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Effects of Social Class on Student Learning Outcomes in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh: A Comparative Literature Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

It is widely believed that education systems mirror and reinforce social hierarchies. This article presents the first comparative synthesis across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh on how socio-economic class reproduces disparities in student learning outcomes. Following PRISMA guidelines, 31 studies were selected through a systematic search of Google Scholar and SCOPUS databases, along with expert recommendations. The final selection included 29 journal articles, two doctoral dissertations and two working papers. The findings from these studies show that parental wealth, maternal education, paternal occupation, and caste positively correlate with learning gaps between children. Conversely, the impact of ethnicity on learning outcomes remains under-researched in all the three countries. Education policy must counter these class-based inequities to level the playing field for every child. Unless differences in home-based endowments are factored into design and implementation of policies, education systems will continue to reproduce social inequalities in academic attainment. The article also highlights that the analytical utility of "social class" is contested in the Global North, but it remains a vital framework for understanding learning variances in South Asia.

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1. Introduction

Many countries in the world are facing a learning crisis. Learning poverty rate[1] has risen to 70 percent in low- and middle-income countries (World Bank, 2022). Children are not gaining foundational skills and cannot read a simple text by age 10. Long school closures and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have likely increased the learning poverty at a much faster rate in South Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The literature traces the reasons for poor learning to a multitude of factors such as a lack of system coherence (Kaffenberger & Spivack, 2022), low and inefficient spending (Baldacci et al., 2004; Glewwe et al., 2011; UNESCO, 2010), deficits in teaching and pedagogy (Aslam & Kingdon, 2008; Kingdon et al., 2014; Rashid & Muzaffar, 2015), poor governance (Saguin & Ramesh, 2020), and effects emerging from exogeneous variables such as the socio-economic background (Hattie, 2009; Levinson & Cohen, 2023).

[1] 'Learning poverty' includes metrics of both deprivations in access as well as basic skills in reading and numeracy. See World Bank (2021) for methodology to measure learning poverty.

The bulk of literature, though, scrutinizes how such factors cause variations through metrics of access and distribution of educational services and public expenditure (Nawaz & Iqbal, 2016; UNESCO, 2010). A key consequence of this skewed attention is that policy research on effects of poverty and family background has traditionally centered around paradigms of social exclusion, discrimination, and inequality in availability of schools, and disparities in enrollment, retention, and completion rates. The ways in which these factors enable or constrain learning gains, once children have overcome initial access barriers and are enrolled in a school or any other formal setting, have received less attention in the literature. This article examines how social class characteristics influence learning outcomes of children in pre-primary, primary and secondary education in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. I have chosen these countries because, despite frequent political conflicts and differences in social and economic trajectories, these "lands of belonging", as Bhatt and Bhatt (2022) put it, share a common social, political and cultural history before Pakistan was born out of India's partition in 1947 and Bangladesh hived off from Pakistan in 1971. There are many common social attributes in these societies such as economic inequality, caste-based social hierarchy, ethnic identities, and racial ancestry. The three countries make around a quarter of the world's total population with a huge diversity in ethnic groups, languages, religions, and social and cultural institutions.

All the three countries are facing acuate learning crises in their societies. According to the World Bank's estimates, learning poverty stands at 56 percent in India, 80 percent in Pakistan, and 51 percent in Bangladesh (World Bank, 2024). This article makes an important contribution to our understanding of how social class affects children's acquisition of knowledge and age- or grade-appropriate proficiencies. This is done through a synthesis of the existing literature. While many researchers have examined selective aspects of social class, this article presents the first comparative synthesis that brings together the findings from 31 scholarly works across five domains of social class in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It brings to prominence insights and relationships that need to be given due consideration in education policy and practice to tackle inequality in learning outcomes for children from different socio-economic backgrounds. The article also presents a conceptual framework which can explain which variables and relationships have studied or omitted in the literature. This is important because every child, regardless of their background, has a right to a quality basic education. In reality, the South Asian societies are highly unequal in terms of wealth, income, and social status (Acharya & Acharya, 2022; Munir & Kanwal, 2020). Their education systems reproduce these inequalities in learning as well (Sepúlveda et al., 2022). The next section outlines a framework within which the relationship between social class and learning outcomes is conceptualized in this article.

2. Conceptual Framework

The two main concepts used in this synthesis, namely 'social class', and 'learning outcomes' are open to a wide range of interpretations and philosophical positions. The Marxist theory defines class in terms of social groupings based on relationships with means of production. In sociology, this concept divides society into a stratification system (Vitt, 2020). This stratification has been used for analysis of inequality based on wealth, power, occupation, and social status. In the post-structuralist Western societies, new forms of social stratification are gradually replacing the traditional class hierarchies, with calls for a re-evaluation of how we conceptualize and measure social stratification (Clark & Lipset, 1991; Rossiter, 2023; Savage & Mouncey, 2016). Therefore, the relevance of class as an analytical concept in the Global North is disputed. This concept, however, is still relevant in the Global South where class-based identities interact with each other to reproduce inequalities (Banaji, 2019). In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, family and individual attributes like income, wealth, caste and education determine, to a great extent, access to political, cultural, and economic resources. This, in turn, sets the boundaries for position of individuals in the society and their ability to 'buy' services that are commensurate with the norms and standards of the class they associate themselves with. In this article, I rely on the traditional concept of social class hierarchies based on income and wealth, parental education, parental occupation, caste and ethnicity.

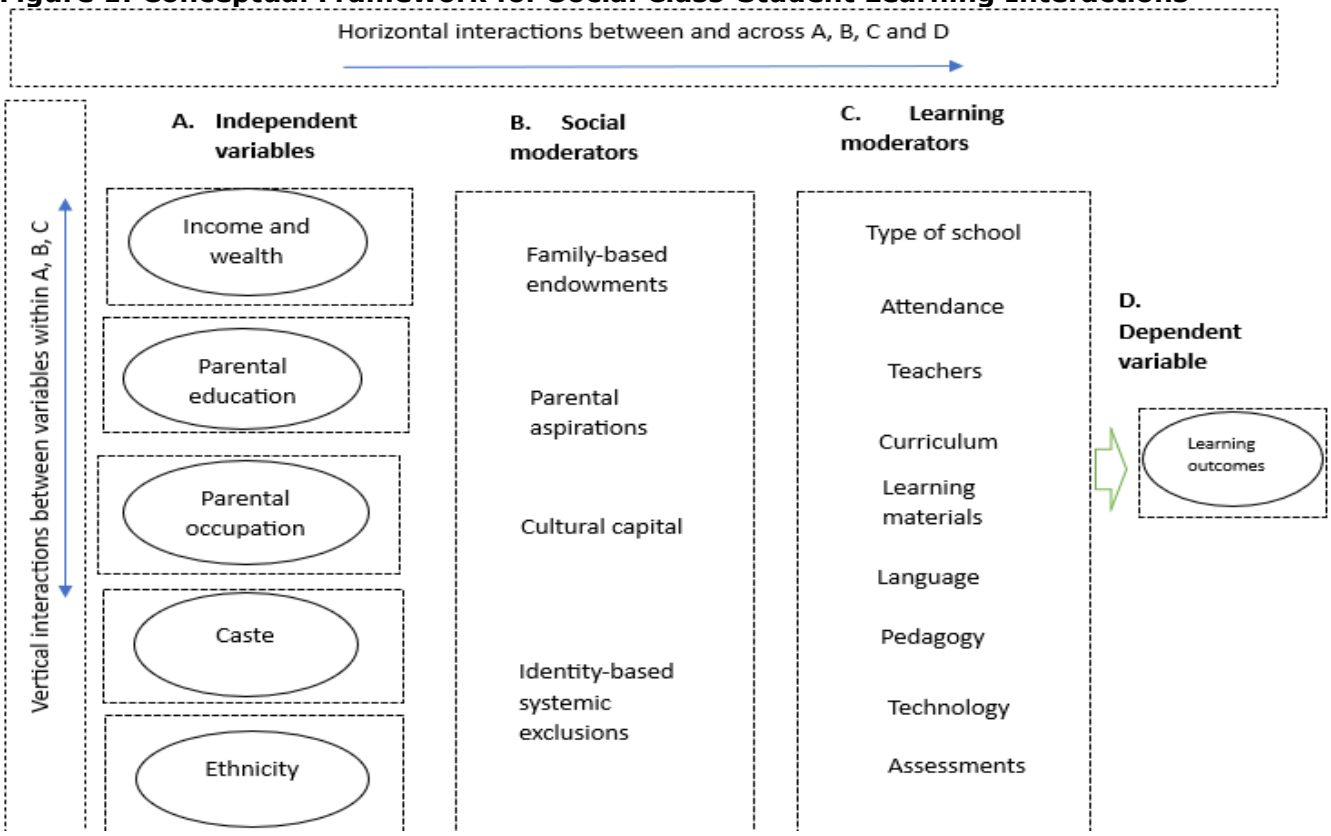
The second concept, learning outcomes, encompasses a process of acquiring knowledge, skills, habits, and values through experience, experimentation, and observation, in its broadest sense (Lasi, Nadeem, & Fatima, 2007). In education, this broadest meaning is often expressed as 'holistic child development' as an approach to learning that considers a child's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual growth, especially in the early stages of life. In an academic sense, however, learning is defined in terms of students' ability to meet specific curricula objectives within a given timeframe, but several versions of this definition exist in the literature (Prøitz, 2010). Learning achievement in this article is used in its broadest sense, but in relation to pre-primary, primary and secondary levels of education. The bulk of available literature has focused on the effects of exogenous factors of discrimination and exclusion in school participation. Heyneman and Loxley (1983), drawing on data from 29 developing countries, concluded that compared to high-income countries, academic achievement in low-income countries was affected more by pupils' social status and less by teacher quality. Hattie (2009) famous synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses showed that home resources such as parental income, occupation, and education, have a notable influence on the student's achievement. Child's intelligence and several other social, economic, and environmental factors can also affect the performance of a child (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Das, 2021; Muller, 2018; Polyzou & Karypis, 2016). Glewwe et al. (2011) also conducted a systematic review of the effects of school and teacher characteristics on learning in developing countries, and found a mixed picture of correlations.

The focus of this synthesis is on South Asian context. Figure 1 below provides an overview of how I conceptualize the montage of relationships between social class and learning outcomes in this context. It is important to clarify here that this framework is guided by a combination of insights from the systematic reviews discussed above as well as my own understanding and observations as an education practitioner. The framework has not emerged directly from the synthesis of 31 studies reviewed in this article, but I will revisit towards the end of this article to discuss how it can explain the breadth as well as gaps in the South Asian literature. I treat the social class characteristics as 'independent variables' (A). Family income and wealth, parental education, parental occupation, caste, and ethnicity are the class traits which children cannot choose, but they subscribe to them being a member of the family. These attributes can predict a child's exposure to the type and amount of 'learning mediators' (C), either directly or through several intervening 'social mediators' (B). The linkages between and among these variables influence the 'dependent variable', i.e. learning outcomes (D). These linkages are vertical as well as horizontal, i.e. variables in A, B, or C interact across the boxes but also within each box with each other, causing variation in the intensity of effects. For example, household income and wealth provide the parents more purchasing power for increased "family-based endowments" such as quality of food (which in turn is associated with child's health and nutrition), location of house, quality of home-based support, access to technology, selection of a school type, private tuition, safe and reliable transport, etc. Some of these factors such as access to health and nutritious food directly affect a child's cognitive development both in the uterus and in early age. To useSen (1983) analogy in the crude form, income and wealth enhance a household's alternative "commodity bundles" that enable them to exercise a degree of control over social and learning variables (B& C) in favour of their child's learning.

Education levels of father and mother are strong predictors of their beliefs and aspirations about success of their child in education. Occupation of parents determines their earnings and hence their control over social and learning moderators. The nature of occupation may also determine the home environment and demands on a child's time. Social exclusion of so-called low-status castes and politically oppressed ethnic groups is common, and leads to their deprivation from political power, economic resources, and equitable distribution of basic services like education and health. As a result, children from such groups are constrained to choose between a high- and low-performing school, or to be able to access a school at all. The relationships between variables in columns A, B, C and D run in both horizontal and vertical directions (see Figure 1). For example, parental education and family income and wealth relate to each other as much as parental occupation and income do within the same box with each other. Similarly, parental aspirations can predict family-based endowments as well as home-based support. In some cases, there may be direct relationships between factors in column A and the

learning variables in column C. Therefore, the lines of causality run both directly and indirectly to the learning outcomes. We can conceptualize many interdependencies and relationships, and the assumptions underpinning them. Indeed, each relationship in this framework will appropriate a theory of change to understand the causality and mechanisms through which effects take place.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Social Class-Student Learning Interactions



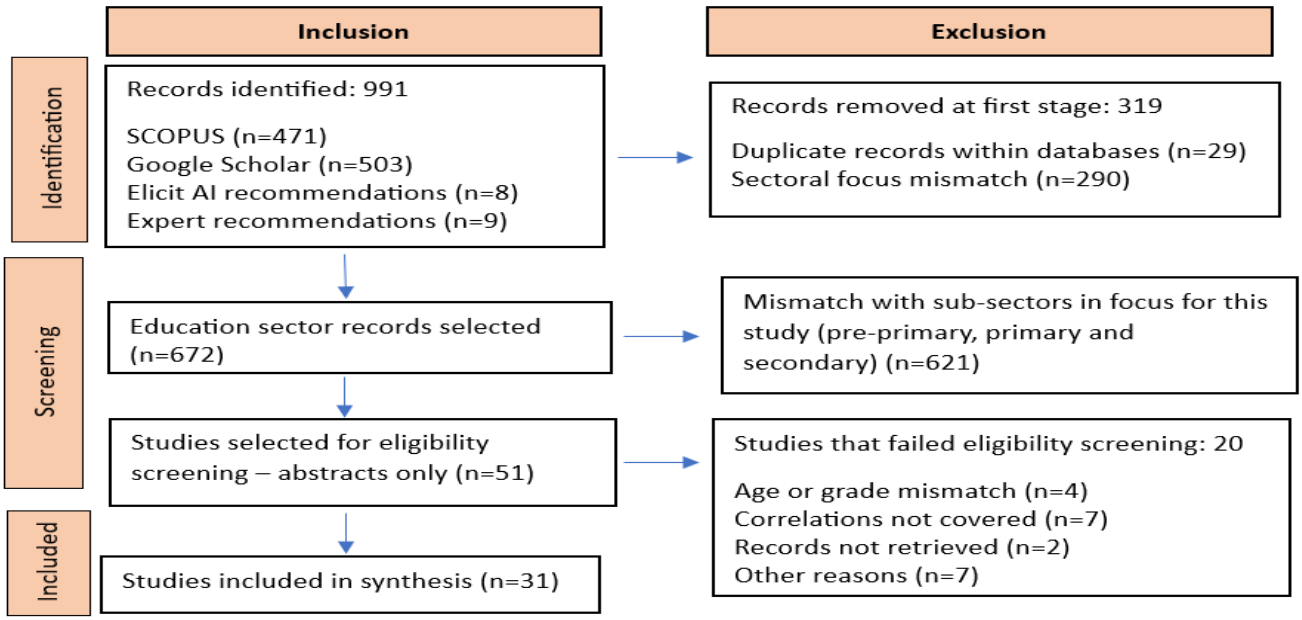
3. Method

This literature synthesis aims to explore how social class characteristics influence student learning outcomes in pre-primary, primary and secondary education in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As the conceptual framework (Figure 1) encompasses a wide range of relationships between social class traits and learning outcomes, another aim of this article is to explore the extent to which the evidence available so far investigates the nature of those relationships in these three countries, and where the gaps are that need attention in future research. Two databases, namely SCOPUS and Google Scholar, have been used for literature search. I selected these databases partly due to time constraints but also due to their wide subject coverage as well as robust filtering capabilities. The subject coverage was particularly a crucial criterion because the topic of my research covered education as well as five domains of social class. At the first stage, queries were limited to the titles of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, doctoral dissertations and working papers. The search queries used social class variables in combination with education terms relevant to the research question. The initial search of titles returned 991 studies, including 974 records from Google Scholar and SCOPUS, eight recommendations from Artificial Intelligence-powered Elicit (an online tool for scientific research) [2], and nine recommendations from experts. Out of these, 319 studies were excluded to remove duplicate listings and those with a focus on sectors other than education. 672 studies focusing on education were selected, but most of them were found to cover either higher education, or skills or sub-

[2] This search was based on this question: "papers that examine the relationship between social class and learning", separately for India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

sectors other than pre-primary, primary and secondary (Figure 2). The selection of studies focused on the right education level returned 51 records for abstract screening. 20 studies were excluded at this stage because they either covered a different age group or level of education, or they did not cover any correlation between social class variables and learning outcomes. Other reasons included non-retrieval or use of class or learning in a context that did not sit within the parameters of this study. The final selection came down to 31 studies. All studies published after the partition of India from August 1947 to March 2025 are included in the scope. The final selection includes 29 journal articles, two doctoral dissertations and two working papers. Selection criteria and characteristics of the selected materials are summarized in Figure 2 and Table 1, respectively.

Figure 2: Flow Diagram for the Search and Inclusion of Studies



I draw on key elements of PRISMA guidelines (Liberati, et. al, 2009, cited in Nag et al. (2024a) for selection of literature and Schirmer (2018) framework for synthesis and organization of findings. Although literature synthesis is less structured compared to a systematic review, it involves presenting information and findings into a coherent form along with critical analysis of the state of knowledge, identification of gaps and inconsistencies in the body of research, and recognition of the next logical steps in the line of research inquiry (Schirmer, 2018). A common approach in synthetic reviews is that findings are organized into key themes. The selection of studies did not apply a quality assessment criterion upfront, but a post-selection analysis was carried out to map the quality. Although the impact factor (IF) of journals is not a reliable metric for assessing the quality of individuals articles (Jarwal, Brion, & King, 2009), it indicates a degree of influence and importance of the journal. Impact factor data was available from the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) and SCOPUS for all journals. While no benchmark is universally agreed, I consider IF above 3 as a threshold for "good" impact. 30 percent of the papers included in this review are above this threshold.

4. Results

4.1. Income and Wealth

The research carried out almost two decades ago showed differences in learning between rich and poor students and the type of school. Based on a survey of primary public and private schools in rural Pakistan, Das (2021) found, using data from tests performed at the end of grade 3, a bare majority had mastered the Kindergarten and Grade 1 mathematics curriculum. 31 percent of the students could correctly form a sentence with the word "school" in the vernacular (Urdu). The largest gaps were between schools rather than between students. This is evident from the adjusted gap between public and private schools in English which was 12 times the adjusted gap between rich and poor children. The adjusted gap between public and private schools in

Mathematics was 8 times the adjusted gap between children with literate and illiterate fathers. The overall conclusion is that socio-economic status matters, but the type of school a child attends matters more. In India, Goyal (2007) found similar results. A one-point increase in household asset index increased test scores by 1-2 percentage points. In this study on Grade 4 and 6 students in Orissa, the author noted that the type of school attended by the child had more profound impact on the quality of learning. It is striking that studies conducted during this period in both India and Pakistan showed similar findings.

Studies conducted a few years after these findings, however, indicate that the distinction between public and private school has become less important; wealth is far bigger a determinant of learning than the type of school (Alcott & Rose, 2015). Using data from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) in Pakistan, Alcott and Rose showed that rich children are around three times more likely to be able to read a paragraph than poorer children in the same type of school within both government and private schools. In the same study, the authors show that rich children in government schools learn more than poor children in private schools do. This is especially true in rural India, where this gap in being able to read a paragraph is 19 percentage points, while in rural Pakistan the gap stands at 8 percentage points. Thus, learning inequality in reading skills in India was twice as much as in Pakistan, according to this study. Empirical evidence on causal pathways, however, is limited. In India's Uttar Pradesh province, Cashman, Sabates and Alcott (2021) found that wealth is associated with one or more of the following five parental involvement activities in learning of low-achieving children: checking books, helping with studies, reading or telling stories to child, visiting the school and knowing the name of at least one teacher of the child. A parent in a household in the richest wealth quintile is 1.2 times more likely than a parent in the poorest quintile to indicate that they check the child's notebook or textbook. A parent in a household in the top quintile is 1.4 times more likely than a parent in the bottom quintile to read or tell the child stories or know their child's teacher's name. Contrary to the title of this study, the dataset used in the study covers only one district and therefore, caution should be exercised to generalize the findings across the rural India.

Considerable attention has been paid to the importance of school facilities and infrastructure in educational research. Income and wealth are strong predictors of such home-based endowments (Figure 1). Desai (1991) noted that a significant relationship exists between education supplies and sanitary facilities (lavatory) at home with academic performance as well. Other factors with positive association include location of home, distance from the source of drinking water (Desai, 1991), and adult literacy practices and books-at-home (Nag et al., 2024a). Nag et al. (2024b) also found positive associations between a composite measure of books-at-home (number of children's books owned, frequency of book reading, frequency of borrowing books from the library) and children's language and emergent literacy skills in India. However, the impact was less significant in this study. In addition to parental engagement and home facilities, private tuition also mediates the relationship between income, wealth, and learning. Alcott and Rose (2015) provide a comparative perspective on India and Pakistan and observe three similarities between the two countries. First, for children from all backgrounds, those who learn the least are those at government schools who do not receive private tuition. Second, the presence of private tuition is associated with greater improvements in learning for poorer children than richer children. Third, despite these improvements associated with private tuition, they still do not completely override disparities in learning caused by wealth. The policy implication is that extra time spent on remedial learning and private tuition given to poor students can narrow down the difference in learning between rich and poor children.

Another pathway that can explain causality between wealth and learning is cognitive development. Sullivan et al. (2024) conducted a seminal study, using advanced neuroimaging techniques, to measure variations in "auditory statistical learning" of children from low-income urban neighborhood of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The concept of statistical learning refers to detection of patterns and structure in auditory inputs such as speech or sound. It plays a crucial role in the learning of language because it enables infants and children to divide their speech into words and learn grammatical rules. They showed a positive correlation between socio-economic background

and "auditory statistical learning" for a cohort of 5-years old children. They indicate that statistical learning paradigm could be sensitive to differences in environmental circumstances and could provide an "index of the biological embedding of social and economic background" (Sullivan et al., 2024). Other researchers have documented the importance of external influences on child in early years. In a rural district of Sindh in Pakistan, Hentschel et al. (2024) found that responsive caregiving, maternal education, and wealth had strong and positive correlation with stimulation with playthings and people, which is strongly associated with development of under 3-years old children. Cultural and psychological factors in early childhood environment also influence cognitive development of children (Desai, 1991). A key policy implication of these findings is that policy reforms and assessments must better reflect the nature of homes in different cultures to capture true variation in the population.

These studies point out how income and wealth create conditions for behaviors and actions of parents that bolster different forms of "home-based endowments" (see Figure 1). Findings of a study by two prominent economists, Serneels and Dercon (2021) in Andhra Pradesh province of India, provide direct evidence on the contribution of mother's aspirations[3] to children's education outcomes. Aspirations, measured as her aspired grade for the child at age 12 in this case, are strongly related to the child's grade achieved at age 18. There is also a strong association with learning outcomes, including with local language, English and Mathematics test results, and with attending school. The study offers a possible explanation that aspirations are positively related to attending school and negatively related to working. Aspiring to secondary or tertiary education significantly increases the grade achieved for children from backward castes.[4] For mathematics, even low-level aspirations make a difference. In contrast to common perception, Serneels and Dercon did not find any relationship of aspirations with private school enrolment. They assert that aspirations are non-linear, and must rise above a threshold to have profound impact on academic progress. Cashman, Sabates and Alcott (2021) found a similar (economic) threshold in poorer populations under which increased wealth does not influence parental involvement in education. There is an inherent assumption in Serneels and Dercon's study that mothers' aspirations translate into wise investment decisions or hard work by children, and hence, learning outcomes improve. This assumption does not hold for poor households because it does not consider the multitude of constraints imposed by social structures in which aspirations are formed, moulded or abandoned due to endogenous and exogenous factors. This gap is filled, to some extent, byNaveed (2024), albeit in a different social context. His study shows that the poor's experiences of 'social closure' have effects of 'social conditioning of aspirations'. Based on fieldwork covering 40 individuals from 10 rural families in Sargodha district of rural Punjab between 2009 and 2016, he found that survival strategies of the poor in the wake of economic hardship could lead the families to make a *Faustian bargain*—prioritizing short-term livelihood security over long-term development, such as by postponing educational investments. Thus, aspirations are conditioned by the economic realities of the poor households. In Bangladesh, one of the forms of social conditioning is manifested in minority children's psychosocial problems in school contexts, which partially mediate the relations between parents' lower social status and children's poorer primary school outcome (Uddin, 2023).

Another key dimension of parental aspirations is their emphasis on the learning of English language, which in turn leads to better foundational skills. There is an unprecedented emphasis on the learning of English in oppressed groups (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2025). However, the drivers of this aspiration are not always the same. Economically oppressed groups like Dalits view the learning of English language as the most prestigious subject taught in school. A majority of parents rank it even more important than science and mathematics as it is considered a key vehicle for emancipation from poverty. Wealthy families, on the other hand, also associate it with a sense of belonging to the higher class. As discussed above, social conditioning of aspirations applies in this situation as well. There are many frustrations and concerns of low-income and

[3] Mother's aspiration was measured by the question: 'Ideally, what level of formal education would you like the child to complete?'

[4] The term 'backward caste' or 'Scheduled Caste' is used in official documents to refer to marginalized castes and is not a pejorative term.

economically oppressed parents about the ability of their children to learn English language in schools (Islam, 2018; Kalyanpur, 2020). Ganapathy-Coleman (2025) observed that uneducated and poor parents in India are concerned for being unable to provide academic support to their children in the learning of English language. This issue persists in Pakistan as well. English, along with Urdu and Sindhi (the latter applies to the Sindh province only), is taught in government schools as a compulsory subject, but students from low socio-economic backgrounds who populate these schools hardly learn the valued language (Mansoor, 2010; Tamim, 2014a, b; Rahman, 2002 & 2005, cited in Tamim (2021)). There is a "mismatch between the languages people speak and the languages that are privileged by the school and other institutions of power" (Benson & Kosonen, 2013). Although Tamim does not draw on any statistical correlations, her analysis shows that such exclusion widens the learning gaps because children will not gain reading skills.

What do the teachers think about impacts of social class on student learning outcomes? De and Malik (2021) interviewed teachers in Pakistan and India in relation to effects of parental background on students' capacity to learn and to do well in class. They found that the teachers visualize a 'good student' as someone who is intelligent, confident, interactive and attentive in classroom, attends the class regularly and is able to learn at home. The authors observe that these characteristics are more likely to be found in children from socially and economically well-off homes. A key implication is that these beliefs could increase the social distance between the teacher and the student from disadvantaged backgrounds, thus reinforcing the reproduction of marginalization. In summary, the evidence suggests a positive correlation between a household's income and wealth and learning gains. However, this is mediated by several intervening mechanisms such as family-based endowments, parental aspirations, and engagement. In addition, this relationship is non-linear as these factors do not influence learning below a certain threshold. A comparative synthesis of these studies suggests many similarities between India and Pakistan. For example, learning poverty is high in both countries. The studies conducted during mid-2000s noted that the type of school had a larger influence on learning of children than wealth. In recent studies, this pattern has witnessed a change in both countries with assertions about wealth exerting a greater impact on student achievements. Although this variation warrants new research, the literature provides some clues about this shift. The rise of private schooling and a culture of private tuition might have enabled richer families to increase "family-based endowments" at a faster rate than poorer families. The choice of school again seems to be an important mediator in this context. Similarly, parental aspirations for English language skills and higher grades play a crucial role in academic attainment in both countries. This comparison is not possible for Bangladesh due to scarcity of research on this topic. Literature, however, does not provide many insights into causal mechanisms for any of the three countries. Use of mixed methods and more qualitative research can fill this gap.

4.2. Parental Education

Most of the studies covering this class trait have been conducted in India and Pakistan. Evidence of a positive association with learning, especially with mother's education, is clear in both countries. For example, Alcott and Rose (2017) show that the predictive power of the effects of mother's education on children's ability to solve subtraction questions increases as child progresses from Grade 1 to Grade 5. Das (2021) showed that children with more educated parents had higher scores in Mathematics and Urdu in Pakistan. They found a similar association in India, although the gaps were larger for Mathematics than Hindi. In Bangladesh, Ahmmed and Uddin (2022)) found strong evidence of a learning gap between those whose parents attended a school and those whose parents did not over the trajectory of primary school years. A similar association was found between levels of parental education and family income on examination marks of secondary school students in the English subject in a rural sub-district of Bangladesh (Hamid, 2011). The dominant perspective in the literature is that mother's education is more influential compared to the father's education for children's learning outcomes (Goyal, 2007; Serneels & Dercon, 2021; Sumi et al., 2021). Goyal (2007) found that children whose mothers were literate had higher test scores, whereas father's literate status had no impact. But she observed that this impact of mother's education was small. Evidence on the size of effects and

pathways through which parental education affects children's learning, after they have overcome initial access barriers, is less clear.

Table 1: Characteristics of the 31 Studies and Key Findings

Study	Geography	Sample N	Grade/Age	Method	Key Findings
Ahmmed and Uddin (2022)	Bangladesh	8,542 children	Grades 1-5	Regression	There is a clear disparity in learning between rich and poor students; this gap increases over the primary school years. Parental school participation is positively associated with children's learning at primary level.
Alcott and Rose (2015)	Rural India & Pakistan	India 147,651; Pakistan 54,066 children	10-12 years	Regression	Rich children are 3 times more likely to read a paragraph than poor children in the same type of schools. Rich children perform better on basic reading and numeracy even in government schools.
Alcott and Rose (2017)	Rural India	1.27 million children	Grades 1-5	Regression	Household wealth and parental education are positively associated with learning outcomes. Effect of mother's education on children's ability to solve subtraction questions increases as child progresses from Grade 1 to 5.
Cashman, Sabates and Alcott (2021)	Uttar Pradesh, India	24,060 children, >14,000 parents	Grades 3, 4, 5	Regression	Wealth is associated with parental involvement in child's studies; influence is more pronounced for the richest 20% of the population.
Chopra (1966)	Lucknow, India	1,193 children	14-17 years	T-Test	Brahmins are not superior in intelligence and academic achievements. No significant differences in mean achievement amongst children from different castes.
Das (2021)	Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal, India	9,186 children	School-age	Semantic Bayesian Network	Learning performance is more profoundly influenced by occupation of father than that of child's mother.
Das, Pandey and Zajonc (2006)	Rural Punjab, Pakistan	6,241 children	Grade 3	Regression	Wealth and parental literacy are associated with higher scores, but the gaps between rich and poor children disappeared or reduced significantly when controlled for the type of school.
De and Malik (2021)	India, Pakistan	224 teachers	Grades 4-5	Descriptive	A majority of teachers believe that children whose parents are not literate have the most difficulty in learning. This belief is stronger in India than Pakistan.
Desai (1991)	Andhra Pradesh, India	179 dropouts	Grades 1-5	Regression	Academic performance of dropouts is associated with availability of home-based lavatory, location of home, and distance from drinking water. No significant impact of parental income, literacy and caste.
Ganapthy-Coleman (2023)	Gujarat, India	19 parents, 5 teachers	8-18 years (children)	Descriptive	Parents from so called low-caste groups such as Dalits have strong belief that English language is a vehicle for educational and economic mobility of their children, but they struggle to provide academic support at home.
Goyal (2007)	Orissa, India	6000 children	Grades 4, 5	Regression	Small effects of social group, household wealth and mother's literacy on test scores; the largest differences are between types of schools. Father's literacy status had no impact on test scores.
Hamid (2011)	Rural Bangladesh	228 children	Grade 10	Univariate & bivariate analyses	Positive association between parental education and income with English exam scores. Children of salaried fathers outperformed their peers whose fathers were in business, farming and manual work.
Hentschel et al. (2024)	Rural Sindh, Pakistan	200 mothers	0-3 years (children)	Regression	Responsive caregiving, maternal education, and wealth have strong and positive correlation with 3-years old children's brain stimulation with playthings and people.
Islam	Bangladesh	231	Grade	Mixed	Quality of communicative language teaching

Study	Geography	Sample N	Grade/Age	Method	Key Findings
(2018)		children	10	methods	(CLT) is associated positively with schools with high pass rates. Father's occupation and income mediated children's access to these schools.
John et. al (2020)	Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, India	858 children	Grade 9-10	Regression	Significant association between caste ranking and academic performance, even when controlled for school environment and income.
Kalyanpur (2020)	India	n.a.	n.a.	Descriptive	Students from low-income families in low-fee paying English-medium schools are being marginalized because they struggle academically.
Kumar, Pratap and Aggarwal (2023)	India	12,430 children	8-11 years	Regression	Negative effect of low reading and math scores on continuity of education is higher for girls from low- and scheduled castes, and urban children.
Lall (2009)	Pakistan	89 parents, caregivers, 449 children	n.a.	Descriptive	Good schools are changing attitudes towards girls' education in all ethnic groups, even in the most traditional, poorest areas of Pakistan.
Nag et al. (2024a)	India, Pakistan,	6,678 correlations, 43 countries	Up to grade 8	Meta-analysis regression	Significant association (r = .08) between home language and literacy environment and children's language and literacy skills. Highest impact was of adult literacy practices and books-at-home. But non-significant association with books-at-home in India for kindergarten-aged children.
Naveed (2024)	Sargodha, Pakistan	40 individuals, inclusive of 9 children	No age or grade limit	Descriptive	Parental aspirations are conditioned by economic hardship in rural societies, allowing livelihoods to override aspirations for education credentials.
Saha (2023)	India	17 government officials	Grades 1-12	Descriptive	Migratory lifestyle, poor school environment for learning, and teachers' focus primarily on just getting these students promoted to the next grade leads to a low level of learning amongst children from Scheduled Castes.
Sinha and Mishra (2014)	India	424 children	Mean 14.01 years	Correlations	Social identity based on father's education does not explain academic achievement gaps well.
Serneels and Dercon (2021)	Andhra Pradesh, India	1,008 children	15 & 18 years	Regression	Mother's aspirations are positively associated with grade achieved at age 18, and for mathematics, even low-level aspirations make a difference. Better-educated mothers had higher aspirations.
Subramanian and Visawanathan (2023)	Tamil Nadu, India	5 students, 1 teacher, 1 teacher educator	Up to grade 10	Content analysis	Use of pure Tamil in mathematics textbooks has negative implication on learning outcomes for Tamil and other disadvantaged students who are solely dependent on textbooks.
Sullivan et al. (2024)	Dhaka, Bangladesh	227 children	2 & 5 years	Neuro-imaging	Positive correlation between socio-economic background and "auditory statistical learning" in 5-years old children. No correlation between socio-economic status variables and language outcomes.
Sumi et al. (2021)	Magura district, Bangladesh	566 children	Grades 9, 11 & 13	T-Test, Pearson's chi-square	Parental education, occupation and income are associated with higher GPA scores in both rural and urban areas. Mother's education and father's occupation had higher influences.
Tamim (2021)	Sindh & Punjab, Pakistan	36 participants	Grade 10 plus 4-6 years siblings	Multiple case studies	Teaching of English as the medium of instruction in multilingual contexts reinforces class-based exclusionary practices in education.

Study	Geography	Sample N	Grade/Age	Method	Key Findings
Uddin (2017)	Dinajpur, Bangladesh	580 children	Grades 1-5	Regression	Ethnic identity is positively related to late enrollment and irregular class attendance of children from Santal, Oraon & Hindu families.
Uddin (2023)	Bangladesh	220 children	Grade 5	Bivariate correlation	Children with minority ethnic identity and father's lower socio-economic background develop psychosocial problems with negative effects on their learning. Positive association between father's occupation and learning at primary and secondary levels.
Ullah and Ali (2018)	Pakistan	220 children	Grades 9-10	Descriptive	Low-income families do not engage actively with children's education, and hence, contribute to reproduction of social inequality.
Vagh (2010)	Mumbai, India	262 children	Kinderg arten	Cluster and growth-model analyses	Access to print resources at home in low-income families is positively associated with children's language and emergent literacy skills. Children of mothers with more years of schooling had steeper growth rates than children of low-schooled or unschooled mothers.

Sinha et al. (2014) provide contradictory evidence in the Indian context. They used students' self-reported answers on their socio-economic status (SES) questionnaire and separated high and low social class students on the basis of fathers' education. They concluded that "social class-based identity process has less important role in explaining the existing academic achievement gap. Thus, the need arises to explore other identities that may collaborate with the social class identity in an educational domain" (Sinha et al., 2014). While the study uses quantitative data, the conclusion is misleading because it overgeneralizes the findings to social class-based identity. The findings, nevertheless, show that father's education is not a strong determinant of socio-economic status and did not explain variations in academic performance.

4.3. Parental Occupation

The type of work a child's parents do tends to influence their learning outcomes. In theory, this influence is moderated through (1) effects on household's income, (2) demands on child's time, and (3) parental aspirations. The occupation of parents determines their earnings and hence, acts as a device for their control over child-centered endowments and enablers of learning (Figure 1). The nature of occupation may also determine the home environment and demands on a child's time. Children of self-employed parents involved in labor-intensive professions are more likely to have lower levels of instruction time either due to involvement in household chores or paid labour. Occupations, especially high-status and high-income, also influence parental aspirations about a child's future career in the same job family. This, in turn, guides their investments in their children's education. These theoretical linkages are based on day-to-day observations, but scholarly works to examine them are scant in all countries, especially in Pakistan. In India, the literature finds a positive correlation between father's occupation and the academic performance of children (Chopra, 1966; Das, 2021; Sumi et al., 2021), but suggests that this may be due to occupation's effects on the household's socio-economic status. This is partially confirmed in a study in two districts of Andhra Pradesh carried out by Desai (1991). He showed that the type of parental occupation had no significant influence on learning, but when fathers were employed full-time, 72.1 percent of their children were in the top half performers in the class. When fathers were employed only part-time, only 10.3 percent of their children were in that category. A similar pattern was observed for mothers. This was indicative of the corresponding effect of earnings on total household income, and hence, on wealth and family-based endowments.

In Bangladesh, Uddin (2023) and Sumi et al. (2021) also found a positive and significant correlation between children's learning with father's occupation in primary and secondary education, respectively. In India, Das (2021) showed that academic performance was more profoundly influenced by occupation of father than that of the mother. From a methodological perspective, a key drawback in this study is that the context is not explained well. There is no sufficient information about the sample. Academic performance is categorized in terms of percentage of scores, but no information is provided about the education level or rural-urban split.

It is also unclear whether academic performance is aggregate or subject-specific. While the article makes an important methodological contribution by validating superiority of data semantics and machine learning over conventional analysis of survey data, the findings are not grounded in appropriate contextual information. While parental occupation has generally not drawn much attention of researchers, a key gap is how different types of parental occupations shape aspirations about learning and social mobility.

4.4. Caste

Historically, race has been a key element of social class typology in the Western nations. Its equivalent in the South Asian context is caste (Maun, Shukla, & Chand, 2020). The Indian society is divided into *varnas* which are further categorized into castes and sub-castes. For many centuries, Brahmins were literate, performed all rituals, and had a monopoly on knowledge and learning. The Vaishyas were workers, engaged in diverse professions (including animal rearing, food production, pottery, weaving, blacksmithing, etc.). The Shudras were at the bottom, mostly considered untouchables. They cleaned the filth of society and performed cremation of the dead. They were not allowed to enter homes or public spaces accessed by the other three varnas. They have also been disadvantaged due to their remote habitations and exploitation by colonial rulers. Although social relationships between castes have changed, but this hierarchy is still firmly rooted in the Indian society. Pakistan and Bangladesh have inherited the caste system from India due to common historical roots, but social hierarchy is less rigid. In Pakistan, there are around 40 castes, with 32 formally recognized as Scheduled Castes (Rimsha, 2023). There is no accurate data on the number of castes in Bangladesh, but caste-based social ranking is more or less similar to Pakistan. The Muslim population is in majority in both countries but it includes caste-based identities which are more pronounced in rural kinship systems. The Hindu population in the two countries is a minority and boasts a rigid social ranking similar to that of India.

Chopra (1966) examined the association between caste, intelligence and examination scores of boys in Grade 10 in Lucknow district of India. The results did not support the traditional view of the superiority of Brahmins. Differences in the mean achievement of students from different castes were not significant. Chopra suggested that lower achievement, in comparative terms, of children from Scheduled castes may be associated with poorer economic conditions rather than caste. Desai (1991), in a study focusing on 179 students in 20 villages in two districts of Andhra Pradesh, India found no significant influence of gender, age at enrolment, reason for dropping out, parents' income, literacy and caste on learning, thus confirming Chopra's findings in relation to caste. Goyal (2007) found that all social groups perform relatively well in good schools, and all perform relatively poorly in less well-performing schools. Therefore, it is the type of school that mattered, rather than social group characteristics. More recent studies, however, show a positive correlation between caste-based status and learning. Kunnel John et al. (2020) noted that higher level of class predicted better academic performance, controlling for income. The level of early reading and mathematics scores are positively and significantly associated with the likelihood of continuation of post-enrolment education of children from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Kumar, Pratap, & Aggarwal, 2023). One reason for this may be that parents want to invest in their children's further education only if they are likely to see a good return, i.e., children perform well (Banerjee et al., 2010; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005), cited in Kumar, Pratap and Aggarwal (2023). The study suggests that increase in the level of children's foundational literacy and numeracy skills will significantly reduce school dropout, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Caste-based identity also affects a child's experience and interactions with peers and teachers in the classroom. This may take several forms such as low self-esteem and psycho-social effects. In theory, these effects may be higher in private educational institutions where children from high- and low-status castes are studying together.

This synthesis observes that there is a disagreement between the older and more recent studies. The older studies Chopra (1966); Desai (1991); Goyal (2007) find no or insignificant effect of caste on student learning outcomes. The recent literature, as summarized in the above paragraph, shows that children from low-ranking castes struggle more in learning. There is no explanation of this disagreement in the studies reviewed in this article. However, it is possible to

contemplate a scenario based on the findings we have discussed above in the income and wealth section. Richer families have greater control over choice of better schools. The growth of private schooling has made it even more convenient for them. The accumulated effect of intergenerational poverty of families from low-ranking castes might have pushed children to attend low-quality public schools in impoverished communities, compared to their peers from high-ranking castes. Thus, this may be due to widening of inequality in wealth and income over time between castes and its effects on learning variables (Figure 1), but this assumption needs to be validated through further research.

4.5. Ethnicity

Ethnicity and caste are both drivers of social hierarchy, but they are distinct concepts. Caste is ascribed to by birth, but ethnicity is a collective identity for social belonging based on a shared history, language, religion and ancestry. In India, major ethnic groups include Kannadiga, Malayali, Tulu, Tamil and Telugu. In Pakistan, ethnic identities are mostly organized by province or language such as Punjabis, Sindhis, Balochis, Pashtuns, and Seraikis. Bangladesh has similarly a large number of ethnic groups such as Chakmas, Beharis, Marmas, Santals, Tripuri, to name a few. Ethnic norms and culture could be a driver of late enrollment and irregular class attendance, according to research in multi-ethnic primary schools serving children from Santal, Oraon and Hindu ethnicities in rural Bangladesh (Uddin, 2017). Although there is no definitive evidence of how ethnic identity leads to late enrollment and poor attendance, significant association with other family variables provides some insights. Origin of family, lower socio-economic status, limited resources, and poor social capital affect the timing of enrollment and attendance. Minority children's psychosocial problems in the school context partially moderate the relationships between parents' lower social status and children's poorer primary school outcome (Uddin, 2023). In Pakistan, Lall (2009) argues that cultural norms around education of girls varies between different ethnic groups. Based on data collected across all the four Pakistani provinces showed that old attitudes towards girls' education in Pashtun, Punjabi, Balochi and Sindhi families were shifting in a positive way. The traditional cultural heritage of a traditional Muslim society is no longer the constraint it used to be previously. Good schools are the centre-piece in changing attitudes, even in the most traditional, poorest areas of Pakistan. While this study provides insights into ethnic ethos and their effects on school, association between learning and ethnicity does not come out very clearly.

A study focused on the Tamil Nadu state of India (Subramanian & Visawanathan, 2023) contends that teaching of mathematics in English language has negative implications on learning of children from marginalized backgrounds. This is because Tamil children rely mostly on textbooks only and struggle to internalize English-equivalent terminologies translated into pure Tamil. This is alienating them from gaining English language skills, and hence, from competing with their peers in mathematics. The article questions the linear relationship between use of mother tongue and mathematics education in situations where ethnic groups force their own language to be taught in schools in an effort to consolidate power for political survival. In comparison with other social class traits, this is evident from this section that research on ethnicity as a social determinant of learning is scant in all the three countries. Caste, on the other hand, has attracted more attention of researchers, especially in India. A possible explanation of this difference might lie in the overlap between ethnic and caste-based identities, with the latter being more vivid as an area of academic inquiry. Ethnic identities are based on shared cultural and historical backgrounds and common ancestry and language. Castes, on the other hand, are organized vertically based on birth and ancestral occupations. In South Asia, ethnic groups are generally organized along regional or provincial lines with distinct lingual and political identities. Depending on the geographic location and local power dynamics, castes become embedded into broader ethnic groupings. As a result, the cultural capital and ethos of castes and the ethnic group they identify themselves with become inseparable from each other. Therefore, this poses a challenge for researchers to draw a neat boundary between the two concepts. Therefore, caste, as a small sub-group compared to a larger ethnic group, seems to be a more attractive social category for researchers.

5. Discussion

This is evident from the above findings that social class remains a relevant analytical framework to understand variations in student learning outcomes in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, although causal pathways have not been studied extensively. Evidence is clearer and stronger on some traits than others. There are positive and significant effects of household income and wealth on children's learning. Mother's education and father's occupation are also strong predictors of learning variations. Low-status castes such as Scheduled castes in India negatively affect children's learning but empirical evidence on differences within, as opposed to between high-status or low-status castes, is inconclusive. Evidence on the influence of ethnicity is less clear and has not drawn much attention of researchers in relation to learning. A number of aspects of the methods and data used in these studies call for more rigour and improvement in research methods and data. Firstly, the nature of learning data used in the studies indicates that researchers are sitting in a 'comfort zone'. There is a preference for using the existing data on reading and numeracy skills such as that from the Annual Status of Education Reports or scores from standard examinations. There is nothing wrong with this approach from a convenience perspective, but the appetite for collection or use of new primary data across a broad range of curricular learning outcomes is not evident from the available body of literature. The implication of this tendency is that the concept of learning has been studied in a narrow sense.

Secondly, there is a great deal of variation in the representativeness of samples in the studies. This is not surprising because these studies were designed and executed independent of each other. However, in some cases, samples are too small to reflect the high level of diversity of the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi societies. It is acceptable in academic research to use small samples, but diversity of the population being studied should inform the sampling and research methodology. This is not obvious in most of the studies that use small samples. Therefore, caution must be exercised to extrapolate the conclusions of such studies to other social contexts. Thirdly, while the researchers have paid considerable attention to the effects of social class on learning outcomes in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, this attention is uneven in terms of thematic and geographical diversity. Most of the literature has concentrated on the effects of income and wealth and parental education, and to some extent parental occupation. Around half of the studies have focused on India. Caste has received most attention in India, and to some extent, in Bangladesh. Let us now return to the conceptual framework (Figure 1). This is evident that quantitative studies have established statistical correlations between some variables, but many possible conceptual linkages between social class (column A) and social moderators (column B) and learning moderators (column C), have not been studied. This can be attributed partly to a general presumption of the research on social class in favour of access problems rather than learning, but it is also a corollary of methodological choices. Due to excessive use of quantitative methods alone, explanatory power of these studies remains low as they cannot build a fuller picture of causality. Use of mixed research methods with an explicit design to develop a theory of change for each relationship will fill important gaps in our understanding of how social class-based characteristics enable or constraint learning of children in any learning settings. Particularly, empirical studies using primary data to investigate the effects of parental aspirations, parental occupation, ethnicity and caste on learning outcomes will add value to the comparative education literature in South Asia. As discussed above, many correlations of social determinants with learning moderators (column C in Figure 1) have not been studied in any depth and provide a fertile ground for academic inquiry.

There are significant policy implications for the domains where findings are conclusive. The foremost among them is the positive correlation between wealth and learning outcomes. This is often mediated through impacts of home-based endowments, choice of school type, father's occupation, and private tuition. A key objective of public policy should be to expand measures that enable the education system to mitigate the impacts of these differences between the richer and poorer children in and around schools, for example, through raising the standards of teaching in all public schools, providing targeted subsidies and voucher schemes to enable parental choices for selecting better schools, and health and nutrition interventions in aid of cognitive and socio-emotional development. Private tuition is found to have greater impacts on learning for children

from poorer backgrounds. From a policy standpoint, remedial learning and Teaching-at-the-Right Level (TaRL) initiatives in public schools are suitable alternatives to private tuition for children who lag behind. The evidence on positive spillovers of mother's education and their aspirations for children's academic achievement is also conclusive, and reinforce the need for early investment in girls' education. Although evidence on caste and ethnicity is inconclusive, education policy needs to pay special attention to the intersection of these traits with intergenerational poverty and its knock-on effects on equity and inclusion in schooling.

5.1. Limitations

This study has six main limitations in the research design, methodology and analysis. Firstly, the selection of studies is limited to only two databases, namely Google Scholar and SCOPUS. The reasons are explained in the methods section. As a result, the coverage is narrow and it is possible that some seminal works might have been excluded from the final set of studies reviewed in this article. Secondly, the search queries filtered the studies that were carried out between August 1947 and March 2025. Any scholarly works completed before or after this period are not covered. Thirdly, the synthesis is systematic, but it based on critical literature review methods, and does not represent a fuller systematic review. Therefore, the findings do not capture the full breadth of correlations studied in the regression analyses; only salient findings were selectively picked. Fourthly, an important limitation is that the 'statistical significance' of correlations is not documented in this article. Therefore, no distinctions are drawn between the relative strengths of different correlations. This is mainly due to my own limitation and lack of a professional background in economics and regression methodologies. Therefore, while the associations between a social class variable and learning outcomes are discussed, the readers who are interested in actual effect sizes of the associations need to consult the original works cited in the references section.

6. Conclusion

This article has offered a critical review of 31 studies that examine the effects of social class on learning outcomes of children in pre-primary, primary and secondary education in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It fills an important gap in comparative education literature in the South Asia by synthesizing findings from 31 scholarly works across five domains of social class in the South Asia region. The conceptual framework presented in this article is also a valuable contribution to the literature on this topic because it can explain which variables and relationships have been studied or omitted in research. The synthesis suggests that there is unambiguous evidence that income and wealth, mother's education and father's occupation are influential predictors of learning outcomes. Evidence on the influence of caste and ethnicity is mixed and inconclusive. Evidence on these correlations should guide policymakers in designing initiatives that reduce the school-level inequalities between wealthy and disadvantaged students. Key strategies could include, for example, elevating public school teaching standards, providing targeted subsidies and vouchers to expand parental choice, remedial learning as a substitute for private tuition, and implementing health and nutrition programs to foster cognitive and emotional growth. The findings on importance of mother's education and aspirations emphasizes the need for investing in girls' education.

Many theoretical linkages of the class traits with learning mediators (see Figure 1) have not been studied yet. A key drawback in the literature is that these studies cannot adequately explain mechanisms of causality. Some traits have not drawn much attention of researchers such as ethnicity. In Pakistan, the literature on caste and parental occupation is also scant. Further research will benefit from comparative empirical studies using primary data and mixed research methods to enhance our understanding of the pathways through which social class interacts with intervening variables and learning enablers. However, contrary to the philosophical contention on the usefulness of social class as an analytical concept, this review shows that it is still relevant to explain the reproduction of educational inequality in the South Asian context. More research in this area will enrich the policy debate to mitigate class-based differences in student learning outcomes.

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