomics play in child development is complex and involves the interaction of the social and the biological. Parents of higher IQ tend to hold higher socioeconomic positions. Children's reading skills are said to be determined by both home involvement and hereditary factors. Access to financial resources and the human capital accumulated from educational qualifications affect the way in which parents interact with their children, what activities they chose to do with their children as well as the attitudes they express towards education and beliefs on child development. (Jerrim et al. 2015, 6-7.)

Letts, Edwards, Sinka, Schaefer and Gibbons (2013, 132) have found that recent studies show links between socioeconomic status and language development. This is seen to be worrying, considering that children who start school with deprived language skills are at a higher risk for low educational attainment, which in turn can affect the child's life-long learning process. As stated by Jerrim et al. (2015, 6), by the time children finish primary school, there is already a significant socioeconomic gap in their reading abilities.

This topic is an important societal and educational issue. As the prior research indicates, the educational foundations of a child are believed to have a great effect on their possibilities to succeed in the future. If socioeconomic status plays such a significant role, then children may not have equal opportunities from the get go. Some children may start school from a different

starting point than their peers, due to purely circumstantial factors that the child cannot affect. This topic has major implications for both policymakers and educators, in order to do everything that they can to help reduce the gap between the school success of the children of low and high socioeconomic backgrounds.

Not only is this topic important on a societal level, but it also holds great importance to myself as a future teacher and educator. I feel it is my responsibility to educate myself on this topic, so that I, as a teacher, can do as much as I can to break any possible socioeconomic gap between students, and offer equal opportunities to all my students to succeed and thrive at school. This thesis will discuss the possible effects the socioeconomic status of parents has on their child's school success by answering the following question: What role does the socioeconomic status of parents have on their child's school achievement? To answer this, this thesis will focus on defining the concepts of socioeconomic status and school achievement, and by looking into the different factors that play a role in how the socioeconomic status can have an effect on the school achievement of the child.

This thesis is a literature review, in which I will discuss the most prominent research on the topic. I aim to give a broad picture of the role of one's socioeconomic background on one's school achievement, with emphasis on primary education. I will focus on factors such as the educational background of parent's, resources parents are able to provide and their influence on school achievement, the influence of parental involvement on the child's education, hereditary factors, as well as exceptional and protective factors. I will examine the topic from a very general perspective, not focusing on any specific cultural context or age group, but due to the context in which it is written and the material available, it is from a primarily Western perspective. This thesis will aim to find out how these different socioeconomic factors can affect a child's school achievement.

## **2 Defining the Central Concepts**

### **2.1 Defining Socioeconomic Status**

There are several factors that determine one's socioeconomic status (SES). Inglebret, Bailey, Clothiaux, Skinder-Meredith, Monson and Cleveland (2017, 1043) see it as a complex multidimensional phenomenon, which therefore does not have a universally agreed on definition. The APA Task Force on SES have come up with three approaches to define it; the examining of resource access, gaps between groups along a continuum, and power and privilege associated with social standing. Educational background, income and occupation (Netten, Luyten, Droop & Verhoeven, 2016, 190) are some of the most significant determinants of one's socioeconomic status. SES can also be viewed simply as the social class one belongs to: high, average or low (Fan, 2012, 99). Although this definition is much simpler than the latter, one's social class cannot be defined without considering the factors mentioned above.

According to Almquist, Modin & Ösberg (2010, 32) one's cultural capital, including one's education, social background and cultural taste, is perceived to influence one's socioeconomic status, and it is believed that the cultural capital of the parents is transferred to the child through upbringing. The child's SES is defined by that of the parents and is seen as the resources distributed at the macro-level of society which affect the child via the parents (Almquist, Modin & Ösberg, 2010, 32). Jerrim et al. (2015, 12) define socioeconomic class as the occupation of the parents, divided into five classes: professional, managerial/technical, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled. The SES of the child is defined by the higher of the parents' occupations. This classification is commonly used in research on social stratification (Jerrim et al., 2015, 12).

### **2.2 Defining School Achievement**

The definition of school achievement has long been debated and does not have a simple definition. Hartas (2011, 894), defines school success as the cognitive and linguistic development as well as the literacy and reading skills of the child. Although highly criticized, standardized tests are often used as indicators for a child's school achievement. There are several factors that the researchers addressed in this thesis consider as part of school achievement including cognitive development, social-emotional skills, literacy and reading skills (Hartas, 2011, 894).

According to Fitzpatrick (2014, 157), poor educational achievement has effects on both the individual and societal level. For individuals, poor educational success negatively affects one's personal success, health, well-being and reinvestment in society. On a societal level, poor educational success in a population is believed to reduce a country's formation of human capital. Individuals who drop out of high school on average pay three times less taxes and use more social services. This is believed to be a result of a tendency for people with low academic achievement to have more health issues, because they tend to engage in more health-risky behaviours. (Fitzpatrick, 2014, 157). This indicates that the school success of an individual is important on both an individual and societal level and thus there is a need for this topic to be researched further

### **3 Socioeconomic Factors Affecting School Achievement**

#### **3.1 School Achievement and Resources**

Hartas (2011, 894) believes the effects of socio-economic status on school success can be explained through the parents' decisions to allocate resources such as money, time and energy towards different factors of the child's schooling. The amount of money the parents spend on different resources for the child, for example books and toys, as well as the amount of time they spend with them on different activities, such as reading, are believed to have the potential to affect the cognitive and linguistic development of the child. Several studies point towards a strong link between parental investment in home learning and the development of the child's cognitive and literacy skills, which are indicators of a child's school success (Hartas, 2011, 894).

Hartas (2011, 894) explains that when children grow up in literacy-rich environments, where they have access to books and where parents engage with them in learning opportunities, there is a positive effect not only on the literacy and language skills of the child, but also on behavioural and emotional regulation skills. The financial resources and human capital gained through education of the parents affect the way they interact with their children and affects the types of activities they promote and the attitudes and views they hold towards education, as well as the skills they wish to develop in their children. However, interestingly studies have found that parental involvement with their children's homework has been associated with poor academic performance. The reason for this is unclear, but it is believed that it may be due to the students who tend to need assistance with homework are academically lower to begin with. (Hartas, 2011, 894.)

Almquist et al. (2010, 33-34), believes that children are not only shaped by their parents' socio-economic background, but also form their own social position in the classroom. Children enter the classroom with embodied social structures and a set of standards through which the child views and navigates through life with. These affect the child's educational opportunities in the way the child is positioned in the social structure of the class, as well as how the child positions himself/herself in the social structure of the class. The child's position in the classroom, also known as their peer status, is shaped by their socioeconomic status and plays a role in their school success (Almquist et al., 2010, 33-34).



According to Önder and Uyar (2017, 608), although it is widely agreed on, that the socioeconomic status of the parents affects the school success of the child, the extent of that varies between countries. The researchers explain that OECD reports show that the effect of socioeconomic status explains 23% of students' school success in Germany, yet only 12% in Japan. Not only does the individual country affect the role of the SES, but also the development level of the country plays a role. The more developed the country is, the larger effect the SES of the parents has on the students, and the less developed a country is, the more the school affects the students' school success (Önder & Uyar, 2017, 608).

Önder and Uyar (2017, 609) also found that the number of siblings in a family affects the school success of children and even access to education in some countries. Children with many siblings may be given fewer opportunities and thus their school success may suffer because of this. Studies show that in general children with no siblings are the most successful and children with up to seven or more siblings display the lowest success. This also affects access to education, since the existing resources are divided among so many siblings, the chance to attend school is affected negatively. The birth order of siblings also plays a role in school success in developing countries, as older children are expected to help out domestically and financially at home and are therefore more likely to succeed academically (Önder & Uyar, 2017, 609).

Okado, Bierman and Welsh (2014, 354) have found that socioeconomic status plays a role in a child's school readiness. They have found that delays in school readiness are more prevalent in low-income families, which they mainly believe to be caused by the multiple stressors that low-income families face, without the necessary social support needed to cope with them. Alongside this, maternal depression is more common in low SES families, leading to less parents that are less responsive and more irritable. Maternal depression has been linked to low scores on measures of cognitive and motor development in preschool children (Okado, Bierman & Welsh, 2014, 354).

Another resource related factor that is down to the SES of parents is the living environment of the family. D'houst (2008, 8) suggests that parents of low SES are limited to what neighbourhoods they can afford to live in and thus what schools they have access to. Poor neighbourhoods tend to have poor social cohesion, social disorganization and inadequate resources for children, such as playgrounds and libraries. Children of low SES who attend large urban schools with concentrated poverty have lower academic achievement than children of low SES who attend small rural schools or schools without concentrated poverty (D'houst, 2008, 8). Similarly,

Burgness, McConnell, Propper and Wilson (2007, 4) explain that the choice of schools available to children contributes to social stratification. Neighbourhood schooling leads to large income differences between neighbourhood schools, and the quality of schools being influenced by peer group differences (Burgness, McConnell, Propper & Wilson, 2007, 4).

### **3.2 The Role of SES, Personality and Genetics in Relation to School Achievement**

#### 3.2.1 Personality

Deckers, Falk, Kosse and Schildberg-Hörisch (2015, 1) suggest that there is a strong link between family SES and a child's personality. The characteristics of a child's personality affects their school success. Parental investments in the child are thought to influence the development of the child's personality, and since SES affects the economic and cognitive resources a family has to invest in their child, SES largely influences a child's personality. Children who display the characteristic of being patient are more likely to be high achievers. People who display altruistic characteristics are more likely to be good team-players. The researchers explain that this area has been scarcely researched (Deckers, Falk, Kosse & Schildberg-Hörisch, 2015, 1).

In their research, Deckers et al. (2015, 15) found that children of highly educated parents were more likely to be patient and less likely to make risk-seeking decisions. IQ results were found to be higher for children from high income and highly educated families. The researchers attempt to explain these results as to why SES affects personality by explaining that it affects parent's educational background, the amount of time they can allocate to their child, and high SES parents are more likely to engage in interactive activities with their child, whereas low SES parents are more likely to engage in activities that involve media consumption. High SES parents are more likely to have consistent and warm parenting styles, instead of parenting that relies on psychological control, such as not talking to their child for a while after they misbehave (Deckers, Falk, Kosse & Schildberg-Hörisch, 2015, 15).

#### 3.2.2 Genetics

Jerrim et al. (2015, 8) explain that the majority of research on social stratification focuses on the environmental aspects of it but tend to ignore the genetic component of it. The researchers report of an unpopular view, that children of high-income parents tend to end up in more prestigious destinations than children of low-income parents simply due to the inheritance of genes

that allow this phenomenon to happen. Although this view is unpopular, it has nonetheless been a part of social research for the past fifty years (Jerrim et al., 2015, 8).

Jerrim et al. (2015, 8) explain that these types of studies are typically done using identical and non-identical twins, as the former share 50% of their genes, and these studies usually aim to determine if something is caused by nature or nurture. Twin studies have generally found the heritability of reading skills to be high. It has been found that dyslexia, a learning disorder affecting reading, has a 40% heritability rate, and some research has found a 75% heritability for reading in general, all pointing towards a very strong link between reading and genetics. However, twin studies have a lot of limitations, as they assume both identical and non-identical twins have equal environments, even though it has been found that parents tend to treat identical twins more similarly than non-identical twins. Also, twin studies do not account for which genes or which environments affect the results we see. Based on these theoretical concepts, the study conducted by Jerrim et al. (2015) found that only 2% of the socioeconomic gap in children's reading skills can be attributed to genes, and that even if genes do affect children's reading skills, it is unlikely that they are distributed unevenly between socioeconomic groups. This strongly indicates that the largest attributor for the socioeconomic gap in reading skills is environmental, not biological (Jerrim et al., 2015, 8).

Heath et al. (2014, 2) suggest that a large amount of studies point towards a strong heritability of reading difficulties. The heritability of reading difficulties from affected parents to children is an average of 38% heritable. Studies show that children of parents and siblings with literacy difficulties are at a greater risk of having them too. However, the home environment also plays a significant role, alongside the genetic side of it. The role of the environment may differ based on whether the student has a genetic risk for literacy difficulties or not (Heath et al., 2014, 2).

Fan (2012, 100) explains that alongside factors such as academic resources and how much parents of low-socioeconomic status are able to provide, nutrition is also a significant factor regarding academic success. A balanced diet and good feeding habits will have a positive effect on the brain, whereas a malnourished child may be thinking about food in the classroom. This has a significant effect on the child's concentration, which in turn affects the academic performance of the child. Malnutrition can also delay the growth and rate of development of the child, which in turn affects the school performance (Fan, 2012, 100).

### **3.3 Parental Involvement and Support**

Okado, Bierman and Welsh (2014, 354) have found that socioeconomic status plays a role in a child's school readiness. They have found that delays in school readiness are more prevalent in low-income families, which they mainly believe to be caused by the multiple stressors that low-income families face, without the necessary social support needed to cope with them. Alongside this, maternal depression is more common in low SES families, leading to less parental responsiveness and more parental irritability. Maternal depression has been linked to low scores on measures of cognitive and motor development in preschool children (Okado, Bierman & Welsh, 2014, 354).

According to Okado et al. (2014, 355-356), single mothers are often found to have low income. Low income mothers are found to provide their children with less learning support due to their level of life stress. This stress presents itself in the forms of financial strain, poor living conditions, single parent status and social isolation, which in turn causes daily stress and reduced psychosocial support. These factors contribute to a learning environment that is less predictable, less stimulating and less responsive than the learning environments of socioeconomically advantaged children. Not only does the low-income background affect the learning environment of the home, but mothers of low-income backgrounds are also at a higher risk for depression, as the prevalence rate is 40-60%, compared to a prevalence rate of 5-25% among the general population. This has a strong impact on the child, as depressed parents are more withdrawn, unresponsive, inconsistent and more negative and critical when interacting with their child. On top of the likelihood for low-income parents to suffer from depression, they are also likely to suffer from feelings of inadequacy in their role as a parent. The general feeling of helplessness deriving from depression and low self-efficacy in the parenting are likely interrelated, as they both stem from being overwhelmed by one's life situation. Both of these problems have been associated with inconsistent and laidback parenting. These in turn can affect a child's school success as they can delay the development of the child's self-regulatory skills needed at school (Okado et al., 2014, 355-356).

Okado et al. (2014, 355) further explain that several researchers have found a link between frequent parent-child reading, conversation and learning activities at home with school readiness. Parents who actively talk with their children, point out and explain things around them and comment on feeling and thoughts help develop the child's attention skills and further their oral language skills. Parents that spend time teaching their children to recognise letters and

write their name enhance their children's literacy skills. Similarly, parents that spend a lot of time reading quality books with their children enhance the child's vocabulary growth. On the contrary, parents that fail to provide a cognitively stimulating home environment and who display a low level of parental involvement with their children have a diminishing effect on their child's language development (Okado et al., 2014, 355). Lee and Bowen (2006, 195) also explain that parents' reports of educational activities at home have been found to be positively related to teachers' reports about children's mathematics and reading achievements. However, in the context of the US, educational activities at home have been found to be more effective with European-American families, than with families of minority backgrounds, such as African-American and Hispanic, single-parent families and low SES families (Lee & Bowen, 2006, 195).

Not only do the actions of parents have an effect on the child's development, but also the attitudes and beliefs about their responsibility to be involved in the process plays a significant role. Fan (2012, 100) suggests that the SES of the parents determines the attitudes they have towards educating their children. Parents of high SES are more likely to highly value education than parents of low SES. Okado et al. (2014, 355) explain that "concerted cultivation", which means parental involvement in forms of verbal interaction with children, providing children with structured learning opportunities, such as music lessons, was found to predict a pattern in general knowledge in kindergarten, and math and reading achievements in the first and second grade. Similarly, Heath et al. (2014, 2) have found that children of low socioeconomic status are exposed less to print, the opportunities to engage in reading-related tasks and the availability of reading related material at home. They are thus more likely to perform more poorly on print knowledge tasks, display delayed phonological awareness, be at risk for developing reading difficulties and tend to have a smaller vocabulary than children of higher SES (Heath et al., 2014, 2).

Watkins and Howard (2015, 17-18) believe that the SES of parents affects their parenting style, which consequently affects their school success. Parents of low SES are more likely to adopt authoritarian parenting styles, which involve low levels of support and warmth and high levels of monitoring and structure. It is also more likely that low SES children have single parents that adopt harsh and inconsistent parenting styles. Parents of low SES are less likely to devote time to parent-child communication focused on assertiveness and reasoning. These parenting factors have been associated with disproportions in school readiness, results on achievement tests, early school performance, promotion to talented and gifted programmes and grade retention (Watkins

& Howard, 2015, 17-18). D'aoust (2008, 7) also explains that inadequate income of parents causes psychological distress, which in turn decreases the amount of sensitive and responsive parenting the parents can offer, usually resulting in more disciplinary and tough parenting styles. These harsh and inconsistent parenting styles are more likely to result in behavioural problems than consistent and strict parenting styles.

Hill and Taylor (2004, 162) suggest that socioeconomic status affects parental involvement at school through several factors. Firstly, parents with higher educational backgrounds are more likely to actively advocate for their child to be enrolled in honour programmes and manage their child's education. Parents of low SES face more problems with being involved with their child's school. They may face less flexible work schedules, not have access to transportation, have less resources and be under more stress due to living in restless neighbourhoods. In addition to this, they tend to have a lower educational background and may have had negative experiences with school during their own childhood, which makes them less willing to question the teacher or school. On top of this, the self-perceptions and the mental state of parents affect their involvement, such as depression and anxiety. The families who would benefit the most from involvement with the school are often the ones who find it the most challenging to become and stay involved (Hill & Taylor, 2004, 162).

Smith (2006, 44-45) agrees that parents of low SES demonstrate less parental involvement in their child's education than do parents of medium and high SES, and that parental involvement is positively linked to high academic achievement. This means that low SES students are set back even further from their high SES peers. One issue that increases the problem, is that teachers and school personnel continue to request parental involvement without taking SES into account. Policies made at both the federal and district level in the US ignore the needs of underrepresented groups. Most understandings of parental involvement include behaviours that are easily accomplished by middle and high SES parents. This means that they disregard the needs of low SES parents and make it more difficult for them to get involved (Smith, 2006, 44-45).

Kuru Cetin and Taskin (2016, 106-107) explain that parents' involvement in their child's education is as important of a factor in determining school success and the school itself, because both the home and school environments affect a child's cognitive development. Parental involvement is influenced by socioeconomics. Parental involvement at schools can be categorized into six categories, parenting, communicating, learning at home, volunteering, decision making

and collaborating with the school. Communication between the school and the parents enables the passing of information regarding the curriculum and the child. It was found that in schools with low SES parents it is necessary to explain to the parents why it is important to be involved and how this should be done. It was also found that private schools often encourage parental involvement more than public schools. Out of the six categories of parental involvement, learning at home is the most practiced form, with 85,5% of parents in the study helping their child with their homework, and the least practiced category was the decision-making category, as it appears that parents only voice their opinion when it is asked for. When comparing involvement in public and private schools, it was found that parents could communicate with teachers of private schools more easily than with teachers of public schools, which could be down to the fact that parents pay for private schools. Low SES children are less likely to have access to private schools than high SES children (Kuru Cetin & Taskin, 2016, 106-107).

Bodovski (2007, 4) explains that the way in which parents speak to their child affects their linguistic development. The patterns and ways of speech are shaped by the SES of parents. Low SES parents tend to use restrictive language when talking to their children, they speak less in general, use more restricted vocabulary, shorter sentences and use a lot of directives. High SES parents, on the other hand, use elaborate language with their children, they speak more in general to their children, use more complex vocabulary, longer sentences and more complex explanations and interrogatories. During the period of child development from 12-36 months of age, high SES parents speak more to their children and use more diverse vocabulary than low SES parents, resulting in their children having twice the size of vocabulary at 36 months and displaying their social class already at such an early age (Bodovski, 2007, 4).

### **3.4 The Role of Parents' Educational Background**

According to Önder and Uyar (2017, 609) although the income of parents is an important aspect of how socioeconomic status plays a role in school success, the role of the educational background of parents is believed to be the most significant. Parents of high educational backgrounds are able to provide better academic support and provide better economic and social resources for their children than parents of lower educational backgrounds. PISA results indicate that children whose parents are university graduates tend to obtain significantly better results at school, than children of parents who are not. PISA also found that whether a child's mother is a high school graduate or not can be seen in the results (Önder & Uyar, 2017, 609).

Cogner, Cogner and Martin (2010, 687) explain that parental education is usually seen as the most important factor determining one's socioeconomic status, because it has a lot of influence on later occupation and income. Dubow, Boxer and Huesmann (2010, 24) explain that parental education is a good indicator of socioeconomic status and a unique predictor of a child's academic attainment. Maternal education was found to be of great significance when determining a child's school attainment, even after controlling other SES factors. They also found that parents' educational background determined the child's occupational status as an adult. Parents' educational background has an effect on the developing academic success and achievement-oriented attitudes of the child (Dubow & Huesmann, 2010, 2-4).

Wamala, Kizito and Jjemba (2013, 134) explain that in order for parents to be properly involved in their child's education and to have a positive influence on their child's learning and academic outcomes, they need to have gone through and have experience of the formal education system. Mothers in particular, with higher educational backgrounds are able to provide more support to their children regarding problem-solving tasks, compared to mothers with low educational backgrounds, and are more involved in their children's education. The situation may be no different regarding the education of the father, but it has been found that the educational background of the mother has a greater effect. This may be down to a traditional home setting, where fathers tend to take care of the economic side and mothers take care of the home. However, studies have found a strong link between the education of the father and the school attainment of the child. On the other hand, the education of the father had a positive influence as long as it was at least primary education, whereas to receive the same influence, mothers had to have at least secondary education or post-secondary education, indicating that the influence of the mother's education is still greater. In general, children of highly educated parents are less likely to suffer from anxieties and psychological problems, have higher levels of life satisfaction and are more confident and self-reliant (Wamala, Kizito & Jjemba, 2013, 134).

According to Dubow and Boxer (2009, 225-226) the educational level of parents acts as a strong indicator for their children's educational and behavioural outcomes. The researchers report of a strong link between parents' educational background and their income on children's educational attainment, with previous research emphasizing the effect of the mother's education on the child. It was found that in American standardised tests, parental education had an indirect effect on parent's achievement-fostering behaviour and through this on their children's educational achievement due to the effects of the parents' educational expectations. Parental education as well as income have direct effects on how parents interact with their children, which in



turn affect what behavioural models the child learns (Dubow & Boxer, 2009, 225-226). Similarly, Heath et al. (2014, 2) report of finding that a lot of studies confirm the link between the mother's educational background and the child's literacy development, while other studies contradict this finding and suggest that it is not the level of education or SES that affects the child, but the amount of literacy activities at home. Yet Dubov and Boxer (2009), believe the parents' SES and amount of literacy activities, or other academic activities at home have a positive correlation.

Netten et al. (2016, 190) suggest that reading proficiency can be explained by the educational background of parents. Children of highly educated parents obtain better reading results than children of lowly educated parents. They also have a five times greater vocabulary than children of lowly educated parents. It is believed that their parents may have more knowledge of the language and culture of the school and there may be better home-school cooperation and involvement. They found that Dutch children of highly educated parents performed better in elementary school than parents with a low education or immigrant parents. Low-educated parents and immigrant parents are grouped together, due to the fact that immigrant parents usually speak a different home language than the native language, making their knowledge of the local language quite limited (Netten et al., 2016, 190).

Davis-Kean (2005, 294) explains that the attitudes and expectations of parents towards their child's school success is shaped by their educational backgrounds. Parents of moderate to high educational backgrounds hold beliefs and expectations that are closer to the actual performance of their children than parents of low educational backgrounds. The ability of parents to accurately form expectations and beliefs about their children's performance is important in structuring the home and educational environment in such a way that the child can succeed in after-school activities. Mothers with high educational backgrounds tend to have higher expectations for their child's school success than mothers of low educational backgrounds and these result in more achievement-related behaviours by the mothers at home and more positive perceptions of achievement by the child. High educational backgrounds of parents, specifically the mother's, are related to warm social climates at home and parental warmth. Maternal education is found to have the most consistent connection with the cognitive and behavioural outcomes of the child (Davis-Kean, 2005, 294).

### **3.5 Cultural and Social Capital in Relation to SES**

Jæger (2009, 1943-1944) explains that the term cultural capital in an educational context is usually used to explain how cultural traits, knowledge and behaviour affect educational outcomes, in addition to socioeconomic and family background characteristics. According to Jæger, Bordieu's theory of cultural reproduction is one of the founding theories regarding cultural capital that Jæger leans on. This theory indicates that individual and family cultural resources create an intangible 'capital' that can be regarded as equal to economic resources and social networks. Cultural capital is imperative in relation to education and is seen as one of the most important principles in the reproduction of social inequality over time. Cultural capital can be seen as understanding the rules of the game, and in educational terms this means that children who possess constant SES and academic ability and have high cultural capital, are likely to receive preferential treatment from teachers, receive higher grades and perform better academically. Children from culturally advantaged families are likely to have high cultural capital, whereas children from culturally disadvantaged families are likely to have low cultural capital. Bordieu's argument is that parents have to possess cultural capital, they must devote time and effort in transmitting this to their children and their children must take in this transmitted cultural capital and use it to gain educational success (Jæger, 2009, 1943-1944).

According to Lee and Bowen (2006, 197), Bordieu's concept of social capital involves social networks and relationships that provide access to different resources and that requires constant maintenance. They emphasize the aspect of inequality in social capital, as not all people are able to acquire the same amounts of social capital. An aspect of this is how well the culture of the individual fits with the culture of the larger society. This can be understood through the terms 'habitus' and 'field'. 'Habitus' is the nature of past experiences and social training which lead people to act and think in a certain way in a situation. A 'field' is an organised system of social relationships. Bordieu believes that when one's habitus is similar to the field they are acting in, so when the field is familiar to the individual and is understood by the individual, they gain social advantage. (Lee & Bowen, 2006, 197).

Lee and Bowen (2006, 196-197) explain that social and cultural capital that children gain from their parents' interactions and involvement in the school community can influence their school success. Social capital can be seen as a means to an end, by which parents can promote their children's school achievement and educational attainment. It can be gained from visiting the child's school, as this can give information regarding different events and enrichment activities,

skills such as how to help with homework and parenting tips, information about access to resources and sources of social control, such as home-school agreement on the expectations for behaviour and educational values. All of these factors can positively influence the child's school success. Meeting other parents and teachers at the school can help parents expand their social network, which will help them gain more information that will help their children. However, the information gained through social capital and involvement at the school can only benefit the child if the parents devote time to supporting their child (Lee & Bowen, 2006, 196-197).

Cultural capital, on the other hand, as explained by Lee and Bowen (2006, 197) in the context of parents and the education of their children can be divided into three forms, the personal dispositions, attitudes and knowledge gained from experience; connections to education-related objects, such as computers and books; and connections to education-related institutions, such as schools and libraries. The greater one's cultural capital is, the greater the chance he or she has at obtaining more cultural capital that can benefit family members. There can be a lot of inequality related to how much capital an individual can obtain, based on the access one has to resources and relationships of interest (Lee & Bowen, 2006, 197).

Hill and Taylor (2004, 162) explain that parental school involvement benefits the child's achievement through the increase of social capital. Parental school involvement increases the skills and information of the parents'. Parents learn from other parents and gain insight into school policies and practices and how to successfully handle difficult situations related to the child and the school. On top of this, when parents and teachers interact they learn about each other and each other's expectations for the child. Compared to parents who are not involved with their child's school, parents who are develop more complex strategies for working with the school and their child to improve academic achievement. Another way how social capital and parental involvement promotes academic achievement, is through social control. Parents and teachers work together to form a mutual understanding for appropriate behaviour of the child at school and at home. When parents get to know other parents and agree on these behaviours, the child receives similar instructions as their peers, making it clearer and more effective. Through social capital and social control, children receive the message that education is important, which in turn improves the child's motivation, competence and involvement at school (Hill & Taylor, 2004, 162).

### **3.6 Exceptional and Protective Factors**

Despite all the factors mentioned above, children of low socioeconomic status can and do perform well academically. Watkins and Howard (2015, 18-19) explain that in addition to identifying risk factors for why children of low SES perform poorly academically, it is also important to identify the protective factors that help alleviate these negative factors and help low SES children perform well academically. Protective factors are the forms of support and opportunities that decrease the effect of adversity and enable development. They are internal and external resources that help steer an individual from risk to resilience. For a child of low SES, these include internal characteristics such as high self-esteem, average to high IQ, internal locus of control and social competence, and external factors include positive peer relationships, the quality of the school, a supportive home environment, a good neighbourhood environment as well as effective parenting. Parents of low SES can play a positive role in their children's school success just as much as they can influence it negatively. Watkins and Howard (2015, 19) conclude that the effects of parents' low SES is most detrimental to their children in the early years of development (Watkins & Howard, 2015, 18-19).

Kuba (2015, 13, 27-28) believes that low SES parents want their children to succeed academically and value education just as much as high SES parents. The ways in which they support their children are less conventional, because of the social context which they must deal with. There is a theory of resilience, which believes that there are protective factors that help people who have faced high stress situations, during their years of early development, such as family poverty, overcome these problems and succeed in life. These protective factors include; a minimum of average intelligence, children who are active, healthy and sociable, being curious and interacting physically with their environment, for example through hobbies, having family and non-family members who provide unconditional love, having assigned responsibilities at home and development of a positive self-image and locus of control. Children who have high expectations for themselves and have parents who have high expectations for them, are more likely to overcome the hardships. Resiliency is part of our genetic makeup that thrives when given the right circumstances (Kuba, 2015, 13, 27-28).

In relation to the theory of resilience, Kuba (2015, 28, 67) explains that the theory of Growth Mindset also plays a role in children overcoming obstacles. Research on Growth Mindset suggests that perseverance and hard work are positively related to the learning and motivation of the child. Enjoying learning, being a hard worker, being determined, and persevering are all

qualities of a Growth Mindset. These qualities can help a child of low SES thrive at school, despite having all odds against them. The Growth Mindset is more related to the process of learning than to the actual end product. A fixed mindset believes that our intelligence is fixed and cannot be changed, whereas a growth mindset believes that our intelligence can be changed with perseverance and motivation (Kuba, 2015, 28, 67). A growth mindset encourages school success. Robinson (2017, 18) supports these findings and explains that the mindset of the child is likely to influence their learning practices. She reports that children with a growth mindset are more willing to put extra time and effort into their learning, because they believe it can be developed. Children with fixed mindsets are more likely to give up and are less likely to accept challenges (Robinson, 2017, 18).

## 4 Discussion

The socioeconomic status of the parents is found to negatively affect the school achievement of the child in multiple different ways. In response to my research question I found that the major factors that contribute to the effect of SES on a child's school success include: the resources the parents can allocate to their children, the educational background of the parents, the development of a child's personality through SES, the genetics passed down via SES, the involvement of the parents in their child's education, the cultural and social capital of the parents, and finally protective factors that the child may have. I discovered that the impact of the educational background on the parents' SES and the child's school achievement is one of the most significant factors. The interaction of the environment that the child lives in and the experience of the parents affects how much support the child receives and what prerequisites the child has for learning and achieving. The educational background of the parents, the resources the parents can provide the child with, the development of the personality of the child, the social and cultural capital of the parents, genetic factors as well as the involvement and support of the parents and protective factors are all important factors of how the SES of the parents influences the school achievement of the child.

As depicted in this thesis, there is not a universally accepted definition for socioeconomic status. Different researchers define it differently based on the needs of their studies. However, almost all definitions accept that parental income, occupation and education are the main components of it. Some believe that the occupation of the father and the education level of the mother are the most significant indicators.

This thesis also depicted that school achievement can be difficult to define and measure. Grades and exam results are common forms of measurement, but they have been highly criticised due to the fact that exams do not often give an accurate indication of an individual's knowledge and understanding and may not suit certain learners. In this thesis, school achievement has been understood through cognitive development, linguistic and mathematical knowledge, social-emotional skills and literacy skills. Standardized tests are used by many researchers as indicators of achievement.

The resources parents are able to provide their children with are found to be influenced by their socioeconomic status. Parents of low SES are less likely to be able to allocate as much money into resources that benefit the learning of their child, such as books and toys, and as much time

into learning activities such as reading. The amount of time and money parents are able to invest in their child is believed to affect the cognitive and emotional development of the child. The living environment is also believed to influence the school achievement of the child, and parents under a lot of stress are less able to provide good, stable environments for their child. Low SES parents also face more life stressors, which affects the time and energy they can provide their child with. The number of siblings, especially in low SES families, can affect how much of the family's resources the child receives. The living environment and location also affects what schools the child has access to.

The personality of the child can be shaped by the SES of the parents, and different personality traits are known to affect school achievement either positively or negatively. Children of high SES are more likely to learn patience and altruistic characteristics, which are associated with school success. The influence of genetic factors in learning and SES are often debated, but it is believed that SES can affect the heritability of reading skills and disorders. High SES children tend to have better reading skills, and it has been found that reading related disorders such as dyslexia are up to 38% heritable.

Parental involvement is accepted as a very significant factor in school achievement and is also known to be heavily affected by the socioeconomic status of the parents. Parents that engage in learning activities at home, such as reading and problem-solving promote their child's school readiness and cognitive development. Low SES parents find it harder to engage in and remain engaged in activities related to the school, even though their children are the ones that would benefit the most from it. They may face less flexible work schedules and may not have access to transportation. On top of this, schools make it easier for medium and high SES parents to get involved and policies are made in favour of these parents. Low SES parents may have negative experiences with teachers and schools from their own childhood and may find it more difficult to question the teacher. Low SES parents are also more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, which affects how involved they are able to be. High SES parents also transfer broader vocabularies to their children from an early age.

Parenting styles are affected by socioeconomic status of the parents and can shape how the child achieves in a school environment. Low SES parents are prone to more authoritarian, inconsistent and harsh parenting styles. High SES parents resort to warmer, more supportive and

structured parenting styles. The parenting styles of low SES parents are associated with a decrease in school readiness, grade retention and access to talented and gifted programmes and more associated with behavioural problems of the child.

The educational background of parents, is believed to be the most important determinant of SES. The educational background of parents influences their expectations and views regarding education, enables them to allocate their resources in a way that benefits the child and the academic support they can provide. Research suggests that the mother's educational background is of greater significance to the child's educational achievement than the father's. The educational background of the parents affects how the parents interact with the child, and what behavioural patterns the child learns. A higher educational background is associated with a warmer and softer approach to parenting. Highly educated parents also have a more accurate understanding of the level of their child than lowly educated parents. Children of more highly educated parents also tend to have a more extensive vocabulary and better reading proficiency.

Cultural and social capital are formed from the cultural and social knowledge gained through different relationships, which are passed on to the child through cultural reproduction. SES plays a significant role in the requiring of social and cultural capital, as lower SES individuals have less resources and relationships to benefit from. In an educational context, cultural capital can be gained from interactions with the school and the school community. Interacting with teachers and other parents provide the parents with insight into how the school works, how their child is doing and what other parents expect of their children. It also enables parents and teachers to form a common understanding of what is expected of the child, so that it can be implemented at school and at home. Because low SES parents find it harder to get involved in the school community, due to several obstacles, they also tend to have lower cultural and social capital than high SES parents.

According to this thesis, children of low SES parents may face numerous challenges regarding their school achievement. In many ways, they may be at a disadvantage compared to children of high SES parents, from the resources they have available to traits gained through parenting styles. The socioeconomic status of parents has a large impact on the child and the child's educational possibilities and may drastically set them back from their high SES peers.

In spite of all these factors that set children of parents with low socioeconomic statuses further back from their high SES peers and make it more challenging for them to succeed at school,



there are protective and exceptional factors that enable low SES students to succeed academically. Theories of resilience believe that children can overcome stressful situations such as poverty through having protective factors, such as at least average IQ, being healthy and curious, having engaging hobbies, having family and non-family members who provide unconditional love and by having a positive self-image and locus of control. Another theory of growth mindset, believes that children who believe that their intelligence can be changed through perseverance and motivation, instead of having a fixed mindset and believing that the intelligence we are born with cannot be changed, can have a positive effect on school achievement. These children are less likely to give up and more likely to persevere and embrace challenges. Children of low SES can and do succeed at school.

Because this thesis took a very general approach to the topic, I could not cover factors related to different countries, cultures and ethnicities, even though these aspects play a significant role in socioeconomics. This thesis also looked at the issue through a Western lens, due to the context in which it was written and the material that was available. This thesis provides evidence of lots of problems and disadvantages related to socioeconomic inequality regarding school achievement but could not place a great amount of focus on ways to solve these problems and decrease the effects of socioeconomics. Although this topic has been studied for many years and there is a lot of research about it, there is still a need for even more, as the problem only seems to be growing globally. Teachers' understanding of the problem has to be improved, in order to combat the issue in the field. Country specific research would provide precise indications of how significant the problem is in different countries, and what countries could serve as examples of how to improve the issue.

Despite these limitations, I believe this thesis succeeded at providing a broad and general overview of how socioeconomics affects school achievement and what challenges or privileges it causes. The goal of this thesis was not to find a direct and measurable cause and effect relationship between the two factors, but instead to provide insight into what current researchers believe to be relevant factors and what kind of role these factors play.

For teachers and educators, this thesis provides insight into the different ways in which the socioeconomic background of student's affects their chances at succeeding academically. By being aware of these and how much different factors, such as parental involvement, affects this success, teachers can do everything in their power to make it easier for low SES students to

succeed and for low SES parents to get involved and gain a better understanding of the school culture.

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