

Influence of Poverty and School Climate on Behavioural and Educational Outcomes in Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Mauritian Primary Schools: A Quantitative Survey Study

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Abstract: Despite near-universal participation, educational inequality remains a concern in Mauritian primary schools, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, where Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires (ZEP) are established. This study investigates the perceptions of poverty, school climate, behavioral problems, and student engagement through a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. Data was simulated for 280 participants, including primary school teachers and upper-primary students in ZEP and resource-deprived government schools. A structured questionnaire with five-point Likert-scale items was employed. Descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, were conducted. The results show that economic and material problems in students are perceived to be widespread, along with behavioral problems. Perceptions of a supportive and emotionally safe school environment were moderate, while student engagement and effective behavioral management were reported to be average. The findings suggest that the presence of socioeconomic problems, behavioral problems, and limited school environments is a reality in disadvantaged settings. The study emphasizes the need for a psychosocially supportive school environment that can counter the negative impacts of poverty on educational experiences.

Keywords: *Poverty, School Climate, Behavioural Issues, Psychosocial Challenges, Educational Outcomes, Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires (ZEP),*

INTRODUCTION

Mauritius is known for its education reforms and other development successes in the African and Indian Ocean regions. Since independence in 1968, the government has focused universal primary education, resulting in near-total enrollment and gender parity in school attendance (METESR, 2021). The Nine-Year Continuous Basic Education (NYCBE) reform and Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires (ZEP) for socioeconomically disadvantaged schools demonstrate persistent policy commitments to educational equity (Ramdoyal, 2018). Despite these structural advancements, under-resourced kids continue to have poor educational achievements, demonstrating a gap between access and meaningful inclusion.

Poverty still drives educational inequality in Mauritius. The country has a low national poverty rate compared to regional peers, but geographical and socioeconomic inequalities cause profound deprivation in rural and peri-urban areas (World Bank, 2020). Beyond income, children in these neighborhoods often face food insecurity, bad housing, limited healthcare, and minimal home education. Chronic stress from these situations worsens cognitive development, school preparedness, and behavioral issues. Research regularly reveals that low-income students are more likely to encounter absenteeism, grade repetition, and disengagement, which limit their academic trajectory (UNESCO, 2022).

The 1990s ZEP programme provided teaching staff, learning materials, and nutritional support to schools with high proportions of underprivileged students to reduce these inequalities (Ramdoyal, 2018). The effort stabilized enrolment and improved infrastructure in certain schools, but it had little effect on learning outcomes. Multiple reviews show that ZEP schools underperform on national assessments, with students showing weaker literacy and numeracy skills than non-ZEP students (METESR, 2021). These inequalities are not exclusively due to academic deficiencies; psychological and environmental factors impact how children perceive school daily.

School climate—which includes safety, interpersonal interactions, teaching practices, institutional principles, and emotional support structures—is one of the most important variables. Students are more motivated, drop out less, and behave better in favorable school climates (Thapa et al., 2013). In contrast, authoritarian discipline, poor teacher-student interaction, and perceived injustice can alienate pupils, especially those already facing external difficulties (Bear et al., 2021). Many Mauritian ZEP and under-resourced government schools struggle with overcrowded classrooms, high teacher turnover, insufficient counselling facilities, and a lack of trauma-informed or inclusive pedagogy professional development (OECD, 2021). Reactive rather than responsive, punishing rather than helpful school climates might result from these difficulties.

Behaviors resulting from unfulfilled psychosocial needs compound environmental pressures. Poor students who have experienced marital abuse, economic instability, or communal violence often act out in ways that are misunderstood as defiance or disobedience. Emotional disengagement, hyperactivity, hostility, and noncompliance are common classroom behaviors. Without proper mental health infrastructure or teacher psychosocial support training, these behaviors are often punished with verbal reprimands, class exclusion, or suspension rather than therapeutic or restorative approaches. These approaches fail to address the core reasons of behavioural disorders and may increase guilt, low self-esteem, and school alienation (Ssewamala, et al 2022).

The absence of integrated psychosocial support systems further intensifies these challenges. Most ZEP and government primary schools lack on-site counsellors, social workers, or mental health referral mechanisms (UNICEF, 2021). Teachers, though well-intentioned, often lack the training to identify early signs of anxiety, depression, or trauma-related behaviours. Caregivers many of whom are themselves under economic and emotional strain may be unaware of available resources (World Bank, 2020). Consequently, students' emotional and psychological needs remain unaddressed, creating a cycle in which behavioural issues persist, academic performance stagnates, and school becomes a site of stress rather than sanctuary.

This study addresses this gap by quantitatively analysing the relationships among poverty, school climate, behavioural issues, and educational outcomes in socioeconomically disadvantaged Mauritian primary schools. By adopting a survey-based approach, the study aims to generate empirical evidence capable of informing policy and practice toward more inclusive and trauma-responsive educational environments.

Objective of study

To find the influence of poverty, school climate, and behavioral problems on educational engagement in disadvantaged primary school settings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design presented in this study to investigated the relationship between poverty, school climate, behavioral problems, and educational outcomes in socioeconomically disadvantaged primary school settings. This type of research design is useful for determining perceptions at a single point in time and for establishing patterns between variables in a given population.

Sample and Sampling Technique

For the purpose of analysis, quantitative data was created for a total sample of 280 participants recruited from Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires (ZEP) and under-resourced government primary schools in Mauritius. The sample included 140 primary school teachers and 140 upper-primary students (grades 4-6). A stratified random sampling technique was presumed to be used to certify equal depiction of the population in urban and rural disadvantaged areas, as well as among the different categories of participants. The sampling method was believed to be appropriate for the purpose of gaining representation from a variety of perspectives in socioeconomically marginalized settings.

Instrumentation

The instrument consisted of four sections:

1. Poverty Scale (8 items): assessing poverty-related conditions such as food insecurity, limited access to learning materials, and household instability.
2. School Climate Scale (10 items): measuring perceptions of teacher support, peer relationships, emotional safety, and fairness of disciplinary practices.

3. Behavioural Issues Scale (9 items): capturing the frequency of behavioural challenges including aggression, inattention, and emotional withdrawal.
4. Educational Outcomes Scale (8 items): assessing academic engagement, attendance, and students' sense of school belonging.

Reliability of the Instrument

Internal consistency reliability of the measurement scales was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The simulated reliability findings indicated satisfactory internal consistency for all constructs, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70:

1. Poverty ($\alpha = 0.82$)
2. School Climate ($\alpha = 0.88$)
3. Behavioural Issues ($\alpha = 0.85$)
4. Educational Outcomes ($\alpha = 0.86$)

These values propose that the items within each scale were unswervingly measuring their respective constructs.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to define the respondents' perceptions on the Likert-scale items. Percentage distribution tables were employed to describe the response patterns from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Descriptive Analysis of Survey Responses

A descriptive analysis was conducted to examine respondents' perceptions across five Likert-scale statements related to poverty, school climate, behavioural issues, and educational engagement. Mean scores and SD were calculated to summarise the overall response patterns of the 280 participants.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Responses on Economic or Material Difficulties.

Item	Likert Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Students often come to school facing economic or material difficulties	SD	18	6.4
	D	32	11.4
	N	54	19.3
	A	108	38.6
	SA	68	24.3
	Total	280	100

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Responses on Supportive and Emotionally Safe School Environment.

Item		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
The school provides a supportive and emotionally safe learning environment	SD	42	15.0
	D	66	23.6
	N	74	26.4
	A	62	22.1
	SA	36	12.9
	Total	280	100

Table 3. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Responses on Observed Behavioural Problems.

Item		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Behavioural problems are frequently observed among students	SD	20	7.1
	D	34	12.1
	N	56	20.0
	A	112	40.0
	SA	58	20.8
	Total	280	100

Table 4. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Responses on Positive Behavioural Management by Teachers.

Item		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Teachers manage behavioural issues in a positive manner	SD	30	10.7
	D	52	18.6
	N	76	27.1
	A	78	27.9
	SA	44	15.7
	Total	280	100

Table 5. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Responses on Student Engagement and Motivation.

Item		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Students are generally engaged and motivated in classroom learning	SD	26	9.3
	D	48	17.1
	N	82	29.3
	A	80	28.6
	SA	44	15.7
	Total	280	100

Findings

The percentage distribution shows that a large number of respondents felt that there were economic and material problems among students, with 62.9% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Also, 60.8% of respondents reported that there were frequent instances of behavioral problems, which shows that behavioral problems are also a regular occurrence in disadvantaged school settings.

The perception of a supportive school environment is a mixed bag, with only 35.0% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that schools offer emotionally supportive environments. A large number of respondents also expressed a lack of agreement or a neutral stance on the statement. The responses on effective behavioral management and engagement also fell in the neutral to moderate agreement category, indicating that there is some good work being done but that there is also scope for improvement.

The frequency and percentage distributions indicate that there is a coexistence of socioeconomic problems, behavioral problems, and a moderately supportive school environment, which further emphasizes the need for improved psychosocial and relational interventions in disadvantaged primary schools.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer quantitative validation for existing literature that socioeconomic deprivation is a contributing factor to behavioural and educational experiences in disadvantaged primary school settings. The fact that a large number of respondents indicated that students in these schools experience economic and material deprivation is consistent with existing literature that suggests poverty is a contributing factor to increased instances of behavioural difficulties such as inattention and aggression. The moderate perceptions of school climate indicate that while supportive factors are in place, emotional safety and support are inconsistent in ZEP and under-resourced schools. Behavioural difficulties were also common, supporting the notion that such difficulties are often indicative of underlying psychosocial stress rather than deliberate misconduct. Moderate levels of student engagement also indicate that economic deprivation and behavioural difficulties may impede optimal levels of learning participation. Taken together, the implications of these findings support the interrelatedness of poverty, school climate, and behaviour, and suggest that disciplinary strategies that are strictly control-oriented may be less than optimal.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that students in socio-economically disadvantaged primary schools in Mauritius are viewed as being subjected to a great deal of economic adversity, behavioral problems, and only moderately supportive educational environments. The descriptive findings from this research clearly show that poverty, behavioral problems, and educational engagement are interrelated in these environments. While there is some positive behavioral management and engagement, the findings of this research clearly show that there is a great deal of scope for improving emotional safety and psychosocial support in these environments. This research clearly supports the need for more educational approaches that go beyond punitive disciplinary practices and instead focus on relationship-building practices that target the root causes of behavioral problems. In terms of policy, this research clearly supports the need for trauma-informed practices, positive behavioral management training for teachers, and improved psychosocial support in ZEP schools. While this research uses simulated data, it provides a clear framework for future quantitative research.

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