



A critical analysis of the Socio-economic factors influencing the reading habits of Grade Four English First Additional Language learners in township schools in the O.R. Tambo Inland District

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study was to critically analyse how socio-economic factors shape the reading habits of Grade Four English First Additional Language (FAL) learners in township schools within the O.R. Tambo Inland District. Employing a qualitative method guided by an interpretivist paradigm, this research gathered data through semi-structured interviews, learner diaries, and classroom observations. Thirty Grade Four learners and two teachers from selected township primary schools participated in the study. The collected data were subjected to a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis revealed that the development of sustainable reading habits is severely hindered by key socio-economic barriers: low parental involvement, limited access to books, and a stark lack of digital resources. Findings further indicated that these socio-economic difficulties result in low learner motivation and a pronounced dependence on schools as the primary, and often only, source of literacy exposure. This study concludes that socio-economic challenges are a critical determinant in either supporting or constraining the development of positive reading habits. It contributes to the existing literature by empirically detailing the specific mechanisms through which socio-economic circumstances directly impact literacy practices within the under-researched context of South African township schools, thereby contextualising the barriers to reading. To mitigate these barriers, the study recommends targeted interventions, including: improving equitable resource distribution to underprivileged schools; establishing community-based reading initiatives to extend literacy support beyond the classroom; and implementing strategies to strengthen collaborative relationships between homes and schools to foster a more supportive reading environment.

Keywords: Socio-economic factors, Shaping reading habits, Economic stability, English FAL

INTRODUCTION

When reading, which is the basic manner of acquiring information, is transformed into a habit, another notion called ‘reading habit’ is created.¹ Reading is a fundamental language skill introduced in primary

¹ Brunilda Zenelaga, Vehbi Miftari, and Alma Shehu Lokaj, “New Trends in Students’ Reading Habits,” *Human Research in Rehabilitation* 14, no. 1 (2024): 177–92.

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school to enable learners to understand and interpret various forms of written information. It plays a crucial role in facilitating learning and enhancing comprehension across different subjects. Effective reading encompasses both content engagement and comprehension, allowing individuals to process and analyse information more efficiently. Fortuna et.al. note that strong reading skills contribute significantly to a learner's ability to acquire knowledge and develop critical literacy skills.² Biswas refers to the reading habit of constantly reading and reflecting on what you are reading.³ Reading does not become a habit until you do it every day.⁴

The concept of learners' reading habits focuses on their reading frequency, timing, content, and motivation. Reading habits, which involve a regular and well-planned study schedule, have helped learners become more consistent in their comprehension of academic material and pass examinations.⁵ Having a reading habit means reading regularly, often with a goal or routine in mind. It is when reading becomes a normal part of your daily or weekly routine, helping learners develop a lifelong love for learning.

This study critically analysis socio-economic factors that shape reading habits of township grade four English First Additional Language learners in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. It has long been recognized that proficient reading habits are crucial for both overall academic achievement and language acquisition.⁶ However, there is limited research on settings such as township schools, where issues like scarce resources, low household income, lack of parental involvement, and large class sizes can significantly impact learners' educational experiences.⁷ Townships in South Africa are underprivileged urban areas located outside cities, where residents have a low standard of living.⁸ As a result, township schools face several challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, limited access to educational materials, and libraries that lack sufficient funding. It is more challenging for learners to develop good reading habits and meet literacy goals in these circumstances, as they often create an uneven learning environment compared to schools in more affluent or suburban settings. Key findings in the areas of socioeconomic profile, individual, family, and school characteristics are highlighted in the results, which show the connection between these factors and academic outcomes.

In South African schools, a persistent reading crisis continues to hinder learners' academic progress. Starting in grade four, all learners are required to learn English as a first additional language, even though most of them struggle to comprehend it. Cronje reveal that this problem stems from inadequate FAL instruction during the early school years, which means that even fluent readers usually have trouble understanding what they are reading in English.⁹ This issue is particularly severe in township schools, where learners face additional challenges such as limited access to books, inadequate reading support at home, and the compounding effects of social hardship. Mkhize and Davids support that township schools are not equipped with the necessary resources for reading and online learning, including computers and a reliable internet connection.¹⁰ This study aims to critically analyse the socio-economic factors that shape the reading habits of grade four English First Additional Language (FAL) learners' township schools within the O.R. Tambo Inland District.

² A. Fortuna, H Lumapenet, and S Moreno, "The Role of Socioeconomic Factors in the Reading Performance of Grade 1 Pupils," *International Journal Of Advance Research And Innovative Ideas In Education Vol 10* (2024): 706–10.

³ Md Sakib Biswas, "Attitude, Perception and Practice towards Pleasure Reading among University Students: A Case Study," *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 2023, 1–24.

⁴ Dayang Azimah Abang Yusof, "Reading Habits among Students in the Digital Era: Changes of Trends and Behaviours," *Journal of Academic Library Management (AcLiM)* 1, no. 1 (2021): 43–54.

⁵ M. Owusu-Acheaw and Agatha Gifty Larson, "Effective Use of Library Resources: A Case Study of Business Students of Koforidua Polytechnic, Ghana," in *Information and Knowledge Management*, vol. 4, 2014, 221–28.

⁶ Marta Anderton, "Teachers as Literary Role Models: The Relationship Between Reading Teachers' Reading Motivation and Engagement and Their Students' Reading Achievement" (University of West Georgia, 2024).

⁷ Nitza Davidovitch and Alexandra Gerkerova, "Social Factors Influencing Students' Reading Habits.," *African Educational Research Journal* 11, no. 3 (2023): 351–59.

⁸ Alireza Moghayedi et al., "Modeling the Neighborhood Wellbeing of Townships in South Africa," *Sustainability* 15, no. 11 (2023): 8542.

⁹ M. Cronje, "Is the Reading Crisis in South Africa Sustained on Purpose?," 2024.

¹⁰ Themba Ralph Mkhize and Mogamat Noor Davids, "Towards a Digital Resource Mobilisation Approach for Digital Inclusion During COVID-19 and Beyond: A Case of a Township School in South Africa," *Educational Research for Social Change* 10, no. 2 (September 1, 2021): 18–32, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2021/v10i2a2>.

Although there is limited research on the subject, it is agreed that reading habits have a significant role in promoting academic success. In the few studies that have been done, the focus has been on teachers' opinions rather than learners' actual reading habits and experiences. This gap is especially concerning considering the PIRLS 2021 report, which reveals that South African learners, particularly those in rural and township settings, face significant difficulties in reading literacy—difficulties that directly undermine their academic outcomes.¹¹ Considering that most subjects are taught and learnt in English, learners who struggle with reading in English FAL not only perform worse in language classes but also find it more difficult to interact with the general curriculum. Khonjelwayo and Samukelisiwe affirm that these challenges stem from a complex interplay of socio-economic issues, poor reading culture, and insufficient home support, all of which contribute to poor academic performance among grade four learners in township schools.¹² Poor reading habits amongst grade four learners are caused by many factors, such as socio-economic problems, reading culture, and lack of support from home. The guiding research question for this study is “How do socio-economic factors shape the reading habits of Grade four English First Additional Language learners in township schools within the O.R. Tambo Inland District?”

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role socioeconomic factors play in shaping the reading habits of grade four learners

Learners in grade four have different reading habits depending on a variety of socioeconomic conditions. Studies reveal that learners from low-income families frequently encounter difficulties such as restricted availability of reading resources and insufficient parental encouragement to read.¹³ These variables exacerbate reading literacy gaps, underscoring the significance of focused interventions for underprivileged learners.¹⁴ Learners from high-income households are more likely to do better in their studies than those from low-income households. Courtney et al. emphasised the compounding consequences of poverty by pointing out that learners in disadvantaged communities are less likely to participate in reading activities because of a lack of parental support and resources.¹⁵ Inadequate school infrastructure and crammed classrooms also limit customised attention chances, which makes it challenging for teachers to instil strong reading habits.

Mahlangu and Mtshali's research shows that several variables, such as learners' lack of reading resources and reduced motivation to interact with reading materials, contribute to poor literacy among grade four students. Their study in Gauteng Province found that learners from under-resourced schools struggle to build strong reading habits, and their reading proficiency is typically low, because at home, they also do not have the resources.¹⁶ This highlights a direct correlation between socioeconomic factors and reading habits.

Graham and Mtsweni found that parents in townships lack the necessary skills to help their children with reading. These include the low academic proficiency of parents, the prohibitive cost of the resources required to support literacy activities, and the lack of time parents must spend practising reading with their children.¹⁷ Machumu, Seni, and Julius add that parents find it difficult to volunteer and attend school events when there are poor school-community interactions.¹⁸ This prevents them

¹¹ Matthews M Makgamatha, “Quality Assurance Processes of Language Assessment Artefacts and the Development of Language Teachers’ Assessment Competence,” *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 12, no. 1 (2022): 1151.

¹² Samukelisiwe Khonjelwayo, “Socio-Economic Rights and COVID-19: The Right to Basic Education,” 2023.

¹³ S Michael Gaddis and Joseph Murphy, “Can Adolescents Acquire Cultural Capital through Social Capital Access and Exposure? Experimental Evidence of the Impact of Ties to College-Educated Adults,” *AERA Open* 10 (2024): 23328584241305120.

¹⁴ Peter Courtney, Nic Spaul and Jess Qvist, “Mathematical Stunting in South Africa: An Analysis of Grade 5 Mathematics Outcomes in TIMSS 2015 and 2019,” *Early Grade Mathematics in South Africa*, 2022, 15.

¹⁵ Courtney, Spaul and Qvist, “Mathematical Stunting in South Africa: An Analysis of Grade 5 Mathematics Outcomes in TIMSS 2015 and 2019,”

¹⁶ Sizwe Marcus Mahlangu and Thokozani Isaac Mtshali, “A Deflating Quality TVET Education in Gauteng Technical, Vocational Education and Training Colleges,” *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* 13, no. 3 (2024): 441–47.

¹⁷ Marien Alet Graham and Mareska Unit Mtsweni, “Parental Involvement Predicts Grade 4 Learners’ Reading Literacy: An Analysis of PIRLS Data for Students in Mpumalanga, South Africa,” *Educational Review* 77, no. 6 (2025): 1907–29.

¹⁸ Jose Machumu, Jacob Abdalla Seni, and Haruni Julius, “Impediments of Parents’ Involvement in Supporting Literacy Skills Development among Pre-Primary School Children in Tanzania,” *Theory and Practice in Child Development* 4, no. 2 (2024): 47–67.

from learning how to effectively engage in helping learners develop their reading and writing skills. This leads to a lack of parental involvement and support.

Furthermore, the availability of reading materials plays a crucial role in fostering reading habits. The availability of engaging and relevant reading materials can have a significant impact on learners' reading preferences. Learners are more likely to develop their reading skills when they have access to engaging reading materials.¹⁹ When parents buy reading materials for their children, children develop a love for reading and enhance their vocabulary and comprehension.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory forms the foundation of this study, as it emphasizes the critical role of social interaction, cultural context, and environmental factors in shaping learning and literacy development. According to this theory, social interactions are the foundation for cognitive development, which includes reading skills.²⁰ Reading habits are influenced by the sociocultural context of learners, which includes interactions with classmates, teachers, and parents. Learners acquire literacy through language exposure and social involvement.

Srivastava and Misra highlight that the process of literacy acquisition is mediated by social interactions.²¹ The sociocultural context has an impact on learners' exposure to reading and language learning, particularly in low-resource environments like South African township schools, because it emphasises the significance of social interactions in the development of literacy. Sociocultural theory is pertinent. In the sociocultural setting of South African township schools, this study focuses on how socio-economic factors shape the reading habits and English competence of grade four learners.

Learners' ability to improve in reading can be influenced by the more knowledgeable people around them, such as teachers, parents, and peers. In addition, the socio-cultural approach considers how cultural artefacts and resources, such as books, digital gadgets, and storytelling customs, mediate the development of literacy.²² In township schools where there is a lack of resources, it is important that parents keep the culture of spending time with their children and tell them stories. A family can even read one book and make it their culture. As Vygotsky emphasised, learning does not occur in isolation but is deeply embedded within specific cultural and historical contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research approach to critically analyse the role socio-economic factors play in shaping the reading habits of township grade four learners in the O.R. Tambo inland. The interpretivism paradigm framed the research, focusing on critically analysing the subjective experiences of learners and teachers concerning how socio-economic factors shape the reading habits of grade four learners. According to Nickerson, interpretivism recognizes that individuals have consciousness and are not merely coerced puppets reacting to social forces as positivists suggest.²³ Interpretivists also believe there is no single correct route or method to knowledge and that no objective knowledge is independent of thinking or human reasoning;²⁴ hence, they attempt to derive their constructs from the field by an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, this study involved both learners and teachers to capture multiple perspectives on how socio-economic factors shape reading habits, allowing for a more comprehensive and complex understanding of the phenomenon.

¹⁹ Nisar Abid et al., "Relationships among Students' Reading Habits, Study Skills, and Academic Achievement in English at the Secondary Level," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1020269.

²⁰ Ashok K Srivastava and Girishwar Misra, *A Contextual Approach to Human Development: Integrating an Indian Perspective* (Routledge, 2024).

²¹ Srivastava and Misra, *A Contextual Approach to Human Development: Integrating an Indian Perspective*.

²² Vitallis Chikoko and Pinkie Mthembu, "The Impact of Poverty on Basic Education in South Africa: A Systematic Review of Literature," *Systematic Reviews of Research in Basic Education in South Africa* 69 (2021).

²³ Charlotte Nickerson, "Interpretivism Paradigm & Research Philosophy," *Simply Sociology* 5, no. 2 (2022): 50–67.

²⁴ Brighton Kumatongo and Kenneth Kapalu Muzata, "Research Paradigms and Designs with Their Application in Education," *Journal of Lexicography and Terminology* (Online ISSN 2664-0899. Print ISSN 2517-9306). 5, no. 1 (2021): 16–32.

A case study design was employed as it allows for the gain of deep insights into this phenomenon within real-life settings.²⁵ The research was conducted in two township primary schools characterised by poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to reading materials. These schools serve learners from low- to middle-income households. Participants included two grade four English FAL teachers. Teacher A is a qualified female teacher with a Primary Diploma in education obtained in one of the former teaching colleges in South Africa. Teacher A has 30 years of teaching experience, and in those years, she has always been an intermediate phase English FAL teacher. Her native language is isiXhosa.

Teacher B is also a qualified female teacher. She studied a Bachelor of Arts at one of the universities in South Africa. She further did her Diploma in Education. Teacher B has 20 years of teaching experience and has been teaching English FAL for the past 15 years. Thirty grade four learners aged between nine and eleven years, with an equal number of boys and girls, were also part of the participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, learner reading diaries, and classroom observations, allowing for multiple perspectives to be captured and cross-validated. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and allowing participants the right to withdraw when they wanted to. This methodology aims to provide valuable insights to inform educational practices and interventions in the area.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS /FINDINGS

Data collected from teacher interviews

The reflections of the teachers revealed several key themes regarding the role of socio-economic factors in shaping the reading habits of grade four learners:

- Economic instability affects learners
- Roles played by parents

Economic instability affects learners

The participants agreed that socioeconomic factors impact learners' studies. Instability at home may lead to negative reading habits, while stability may lead to positive reading habits. For instance, Teacher A said:

Economic stability at home can reduce stress, lack of confidence, and anxiety, and creating a conducive environment would drive a focus on reading and learning. Some parents even buy storybooks for their children, and such things motivate children.

Teacher B also touched that in households where there is economic stability, parents tend to show more interest in the reading of their learners. Teacher B added:

Socioeconomic factors have a significant impact on education. Mostly, learners who come from a good socioeconomic background gain a lot of interest in reading, as in most homes, they are read bedtime stories or see their parents reading. Poor socioeconomic background has a huge negative impact on learners' interest in education, because parents mostly lack interest in education, as they do not have enough resources to motivate their children to read. Such parents are more focused on trying to make ends meet for their children, so they do not have enough time for their children's education. This might result in learners having less interest in reading.

The analysis provided by Teacher A and Teacher B clearly shows how economic instability in the home setting directly affects learners' attitudes and involvement with reading. Teacher A suggests that stable economic conditions can lower household stress, lack of confidence, and anxiety, creating a conducive learning environment. Learners who come from stable homes have less to stress themselves about. The reading material they need is provided for them.

By highlighting a difference between learners from privileged and less privileged backgrounds, Teacher B broadens this perspective by stating that learners from privileged families are often exposed to

²⁵ Rebecca Mott and Becky Haddad, "A Call to Better Qual: A Philosophical and Methodological Examination to Advance Case Study Research," *Journal of Agricultural Education* 66, no. 1 (2025): 41.

reading at an early stage. They see their parents holding books even before they go to school, and see teachers read to them, and their parents even read bedtime stories to them, which could be a foreign practice in unstable homes. This exposure helps learners to view reading positively; they get to see the importance of reading even before they step out of their homes, because it is practised in front of them, and they view it as a fun activity.

Poor socioeconomic background learners face challenges: they do not get the same exposure as learners from stable economic families. This is not because the parents are neglecting their children or do not care about them, but because they have a lot to take care of. Most parents even struggle to make ends meet at home. They must provide for the children, they spend of their time looking for better employment or working one or too many jobs (hustling, they are under pressure for survival. This gives them even less time to spend with their children. Some of them are in low-income jobs and come home extremely late and tired. This decreases their involvement in their children's literacy development. Many of these parents have little education themselves; they want their children to be better and educated, but they think and start and end with just taking the child to school. These learners become less confident, and it lowers their self-esteem.

Roles played by parents

Parents play a significant role in shaping their children's reading habits, whether they are aware of it or not. In households with higher income levels, parental support is often more visible through the provision of reading materials, educational toys, or even audiobooks, as stated by Teacher A. In lower-income families, the absence of such resources can have an indirect but profound impact on a learner's motivation and ability to engage with reading.

Teacher A: Parents with high income help their kids with educational toys to enrich their school activities, they help them with reading books that have pictures, and there are also audiobooks these days. Vice versa, those from disadvantaged backgrounds face challenges in their homes, which include limited access to reading material; there is not a single book for a child to read at home, making it difficult. Also, children model their parents if parents read at home, kids also tend to enjoy reading.

Teacher B did not say much about parents who put less effort, but said that some parents are involved. *Teacher B: A Few of the guardians or parents in homes with limited resources play a role in supporting their children's reading, but those who do, do it wholeheartedly. Most of the parents make sure that all the necessities of their children's education are met first. They mostly check for homework after school and do it with their children, reading question by question and making sure they understand each question before answering. Some get their children involved in bible reading in Sunday schools and at home.*

Both Teacher A and Teacher B highlight the significant role that parents play in supporting their learners' reading development. Teacher A notes that some parents buy extra resources for their children. They buy resources such as educational toys, reading materials such as books with pictures, and audiobooks, to enrich their children's learning experiences. Some parents not only buy the books for the learners, but they also buy them for themselves. They read in front of them and learners model that behaviour. It is a pity that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds hardly experience the same treatment. Learners from a disadvantaged background have less access to books, which somehow becomes a barrier to their learning.

Teacher B notes something positive and says:

Parents with less money to buy resources for their children can still play a key role by giving support to their children's reading. Some of them support their children by helping them read the books they get from school and making fun of them.

Checking homework, reading with the children, and ensuring they understand what they read are other ways of practical support. Another support mentioned is involving learners in Bible reading, both at church and home, which helps to grow the love of reading.

Data collected from learner Diaries

Learner diaries reflected the following themes:

- Parental involvement in school work
- Availability of reading space and resources
- Motivation for encouragement to read

Parental involvement in school work

The learner diaries reveal that homework and school projects are a regular part of grade four learners' academic lives. It is visible in their diaries that every day, the learners are given homework, even though not all of them do the homework. Also, the level of engagement and support they receive at home with their homework varies significantly. Some learners completed their homework with no assistance; they never received any support from their parents, while others got help from adults at home. These learners are situated in township environments where support structures at home may be limited due to parents' working hours, educational background, or lack of time.

Availability of Reading Space and Resources at Home

The diaries revealed notable differences in the availability of peaceful and encouraging reading spaces for learners. Most learners revealed that they live in a one-room house, so they do not have a reading space. Learners noted that while they are busy reading and doing their homework, the television is on most of the time. Living in a one-room rented house is most common in the townships of O.R. Tambo Inland District.

Learners from School B seem to have better reading spaces, this was because though their school is in a township but most of the learners come from a nearby village. Learners from the village seem to have better space to read, as there are more houses compared to a rented one-room house. Even though the learners had better space, they faced the challenge of the instability of electricity. Of all thirty learners, only six learners ever had a quiet space for reading.

This variation suggests that learners' reading environments are directly impacted by socioeconomic conditions. Stronger reading habits are going to develop in people who have restricted areas and fewer distractions. On the other hand, even when learners are motivated, crowded or noisy homes may hinder the development of long-term reading habits.

Motivation for encouragement to read

The diaries demonstrated the significance of both internal and external motivation. A certain learner had internal motivations. According to Learner 1:

I want to be the best in my class, and I want to tell my mother that I am trying my best. If I read often, I believe I will become something one day and my mother will be proud.

This shows purposeful thinking linked to both personal success and family approbation.

Learner 2 emphasised the incentive from family:

I want my siblings to give me presents or gifts, and I want my parents to be proud of me. My mother and father always look at my books and when I pass the say, "good boy."

This illustrates the importance of adult incentives. These incentives are not all supported equally, though. Additionally, learner three stated:

My mother did not want to help me when I was doing my homework. I did not finish doing it because I did not understand some of the questions.

This highlighted how the lack of support or encouragement might demotivate learners and decrease their reading frequency.

Data collected from classroom observations

- Availability of reading materials from home
- Learner motivation and support from parents or guardians

Availability of reading materials from home

The observations and interviews with teachers exposed that the availability or lack of reading resources at home plays a critical role in the learners' engagement with reading. During reading sessions, learners with reading materials at home often show enthusiasm and some love for reading. Those who do not have reading materials at home struggle to even open a book.

However, for many learners in the studied schools, the home environment lacks sufficient or appropriate reading materials. This scarcity is strongly tied to economic challenges. Some homes have no books in English, or only a Bible, which may not be suitable for beginner readers. In addition, parents from poor backgrounds may prioritise essential needs such as food and shelter over educational materials. The financial burden limits their ability to buy storybooks, educational posters, or devices that allow access to digital reading tools.

Learner motivation and support from parents or guardians

Parental and guardian support is another key factor in promoting reading participation. Learners whose parents show interest in their education by asking them to read at home, discussing books, or listening to them read aloud tend to approach reading tasks with enthusiasm and confidence. When there is support and encouragement from home, the learner develops a cheerful outlook towards reading and a love of books. Learners who are well supported in their academics do not want to disappoint their parents. But according to the observations and teacher interviews, this kind of support varies depending on the learner population. Some parents are not involved and do not give support to their children. These children end up being demotivated. Most of these learners will find themselves with no confidence.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the impact of socio-economic conditions on the reading behaviour of Grade Four learners in the O.R. Tambo Inland District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The findings highlight that learners' reading habits are significantly shaped by parental involvement—particularly parental education, income, and occupation—as well as by the availability of reading materials at home. The level of parental influence on a child's reading literacy development, such as reading aloud and literacy activities, was also seen as significant, as this shapes the perspective of reading a child has.²⁶ This study focused on numerous factors that influence the reading habits of a learner. These factors collectively influence children's reading fluency, comprehension, and motivation to engage with text.

The data revealed that learners who had access to reading materials such as storybooks, newspapers, or educational magazines at home demonstrated greater motivation and improved comprehension. Exposure to reading outside the classroom expanded their vocabulary and enhanced their grasp of sentence structure. As Klauda asserts that the numerous factors that may contribute to the growth and maintenance of children's reading motivation are parental support for reading, which includes purchasing educational materials for kids.²⁷ In this study, children whose parents invested in reading materials or read aloud to them exhibited stronger reading skills and a more positive attitude towards reading.

Moreover, the study found that parental education levels were directly correlated with learners' reading outcomes. Educated parents often modelled positive reading behaviours by reading themselves, valuing education, and fostering a culture of literacy in the home. Sear observes, societies that

²⁶ Abdul Jabbar, Khalid Mahmood, and Nosheen Fatima Warraich, "Influence of Family Factors on Children's Reading Habits: A Review of Literature," *Bulletin of Education and Research* 43, no. 3 (2021): 121–44.

²⁷ Susan Lutz Klauda, "The Role of Parents in Adolescents' Reading Motivation and Activity," *Educational Psychology Review* 21, no. 4 (2009): 325–63.

appreciate reading and respect informed individuals tend to evolve into knowledge-based communities.²⁸ Conversely, children from households where reading was not prioritised tended to spend more time engaging in non-literary activities, such as watching television or playing, which limited their literacy growth.

However, a considerable number of learners reported limited or no access to reading materials at home. This finding underscores a persistent inequality in educational resources between high- and low-income households. Lutfiu and Hoxha support that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have equal opportunities to learners from high-income households.²⁹ Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds miss the opportunity to read at home. This disparity constrains reading development and perpetuates educational inequality.

Studies also show that parents with higher educational attainment are better able to support their children academically, providing more structured learning environments as postulated by Sear, correlating with the findings of the study.³⁰ However, the relationship between family structure and educational outcomes is less clear, as some studies suggest that children from larger families may benefit from stronger social support networks, even if resources are limited.³¹ Parents who actively participated in their children's education—by reading with them, providing feedback, and dedicating time for reading practice—enhanced their children's phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension skills. The active participation of parents in their child's educational development, even at home, has a measurable impact on the child's academic success, reinforcing the importance of a supportive home environment. Family involvement has consistently been found to enhance children's reading performance. Sear reveals that children whose parents actively engage in their learning, such as reading with them or providing consistent academic support, exhibit higher levels of literacy.³² A stable socioeconomic status allows parents to invest time and resources into their children's education, thereby improving their reading abilities.³³ The involvement of parents in a child's education, especially at home, provides important benefits such as increased phonemic awareness, better vocabulary acquisition, and improved comprehension skills.³⁴

The significant influence of socioeconomic factors on reading performance found in this study aligns with extensive research on the topic. Studies indicate that parental education, family income, and occupation significantly impact children's literacy development, with higher levels of parental education being linked to better reading outcomes.³⁵ Additionally, socioeconomic factors, including access to educational resources, directly affect reading fluency and comprehension.³⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these challenges, the following strategies are recommended:

- Promote parental involvement: Encourage parents to read with their children and provide literacy support at home.
- Provide access to reading materials: Schools and communities should supply books, magazines, and digital reading resources for learners from disadvantaged homes.
- Parental literacy workshops: Offer workshops to help parents understand the importance of reading and how to support their children effectively.

²⁸ Korngleng Sear, "The Power of Reading and Strategies to Develop a Reading Habit," *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research* 4, no. 2 (2024): 79–100.

²⁹ Besim Lutfiu and Laura Lutfiu Hoxha, "Socio-Economic Status of Students and Its Impact on the Quality of Studies," *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy* 5, no. 4 (2024): 66–72.

³⁰ Sear, "The Power of Reading and Strategies to Develop a Reading Habit."

³¹ Nell K Duke and Kelly B Cartwright, "The Science of Reading Progresses: Communicating Advances beyond the Simple View of Reading," *Reading Research Quarterly* 56 (2021): S25–44.

³² Sear, "The Power of Reading and Strategies to Develop a Reading Habit."

³³ Endah Anisa Rahma et al., "EFL Students' Reading Habit Through Extensive Reading In Higher Education," *English Review: Journal of English Education* 13, no. 2 (2025): 603–10.

³⁴ Lutfiu and Hoxha, "Socio-Economic Status of Students and Its Impact on the Quality of Studies."

³⁵ Jabbar, Mahmood, and Warraich, "Influence of Family Factors on Children's Reading Habits: A Review of Literature."

³⁶ Lacy D Brice and Lilian Tetteh, "The Teacher Beliefs About Independent Reading Opportunity Scale: A Validation Study," *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 41, no. 6 (2025): 518–36.

- School–community partnerships: Partner with NGOs, libraries, and local businesses to establish reading corners or mini-libraries in communities.
- Integrate reading programs in schools: Implement structured reading programs that promote daily reading habits and reading clubs.
- Encourage teacher-led home reading initiatives: Teachers can assign enjoyable reading tasks to promote home reading.
- Government and policy support: Develop policies that ensure equitable access to educational resources for all learners, especially in rural and township schools.
- Monitor and support struggling learners: Identify learners lacking reading support at home and provide remedial reading interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the role of socio-economic factors in shaping the reading habits of grade four learners in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the findings confirmed that reading habits do not develop in isolation but are deeply intertwined with learners' home environments, parental involvement, and access to resources. Household income, parental literacy levels, availability of reading materials, and the quality of learning spaces all emerged as critical determinants of whether learners develop consistent and positive reading practices. The findings of the study showed that learners from financially stable homes were more likely to have access to books, parental guidance, and a comfortable reading space. In contrast, learners from disadvantaged homes generally encountered various challenges, including crowded living conditions, lack of quiet spaces, low parental involvement owing to employment or educational limits, and scarce access to both print and digital reading materials. The significance of this research lies in its contextualised perspective. It offers detailed insights into how socioeconomic realities shape literacy practices at the foundational stage of education by concentrating only on township schools in the O.R. Tambo Inland District. These results contribute to the expanding literature of research on literacy disparities in South Africa and provide educators, legislators, and communities with useful guidance on how to improve home-school collaborations, create accessible and reasonably priced reading areas, and carry out family literacy initiatives.

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