African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning Journal
Issue 2, Volume 9, 2025 Special Issue
ISSN Print: 2521-0262
ISSN Online: 2662-012X
ORIGINAL RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.70875/v9i2article6

Schooling experiences of learners from low socio-economic status background in Lesotho

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Abstract

Efforts to provide inclusive education in Lesotho started in the late 1980s with the Policy Statement on Special Needs Education. They continued until 2018 when the Ministry enacted the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy, which focused mainly on disability inclusion. Lesotho has a large population living below the poverty line, but low socio-economic status does not constitute part of the special education needs addressed by the education system. Underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm and the capability approach, this case study sought to explore how the schooling experiences of learners from low socio-economic status reflect the learners' academic potential. Participants were purposively selected, and data was generated through semi-structured interviews and analysed through interpretative phenomenological analyses. The study found that learners from low SES experience various psychosocial barriers to learning, such as the lack of amenities to learn, inappropriate role models to ignite their interest in schooling and being victims of domestic violence. Some learners encounter barriers that directly affect their performance, motivation, and retention in school when not attended to. This paper recommends that a large-scale study, representative of the national demographics, be conducted to explore how low SES affects educational outcomes. The results must inform how the Lesotho education system can develop policies and regulations that guide how schools must identify and adequately support all learners to attain their maximum potential.

Keywords: Capabilities, inclusiveness, Lesotho, policies, socio-economic status, secondary schooling

Introduction

The Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy broadly defines inclusive education and special educational needs (SEN), suggesting that SEN emanate from visual, hearing, and intellectual and physical disabilities (MoET, 2018). The Lesotho Education Sector Plan (2016-2026) goes further to state that Lesotho "recognises the need to promote inclusion of people with disabilities into every sphere of life" (MoET, 2016, p. 95). The plan adds, "The learners included are those who have physical and sensory impairments (Hearing and Visual), those with Intellectual Disabilities (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD], Down syndrome, Autism, and Learning Disabilities" (MoET, 2016, p. 95). This policy position that limits the perception of SEN as coming solely from disability requires attention.

The World Bank (2015) notes that Lesotho ranks globally among the top ten most unequal countries. For example, from 2002 to 2018, 60 per cent of the Basotho population lived below the poverty line and mostly live in rural areas compared to 28 per cent in urban areas (World Bank, 2019). Besides abject poverty, many children in Lesotho are made vulnerable by the death of one or both parents. Orphanhood leads to situations where young boys herd livestock for income to support siblings instead of going to school (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2013; Mosia, 2022). On the other hand, girls interrupt their schooling to nurse younger siblings or ailing members of their families or eventually drop out and opt for early marriage to escape extreme poverty (Mosia, 2022; Nyabanyaba, 2009). Unwittingly, this breeds and sustains the cycle of poverty as semi-literate parents would hardly secure jobs with living wages, thus affecting prospects for providing

educational resources for their children. Accordingly, most of the country's SEN emanate from socio-economic challenges rather than disability, approximately 2,5 per cent in the 2016 national census (Mosia & Tseeke, 2021).

Tromp and Datzberger (2021) assert that national policies are developed from international frameworks without contextualising the policy norms to fit cultural diversity. As Ruby and Ali (2020, p. 87) note, there must be a certain level of adaptation or a "purposeful selection and modification of ideas". Thus, Lesotho, in acceding to global policies such as inclusive education, must contextualise the policy adoption to challenges bedevilling its education (Ruby & Ali, 2020).

Education is recognised as a human right globally, but literature depicts it as a longstanding illusive mandate of the global community. The development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, especially SDG four, mandated countries worldwide to provide an inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030 (UN General Assembly, 2015). Ensuring equitable access to education for all is mandated by Article 26(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which declares education a human right that must be respected (UN General Assembly, 1948). Despite a commitment by the UN member states to uphold the right to education, inequalities in accessing education persist, with socio-economic status (SES) as one of the most significant barriers (OECD, 2018). With approximately 258 million children, adolescents and youth out of school globally in 2018 and sub-Saharan Africa accounting for 38% of that total (UNESCO, 2020), target 4.5 of the agenda mandating countries to address socio-economic barriers to education is under threat (UN General Assembly, 2015).

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) mandates countries to give children platforms to share their experiences (UN, 1989) as this promotes "the realisation of the right to be heard and to have views given due weight…" in contexts such as schools, families etc. entrusted to nurture their development (UNICEF, 2011, p. 5). An inclusive and equitable quality education would be challenging to achieve if children and youth are not afforded opportunities to choose and communicate their valued functionings, translating into what one can attain (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016).

Theoretical and Conceptual Literature

Capability approach to educational attainment

This paper adopted the capability approach to explain the educational disadvantage resulting from low SES. The theory argues that people must be afforded opportunities to achieve their maximum potential (Toson et al., 2013). Sen (1999, p. 17) observes that access to education and healthcare requires public action to "complement individual opportunities of economic and political participation and also help to foster our own initiatives in overcoming our respective deprivations." Sen (1999, p. 78) maintains that denying educational opportunities to any group undermines "the basic conditions of participatory freedom".

Capabilities are defined as "…the genuine, effective opportunities that people have to achieve valued functionings" (Terzi, 2014, p. 485). From the capability approach, a person's "freedom to achieve valuable functioning" depends "on social arrangements" (Toson et al., 2013, p. 492). Functionings refer to habits or "actions and states that people want to achieve and engage in" (Terzi, 2014, p. 485). They are what learners achieve with or without support, while capabilities are their potential (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). Therefore, learners need equitable learning opportunities to increase this potential and attain desired/maximum functioning. Learners from low SES families have limited resources to explore educational opportunities, and their academic achievements (functionings) may not reflect their desires. Inadequate resources deprive them of opportunities to attain individually desired goals and achievements (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). This paper inquires about the extent to which inclusive and equitable quality education, as reflected by enacted policies in Lesotho, caters for low SES.

Effects of SES on educational outcomes

In conceptualising SES and its effects on academic achievement, Weinberg et al. (2019)

depict measures of SES, namely, maternal education, paternal education, and neighbourhood, as collectively predicting adolescent educational outcomes. Parental SES is predominantly linked to adolescent educational attainment through what sociologists view as 'social reproduction', and economists describe as 'intergenerational transmission of human capital' (Weinberg et al., 2019, p. 2.). Expounding further on SES, Gweshengwe and Hassan (2020) argue that a learner coming from a family with limitations in the three forms of capital (financial, human and social) is defined as simply "poor". Antonoplis (2022, p. 6) sees SES as individuals' acquisition of normatively treasured social and economic resources where social resources include wealth, income, education, and property, while financial resources cover holding a lucrative job or a rare educational qualification and having distinguished social contacts. In essence, low SES makes the statement, "poverty begets poverty", true as learners' functionings negatively affect their capabilities.

Inaccessible secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa due to poverty remains a concern (REAL, 2018). Countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia which removed school fees temporarily from the early 1990s, were relatively successful in retaining students while building more schools, giving conditional cash transfers and feeding programmes to reduce child labour and improving child health (Langsten, 2017). Focusing on research in nine low-income and lower-middle-income countries (Chad, Comoros, Georgia, Guinea, Haiti, Lao PDR, Lesotho, Liberia and Madagascar) between 1996–2017, Diaz-Serrano (2020) found that in low-income countries, where most parents are unemployed and poor, families could not meet their children's learning needs. Compulsory education laws do not have the desired effect. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inequality of educational access in that when countries went under hard lockdown, remote learning methods used excluded more than half of children and youth who had no access to digital learning devices (UNICEF, 2021).

Gruijters et al. (2023) note that payment of school fees remains a key barrier to education in low-income and lower-middle-income countries where the socio-economic benefits from improved access to secondary education may be substantial. Accordingly, UNICEF (2015) reports that children from families of low SES have a higher probability of showing developmental delays than their affluent peers in literacy and numeracy and miss out on or perform poorly in secondary education. On the other hand, Li et al.'s (2020) study found that children's academic achievement indirectly relates to SES through the intervening effect of self-concept. Learners with low esteem may not achieve valuable functionings as these are "dependent on social arrangements" (Toson et al., 2013, p. 492). Notably, in many African countries, very few children from disadvantaged backgrounds complete primary education, and a limited number of those who enrol in secondary education complete it (Gruijters et al., 2023).

Alternatively, learners with good academic development despite their low socio-economic backgrounds indicate that school and teacher quality greatly impact their success (Lee & Zuze, 2011). Thus, Du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) remind us that inclusive education mainly focuses on physical access while neglecting epistemological access. Xulu-Gama and Hadebe (2022) note that epistemological access is also directly linked to the medium of instruction, which is usually a foreign language across African countries.

Influence of SES on educational access in Lesotho

Basic education in Lesotho has eight years of primary divided into foundation (Grades R-3) and intermediate (Grades 4-7) phases; the eight years of primary education should be free and compulsory (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2010; MoET, 2021). Secondary Education is divided into lower (Grades 8-9) and upper (Grades 10-12) phases. Though the Lesotho Basic Education Curriculum Policy aspires and pronounces it to be free (MoET, 2021, p. 9), it is fee-bearing and inaccessible for many Basotho from low SES.

Poverty significantly contributes to unequal educational opportunities in Lesotho. Thirty per cent more children from the wealthiest quantile than peers from the poorest wealth

quantile attend primary school; the margin expands further at the secondary school level, where parents bear the costs (MoET, 2019). UNICEF (2018) indicates that approximately 51 per cent more children from the wealthiest quantile enrol in secondary education than children from the poorest wealth quantile. Eighty-one per cent of the parents or guardians in the rural areas of Lesotho have limited formal education opportunities and fail to act as role models to motivate learners to study (World Bank, 2015). As Urwick (2011) notes, parents in the highlands are poor, less literate and place little value on primary education.

Generally, poverty in Lesotho negatively affects equitable access to education as parents or guardians cannot afford basic amenities for learning, such as uniforms, stationery, transport fees etc. (Lekhetho, 2013; Moshoeshoe, 2015; Mosia, 2022; Ntho, 2013; PNHC, 2015). Additionally, schools are ill-prepared to support learners as teachers lack the skills to assess learner vulnerability or provide psychosocial support (Mosia & Lephoto, 2015; Mosia, 2019). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequitable access to education in Lesotho as very few learners were able to be taught remotely through digital platforms; learners had unequal access to technology, electricity, smartphones, etc. (Hlabana, 2020; Matlho, 2020). While the Education Act 20 of 2010 deems primary education as compulsory (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2010) and the Children's Protection and Welfare Act 40 of 2011 cites education, adequate diet, clothing, shelter, etc., as fundamental human rights (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2011), the MoET makes no provision for SES as one of the areas of special education needs in the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy enacted in 2018 (MoET, 2018). Thus, the Ministry seemingly focuses on disability inclusion as the most dominant area of focus in international treaties the country ratified. As such, the Lesotho education system, particularly schools, has no mechanisms to identify and address barriers arising from learners' low SES. Hence, there is a need for the current study to highlight the interplay between poverty and access to educational opportunities in Lesotho, resulting in the exclusion of most of her population. In particular, the study addresses the following objectives:

- To explore the schooling experiences of learners from low socio-economic status backgrounds,
- To explain how learners' experiences from low socio-economic status backgrounds constitute SEN.

Methods

The study used an interpretivist paradigm and adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design to generate and analyse data (Creswell, 2014).

Participant selection

As a single case study, one secondary school was deemed sufficient to address the study's goal. Once ethical clearance was obtained, learners from low SES were purposively selected because they were beneficiaries of the social protection grant from the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD). Ten learners in grades 11 and 12 (three males and seven females) formed the sample for this study. School records provided by the Deputy Principal reveal that five out of 10 learners performed well while the other five performed below average.

Data generation and analysis methods

Data sources were triangulated through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of the learners' performance reports to ensure that data generation and analyses had rigour. Member checking was attained by allowing participants to read transcribed data to confirm its accuracy before data analysis. Additionally, the first author constantly reflected on his role as a researcher to minimise a biased influence on the study. A thick description of contextual information about participants was given to uphold principles of credibility and confirmability, respectively (Creswell, 2014). Data were generated through semi-structured interviews; each learner was asked open-ended questions addressing the aim of the study, and follow-up questions were asked to seek clarity in some instances. The study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

for analysing data generated; this entailed transcribing participants' narrations, reading and re-reading the transcripts, synthesising to identify patterns of meaning, concepts, themes, experiences, etc. and drawing a table that reflects emerging themes with a column that links each theme with original transcripts. The study was able to give a detailed picture of each participant's life world (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As Kawulich and Holland (2012) state, data were first analysed at the individual case level, and subsequently, cases were compared to identify convergent and divergent themes.

Ethical considerations

One secondary school from the Morija area in Makhoarane Community Council, situated 45 kilometres South of Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho, was selected as a study site. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the National University of Lesotho and the Faculty of Education. Permission to engage minor learners was obtained from the MoSD, MoET (ED/E/31/2020), and school authorities and parents/guardians. Participants were only contacted about the study when relevant authorities had agreed in writing. Parents/guardians completed assent forms on behalf of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to adhere to the ethical principle of anonymity.

Results

This study presents findings under four headings: effects of inadequate learning resources, lack of role models at community levels, effects of poverty on learners' self-concept, and exposure to family distress. The learners come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, each with the potential to limit access to education. Although the government paid for tuition fees and prescribed textbooks for the ten learners through the MoSD social grant, they still face challenges that culminate in poor academic performance for at least five of the 10 learners interviewed.

Inadequate learning resources

Although all learners have physical access to schools, they recount challenges that undermined their academic potential, as one of them puts it:

"Our school is welcoming, and I often feel better when I'm here than home….and our teachers care for us, but being poor makes things bad, I don't have all my learning needs" (Palesa, a 16-year-old low-performing female learner in Grade 11).

Another learner recounts

"We were once given a quiz in a class, and I didn't have a set of mathematics instruments, and I failed that quiz…. The teacher was very angry with us and said those who failed his quiz were careless. I felt bad that day and nearly quit school" (Puseletso, a 17-year-old low-performing girl in Grade 12).

A third learner laments:

"I am a hard worker even though I struggle to get all I need. If I could have necessities like a Maths instrument and other stationery, I would perform far better than I do now" (Sekila, a 16-year-old well-performing male in Grade 11).

In addition to stationery, there were other economic needs which impaired their studies, as one states:

"Apart from school fees, one needs food and cosmetics; our scholarship does not cover all our learning needs" (Lereko, a 17-year-old and low-performing male in Grade 12).

Another learner notes:

"My shoes are worn out, and I get discouraged from going to school. I feel unprepared to meet and enjoy the company of my peers…." (Pule, a 17-year-old well-performing male in Grade 12).

A third participant reveals:

"I always cry when I look at my performance at school…. I still believe that if I can have all necessary learning material and proper uniform, I can pass well and become a university student one day" (Puseletso, a 17-year-old low-performing girl in Grade 12).

Learners from low SES are also bothered by their inability to participate in extra-curricular activities. The following are some of their concerns.

"I am a member of the English Fair group, and I used to participate in English talk shows and debating sessions. But I no longer participate because when there are trips to other schools for competitions, my parents do not have transport and pocket money" (Neo, a 17-year-old Grade 12 well-performing female).

Another learner also shares:

"I remember one day we were going to Maseru to participate in Maths and Science expositions, and at that time, our school hired a bus and catered food for us. The challenge was that I didn't have a school blazer. The other boys wore theirs, but I didn't have one. I felt so embarrassed and nearly gave up but my teachers said that I may put on my usual uniform for they were really looking forward to demonstrating my science project" (Pule, a 17-year-old well-performing male learner in Grade 12).

Lack of proper lighting and heating facilities seem to distress some of the learners and become barriers to their learning, as one learner indicates:

"My home is good and remains home, sir, but we have no electricity for studying… it's true that we have been using candles all my life, but my eyes sometimes become painful reading under candlelight" (Thato, a 17-year-old well-performing female in Grade 12).

On the other hand, one learner shares an inspiring story:

"It's better because my uncle understands, and his house is warm and bright enough. We use electricity to light, cook and warm the house. Before I joined his family, I was staying with my brother and other siblings, and the six of us were congested in a one-roomed house. Now my performance is better compared to last year. I am motivated and look forward to passing and attending the university" (Pule, a 17-year-old well-performing male in Grade 12).

The learners' experiences show that physical access to schools is not enough if parents or scholarships for OVC and vulnerable children cannot cover all costs for their learning. It can also be noted that learners' home contexts can positively or negatively affect their studies. Learners' views indicate that physical access does not guarantee epistemological access, as contextual factors will likely affect their learning.

Lack of role models at community levels

Despite attending school, the neighbourhoods and home environments generally do not inspire learners to attend school. The following are examples of their comments:

"Sorry to say, but I don't feel motivated by my parent because they are not educated; they don't know how much it takes to learn at high school. However, I appreciate the little they do for my education" (Puseletso, a 17-year-old low-performing female learner in Grade 12).

Another learner opines:

"Sometimes I wish my aunt and uncles were educated; in that way, they would give me enough time to study, but they don't. All they want me to do is do family chores. If they walked the same path as me, they would acknowledge the importance of schooling" (Sekila, a 16-year-old well-performing male learner in Grade 11).

For some, the neighbourhood provides limited support for learning, as they reveal:

"I live far from my classmates, so nobody helps me as there are no educated people in my village. My poor mother only did grade 5" (Palesa, a 16-year-old and low-performing female in Grade 11).

Another learner notes:

"People educated in my village have left their parents for sophisticated town life. Professionals around here are the nurses, policemen and teachers from other districts who have only come here for work" (Nthabeleng, a 16-year-old well-performing girl in Grade 11).

Learners believe that people in communities, including their parents/guardians, provide no motivation for them to continue their studies, and some stay in communities where peer support for schoolwork is limited.

Effects of low SES on self-concept

It was also revealed that a poor SES background may result in the development of low self-concept and learning helplessness from learners who underperform academically. For example, one learner expresses his feelings as follows:

"…even if you know the answer during a classroom lesson because one doesn't have a textbook, I feel unsure and decide to keep quiet" (Lereko, a 17-year-old low-performing male in Grade 12).

Learners' self-concept may be affected by the family's inability to buy them basic necessities, as noted below:

"I feel left out and shy, especially during those days when we wear private clothes …. I like good clothes because I like modelling, but my situation does not allow. Then I sometimes feel ashamed" (Pule, a 17-year-old well-performing male in Grade 12).

Another learner shares:

"Not only do I feel a bit ashamed of myself in class, but it is also worse when there are school trips such as a picnic. Learners put on their beautiful and smart clothes … one would feel out of place" (Thato, a 17-year-old well-performing female learner in Grade 12).

The school environment, particularly how teachers attend to learners' needs, can influence how they perceive and carry themselves. Learners revealed:

"Some of the teachers put it straight that if we don't have books, we should not come to their classes. For me, I feel scared and have no choice but to step out during such teachers' class." (Nthabeleng, a 16-year well-performing female in Grade 11).

Another learner reveals:

"One day, Mrs Tate asked me a question during History class. I raised my hand and got the answer wrong, and she burst, 'How can you pass when you don't ask your parents to buy you books? What you do is buy data for your useless WhatsApp chats'. I felt so embarrassed and hurt, I don't even have a phone" (Palesa, a 16-year-old low-performing female in Grade 11).

Learners' views indicate that their families' low SES affects them psychologically as teachers react with frustration and anger. Subsequently, learners think their challenges reflect their worth as individuals.

Exposure to family distresses

Some revealed that domestic violence and related stresses were barriers to their learning process. Their experiences were shared as follows:

"My father often beats my mother… he doesn't work, but if he happens to get some money from piece jobs, he spends all of it on beer…. He drinks heavily, and he is vulgar when drunk" (Puseletso, 17-year-old low-performing female in Grade 12).

Mokhali recalls that when her parents divorced, she was young, but has memories of their fight, insults and humiliation endured by her mother in their presence (a 17-year-old and low-performing female in Grade 11).

Some did domestic chores, which denied them time to study, as noted:

"My aunt does not do house chores. So, I don't have enough time to do my assignments at home because my cousin (her daughter) is my age mate, but she is lazy. She disappears and is always out. She comes home very late, and my aunty keeps silent about it. However, if I come home late from school or church, she would scold me and use very harsh words" (Sekila, a 16-year-old well-performing male in Grade 11).

Another learner notes:

"My uncle does not value formal education. He gives me a lot of home chores to do…like to collect fodder for animals, herding them, collecting firewood and other farming chores." (Pule is a 17-year year old well-performing boy in Grade 12).

Lereko, who rents a room away from home, states:

"During weekends, I go to town to help people carry parcels and raise money for my food and cosmetics. After these errands, I am usually very tired to read or do assignments, so I just go to bed.… life is very challenging, but it has taught me a lesson" (a 17-year-old low-performing male in Grade 12).

Challenges such as early and unintended pregnancy often cause strain for learners whose parents struggle economically, as noted:

"I got pregnant at a young age… Well, that was unplanned, I just fell into a trap. The man was 13 years older than me… I guess he deceived me with money" (Mokhali, a 17-year-old low-performing female in Grade 11).

Witnessing parents struggle economically brings distress, as one learner laments:

"The death of my father left us and our mother in a difficult situation. I was heavily distressed and sometimes lost track of my studies when I think of how my mother was struggling financially" (Palesa, a 16-year-old low-performing female in Grade 11).

Child marriage cuts a girl child's school lifespan short, as one learner notes:

"We had to leave our home to stay in a rented flat in Maseru so I would be near her work and school. Hahahaha! (laughing) again, we ran away from our home village because boys in the village abducted girls. Some guardians like our grandmother force young girls to get married without their consent, and as a result, they often drop out of school" (Keneuoe, a 17-year-old low-performing female in Grade 12).

Girls are also tasked with caring for the sick, as one learner shares:

"I have to make sure that at 19:00 hours I am at home so that I help granny with insulin injection. That's stressful because I also have to help my younger sisters with cooking" (Thato, a 17-year-old well-performing female in Grade 12).

As revealed in the findings, learners are frequently exposed to social challenges that act as learning barriers and impair undivided attention on their studies. The extent to which a school environment may provide a buffer for these learners' psychosocial challenges depends on the availability of formal structures and resources dedicated to such support.

Discussion

This paper explores the schooling experiences of learners from low SES and how these experiences act as barriers to learning and development. The study found that learners undergo various negative experiences due to a lack of stationery and other school amenities. For example, going to school with worn-out shoes or school uniform, not having cosmetics or being unable to pay for school trips is critical for their learning experiences. The findings confirm previous studies that poor parents cannot meet their children's learning needs (Diaz-Serrano, 2020; Lekhetho, 2013; Moshoeshoe, 2015). Some learners indicate that their school experiences are great. Still, there is a lack of amenities – reference books, mathematics sets, etc.- hence the capability approach's assertion that education requires public action to complement individual opportunities (Sen, 1999).

Five of the ten learners performed well despite their challenges. However, the capability approach argues that what is viewed as a good performance – getting marks above 50% - only shows learners' current functionings without resources; they can achieve higher and reach their maximum potential if they receive the required support (Toson et al., 2013). For example, for one learner, an opportunity to live with an uncle where electricity is used for lighting instead of candles improves the performance tremendously. The same can apply to students who must work on weekends instead of studying, and financial support may improve their performance.

The study also found that some learners are demotivated by their community environments, which have no known university or college graduates they identify with and look up to. Parents and guardians seemingly emphasise domestic chores and looking after livestock over giving them time to study after school. These results concur with Finkenauer et al.'s (2019) assertion that SES predict education outcomes or what Weinberg et al. (2019) refer to as social

reproduction and intergeneration human capital. That is, parents with formal education create a conducive learning environment for their children, the same as those without the background, who are likely to disrupt their children's attention to studies at home.

In the context of Lesotho, students' lack of home support and modelling for their studies echoes the World Bank's (2015) findings that 81 per cent of parents in rural areas of Lesotho have limited education, and poor and illiterate parents place less value on formal education (Urwick, 2011). High SES brings with it social capital through broad exposure of parents who can afford school amenities and motivate their children, while economic deprivation acts as a social barrier for parents who may allow children to attend schools but deny them sufficient time to study (Finkenauer et al., 2019; Weinberg et al., 2019). Lack of support and modelling from home may account for UNICEF's (2015) findings that children from poor families have developmental delays and perform poorly at the secondary school level; this may also result from children growing up in unstable home environments and their exposure to abuse evident in the learners' experiences. As Toson et al. (2013) observe, learners' potential to reach their maximum potential in education depends on social arrangements, which in the current study are not conducive to learner-friendly contexts.

The study further revealed that learners' negative home and school environments led to losing their confidence and self-esteem. Teachers scold learners for not having necessary stationery and reference books; learners are expelled from class if they lack learning resources, etc. This finding confirms previous research that school and teacher quality impacts learning experiences (Lee & Zuze, 2011). However, when teachers act indifferently to challenges brought about by learners' SES, access to education is denied.

The OECD (2018) states that SES continues to deny most children access to education, with almost 40 per cent of children out of school globally coming from Sub-Saharan Africa, of which Lesotho is a member. The UN General Assembly (2015) clearly mandated that the UN member countries address socio-economic challenges to educational access by 2030. However, the Lesotho education system has not identified SES as a marker for SEN (MoET, 2018; 2016), and teachers are not trained to recognise or support learners whose challenges emanate from SES. This observation affirms Du Plooy and Zilindile's (2014) argument that most learners are physically accommodated in schools but may not benefit from the 'inclusion' because of being denied equal opportunities to learn without barriers.

As indicated earlier, 60 per cent of Basotho are poor, reside in rural parts of the country, and most learners drop out of school to supplement family incomes (Mosia, 2022). The social protection grant from the MoSD exclusively provides for school fees, leaving learners vulnerable due to the lack of amenities that are not catered to by the grant. This shortfall offends children's "right to access education, adequate diet, clothing, shelter …" as spelt out in the Children's Protection and Welfare Act (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2011).

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the schooling experiences of learners from low socio-economic status backgrounds and argue for including low socio-economic status as a special education need. The study found that inadequate learning resources, lack of role models, low self-concept due to poor SES, and exposure to family distress all negatively affect access to education. While some learners from low SES perform well enough to pass, the capability approach indicates that they may reach their maximum potential without barriers. The current study only looked at a case of one secondary school in Lesotho, so its results cannot reflect the effects of SES on access, performance and retention in schools. From the foregoing, it is recommended that a national study be conducted to assess how SES affects access, performance and retention. From the findings, the country must decide how to contextualise inclusive education to identify all areas of learner vulnerabilities, including SES, and enact laws, policies and regulations that can stimulate

adequate support for all learners to reach desired functionings.

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