Grappling with Learning: A Grounded Theory Study Educational Disruption Due to Poverty Concerning Learning Performance in State-Run Early Years to Secondary level Schools in Karachi

Areesh Sultana
areesh.hasnain@yahoo.com
Educationist, Sindh Education and Literacy Department

Sehrish Rehman
sehrishcancerean86@gmail.com
Lecturer, BAMM PECHS Govt College for Women Karachi.

Saba Qureshi
sabaqureshi85@gmail.com
Lecturer Govt degree college for Women Karachi.
Corresponding Author: * Areesh Sultana areesh.hasnain@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the effects of poverty on students' academic performance in Karachi, Pakistan government schools. Employing grounded theory approach, the investigation tries to produce a theory explaining the connection between poverty-related elements and academic obstacles experienced by students in impoverished metropolitan areas and coding process by the Stauss and Corbin through three phases transcript are broken down into individual codes, axial coding and selective coding. Grounded theory also arose highlights a cyclical link between poverty and academic underperformance mediated by systemic neglect, poor educational infrastructure, and psychosocial stressors. Focus on two Karachi government school provided semi-structured interviews with pupils, teachers, heads to gather data. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants due to specific reason. Also used NVivo software to group codes and further thematic analysis. Constructive framework was used focus on reality as created socially by the individuals and their experiences. Degree of trustworthiness used to ensure the quality of research paper trustworthiness based on four criteria credibility through triangulation data gathered with the (students, teachers, heads), dependability by maintaining an audit trail, confirmability through peer debriefing and members check, transferability by detailed description of the participants. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the results. This research paper shows how complexly poverty affects academic achievement, including lack of learning materials, family chores, school absenteeism, poor mental health, and insufficient nutrition. Students from low-income homes sometimes struggle in class to focus, have little parental support, and have reduced ambitions. Teachers battle packed classrooms, obsolete resources, and the emotional cost of seeing kids struggle devoid of institutional help. This study helps to guide educational leadership and management. It also urges teacher training programs to help them grasp the socio-cultural dynamics of poverty in urban Pakistan. This study helps to close a major void in the literature on poverty and education in South Asia by providing a bottom-up perspective from within the school system.

Keyword: Poverty, Poor Academic Performance, Lack of Resources, low-income homes, School Absenteeism, Little parental support, Leadership and Management, Teacher Training.

INTRODUCTION

A strong instrument for social-economic movement, education is well known. Poverty, nevertheless, continues to be a major obstacle to academic success in Pakistan and other developing countries. In metropolitan areas like Karachi, where thousands of children registered in public institutions deal with the weight of poverty every day, the public education system mirrors this fight. Although policies seek universal access to education, dropout rates, poor scholastic achievement, and erratic attendance are still endemic issues in government schools. Pakistan's biggest metropolis, Karachi, is a contradiction: poverty coexists with development. This dichotomy especially targets students at government schools from underprivileged backgrounds. Although there is a large body of international literature on how poverty affects education, local research concentrating particularly on Karachi's urban government schools is limited. Most research have measured learning results without investigating the lived experiences of students impacted by poverty. Grounded theory provides a systematic framework to deeply investigate these events, hence enabling the building of a theoretical framework suited for context.

This research paper looks at

a)   How do Karachi's government schools' poor children see and handle academic difficulties?

b)   Mitigating or exacerbating these consequences calls teachers and school infrastructure what part?

c)   How might knowledge of these experienced realities direct educational leadership and policy-making?

The study seeks to produce grounded theory that could guide pragmatic actions by investigating these questions via the voices of teachers and students. Because poverty is still both a cause and outcome of poor academic performance in Pakistan's public school system, this study is timely and imperative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education and poverty have a bi-directional connection. UNESCO (2020) estimates that youngsters from low-income families are five times more likely to drop out of school before finishing secondary schooling. Economic poverty results in diminished school activity, limited availability to educational materials, and more domestic responsibilities (UNICEF, 2019). Emphasizing how several environmental systems including family, school, and community affect a child's growth, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) notes. Poverty hurts all these systems, therefore influencing children's academic, emotional, and mental development. According to the World Bank, 39% of Pakistan's population lives below the poverty line (2023). Often serving the poorest sectors, government schools are underfunded and lack essential amenities. According to Andrabi, Das, and Khwaja (2018), public schools' learning levels lag significantly behind those in private institutions, especially in urban slums like Karachi's. According to Haider and Qureshi (2019), Karachi's Korangi and Lyari neighbourhoods' schools frequently have high student-teacher ratios, inadequate books, and poor hygiene.

These circumstances aggravate poverty's impact on education, resulting in "educational deprivation," as Rehman et al. (2021) note. Directly influencing pupils' academic results are parental education and household income (Cheema and Asim, 2020). Parents in low-income families frequently work several jobs or are illiterate, hence limiting their ability to assist kids with academics. Aslam and Kingdon (2015) noted a major link between literacy rates and household economic status in Pakistan. Financial stress and household chores cause cognitive overload and disengagement from academics for many children from

underprivileged homes who work as venders or in family companies (Farooq et al., 2022). This lowers study time and raises absenteeism (Save the Children, 2018). Strong predictors of students' academic performance are parental education and socioeconomic level. In low-income Pakistani families, parents occasionally lack the knowledge to assist with homework or recognize the value of education (Cheema and Asim, 2020). Some older siblings are expected to help the family financially, therefore interfering with their own education.Over 60% of youngsters in low-income areas of Karachi participate in part-time Labor,which impairs their academic development and raises dropout rates, according to Niazi (2020).

This is consistent with Farooq et al. (2022), which stress that youngsters from impoverished households experience both intellectual and emotional strain, hence impairing their capacity for concentration and involvement with the curriculum.Public sector school infrastructure in Pakistan is frequently insufficient. A 2022 report by the Pakistan Education Statistics Bureau found that more than 40% of Sindh's government schools lacked power, operational toilets, or potable water. Low student retention and poor attendance are brought on by these flaws. Furthermore, lacking is teacher education in how to deal with trauma or financial difficulty in children. Ahmad and Bukhari (2020) contend that schools cannot act as protective surroundings for underprivileged pupils without psychosocial support systems.

Mental health is also impacted by poverty. Students under financial stress, domestic violence, or food instability are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression (Nisar et al., 2021). These circumstances compromise attention and drive, both of which are vital for learning. Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination hypothesis holds that motivation depends on competence, connectedness, and independence. Poverty affects all three: lacking resources causes children to feel less competent; fewer linked to better-off peers; and fewer autonomous since their life options are limited.

Poverty and gender discrimination overlap in many Karachi areas. Girls are frequently taken out of school early for marriage or house chores. Bano (2017) underlined how poverty disproportionality affects female students in metropolitan slums, hence lowering their chances of finishing secondary school.

Cultural expectations, like the favouring of boys' education over girls', worsen the gender disparity in academic performance, especially in conservative areas of Karachi like Orangi and Malir.

Though Pakistan has started several programs including the Ehsaas Program and school meals, their reach in urban slums is constrained (Government of Pakistan, 2022). Furthermore, Jamil (2019), who calls for community-based educational reforms, observes that policymaking and local reality sometimes differ.

Teachers questioned in a 2020 Hashmi and Rizvi study voiced disappointment over bureaucratic obstacles, delayed salaries, and limited professional development chances, which discourage teachers in underprivileged areas. Girls in underprivileged communities experience double prejudice first on account of poverty then because of gender expectations.

Bano (2017) points out that boys' education is given top priority by low-income Pakistani families, who regard girls' education as secondary or prohibitive. This results in early withdrawal, marriage, or housework. UNICEF Pakistan (2021) estimates that one in three girls in low-income urban areas quit before finishing middle school mostly owing to financial constraints,menstrual-related stigma, and a shortage of bathroom facilities in schools. Under-resourced are schools in underprivileged areas.

Hashmi and Rizvi (2020) found that teachers in Karachi's government schools experience emotional burnout, antiquated curricula, and insufficient teaching resources. Many lack training in psychosocial support and cannot cope with the trauma or behavioural problems pupils carry with them.

Furthermore, public school classrooms are often packed with 50 or more pupils each making individual attention almost impossible. Lack of academic scaffolding and this teacher-student disconnect help to explain students' academic disengagement (Yousafzai et al., 2021).Corporal punishment and shaming are still used in some schools, disproportionately impacting underperforming students often due to poverty-related circumstances. These punitive tactics drive kids further away from the learning process (NCHR Pakistan, 2020).

Children who live in poverty have significant emotional effects. According to research by Nisar et al. (2021), pupils from impoverished families in Karachi frequently suffer from low self-esteem, worry, and chronic stress all of which impair cognitive abilities including concentration and memory. Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (1985) proposes that students need autonomy, connection, and mastery to be motivated. These are seldom found in bad schools:

1. Underperformance in academics undermines competence.
2. Social isolation erodes relatedness.
3. Forced Labor or family control lowers autonomy.This psychological setting causes pupils to internalize a sense of failure, therefore promoting dropout and school avoidance (Azeem and Khalid, 2021). Violence and crime have become acceptable in high-poverty areas of Karachi including Lyari, Orangi, and Korangi.

Children sometimes negotiate gang-run areas or suffer domestic abuse. According to an Aurat Foundation (2021) study, more than 45% of pupils in urban slums have either witnessed or experienced violence either at home or on their way to school.

Exposure to violence produces a poisonous stress response that harms a child's brain development and school achievement (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Furthermore, pushing youngsters to leave out or go to school sporadically are risky surroundings. Though several educational changes exist including the Sindh Education Sector Plan and the Ehsaas school stipend program implementation at the local level is still poor. According to Jamil (2019), corruption, lack of responsibility, and political influence stop adequate resource distribution to public schools.Furthermore seldom trained in educational leadership, community involvement, or poverty-responsive tactics is school leadership (principals and headteachers). Educational leadership is still administrative, not visionary (Khan and Saeed, 2020).Because of cultural and contextual variations, global models of educational advancement often fall short in Pakistan. Scholars contend that strategies ought to be community-driven, flexible, and based on the real experiences of underprivileged families (Siddiqui, 2018). International groups such Save the Children (2019) and The Citizens Foundation (2020) advise community-school collaborations whereby NGOs, local officials, and school staff cooperate to offer school meals, mental health services, and parental awareness campaigns. inequalities in education among low- and middle-income countries are also present.
The connection between education and poverty is especially strong in underdeveloped nations.

According to a World Bank (2022) study, pupils from the lowest quintiles in nations including Nigeria, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were at least two levels behind in learning when compared with their more affluent counterparts.

Exacerbating these   learning deficits are restricted school financing, insufficient teacher   training, and packed classrooms (Sayed and Soudien, 2019).

The COVID-19 epidemic highlighted these inequities even further. Poor students had no access to digital tools   for   online   learning, therefore increasing the   academic gap (Giannini   et   al., 2021). Such interruptions severely affected student   retention   and   motivation   in nations like   Pakistan, where internet and electricity access are already restricted (Alam, 2022). Pakistan's 22 million out-of-school youngsters mostly come from   impoverished   backgrounds (Pakistan Economic   Survey, 2023). Public   schools,   especially those in metropolitan slums, accommodate these   children but struggle with severe administrative and structural problems. The Pakistan Education Statistics Report (2022) reads:

One-third of government schools lack electricity.

Twenty-seven percent have no restrooms.

41% have no access to pure drinking water.

These systematic deficiencies have   a direct influence on   attendance,   motivation,   and   performance (Rehman and Tariq, 2021). Haider and Qureshi (2019) contend that political influence, mismanagement and funding restrictions have fundamentally compromised Pakistan's Public education, hence depriving underprivileged pupils of real assistance.

Research Gaps

Few have employed grounded theory to grasp how poverty is lived out in the school environment, even though quantitative studies have shown its effects on educational results in Pakistan. Through the creation of a theoretical framework based on the lived experiences of Karachi's government schools' stakeholders, this study helps to bridge that gap.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research examined how poverty affects academic performance in Karachi's public schools using a qualitative grounded theory methodology. Because it lets researchers create theory from participants' real experiences without predetermined ideas, grounded theory was selected (Charmaz, 2014). Guided by a constructivist framework, the study recognized that knowledge is created collaboratively through interaction with subjects. This is consistent with the objective of getting insight on the subjective experiences of students and teachers inside a certain socioeconomic and cultural environment.

Participants

Two government schools in Karachi's low-income communities Gulberg and Liaquatabad, gathered data. Included: •Ten students (Grades 6–10) Six teachers. Six school heads. Using purposive sampling, participants were chosen from among those immediately impacted by poverty-related challenges.

Participants	School	Location	Sample Size	Sampling	Gender

Heads	Government	Central Karachi Gulberg Town	3	Purposive because Participants Affected by the Poverty	Mix both Males and Females
Heads	Government	Central Karachi Liaquatabad Town	3	Purposive because Participants Affected by the Poverty	Mix both Males and Females
Teachers	Government	Central Karachi Gulberg Town	3	Purposive because Participants Affected by the Poverty	Mix both Males and Females
Teachers	Government	Central Karachi Liaquatabad Town	3	Purposive because Participants Affected by the Poverty	Mix both Males and Females
Students	Government	Central Karachi Gulberg Twon	5	Purposive because Participants Affected by the Poverty	Mix both Males and Females
Students	Government	Central Karachi Liaquatabad Town	5	Purposive because Participants Affected by the Poverty	Mix both Males and Females
			Total 22		

Data Collection

The data was obtained though semi-structured interviews conducted in Urdu and English that lasted from 30 to 45 minutes.Interview transcripts were recorded with permission; they were verbatim transcribed. obtained through semi-structured interviews.

Field notes were kept to document findings on school building and environment.
Anonymity and confidentiality were both maintained with caution due to ethical concerns.
Following the grounded theory coding process proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), data were evaluated in three phases:
1. Transcripts are broken down into individual codes, which facilitates the process of coding.
2. Axial coding: classifying subcategories and categories.
3. Selective Coding: creating a theoretical model around a core category.
NVivo software helped to group codes and enable thematic development.

checking the quality of research through trustworthiness with the following criteria.
By keeping an audit trail, dependability was improved.
Peer debriefing and member checks helped to provide confirmability.
Giving detailed descriptions of the setting of the participants helped to solve transability.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Learning difficulties Begin at Home
Students often noted that their homes lacked calm, electricity, or room to study. A lot of students acknowledged that they had to work after school to support their family, which resulted in a decrease in their attendance and homework.

One student said:
Every evening my father and I sell fruit; by the time I get back, I am too tired to read.
(S-06, Grade 9, Liaquatabad)

Theme 2: Weakness and Physical Tiredness
Teachers stated that hunger and disease greatly affected students' attention.
Said a Grade7 teacher from Liaquatabad:

"Sometimes children drop in the classroom; many arrive without breakfast and have trouble concentrating. "
Many kids acknowledged they came to school sick or neglected breakfast but did not say it out of worry of being sent home.

Theme 3: Absenteeism and sporadic school attendance

Lack of clean facilities caused erratic school attendance, especially among female students who mentioned missing school during menstrual cycles.

I don't go to school when I am having my periods since there are no suitable toilets.
(S-9, Grade 9, Gulberg)

School administrators admitted that absenteeism was a never-ending problem, particularly among older pupils who were forced to Labor.

Theme 4: Scarcity of Education Tools

None of the schools possessed sufficient digital learning resources, operating science labs, or libraries. Many pupils shared textbooks and lacked notebooks.

One school Head noted:

"We lack sufficient books for every student; most either forgo or share. "

For even driven students, this absence of financial support made academic achievement difficult.

Theme 5 Low self-esteem and emotional cost constitute

Students often contrasted themselves against those attending private school and felt inferior. Teachers portrayed pupils as timid, reluctant to ask questions, and lacking confidence.

One teacher said:
"They feel they are already behind. They don't dream of becoming engineers or doctors. " (T- 2, Female, Gulberg Town)

Thematic map
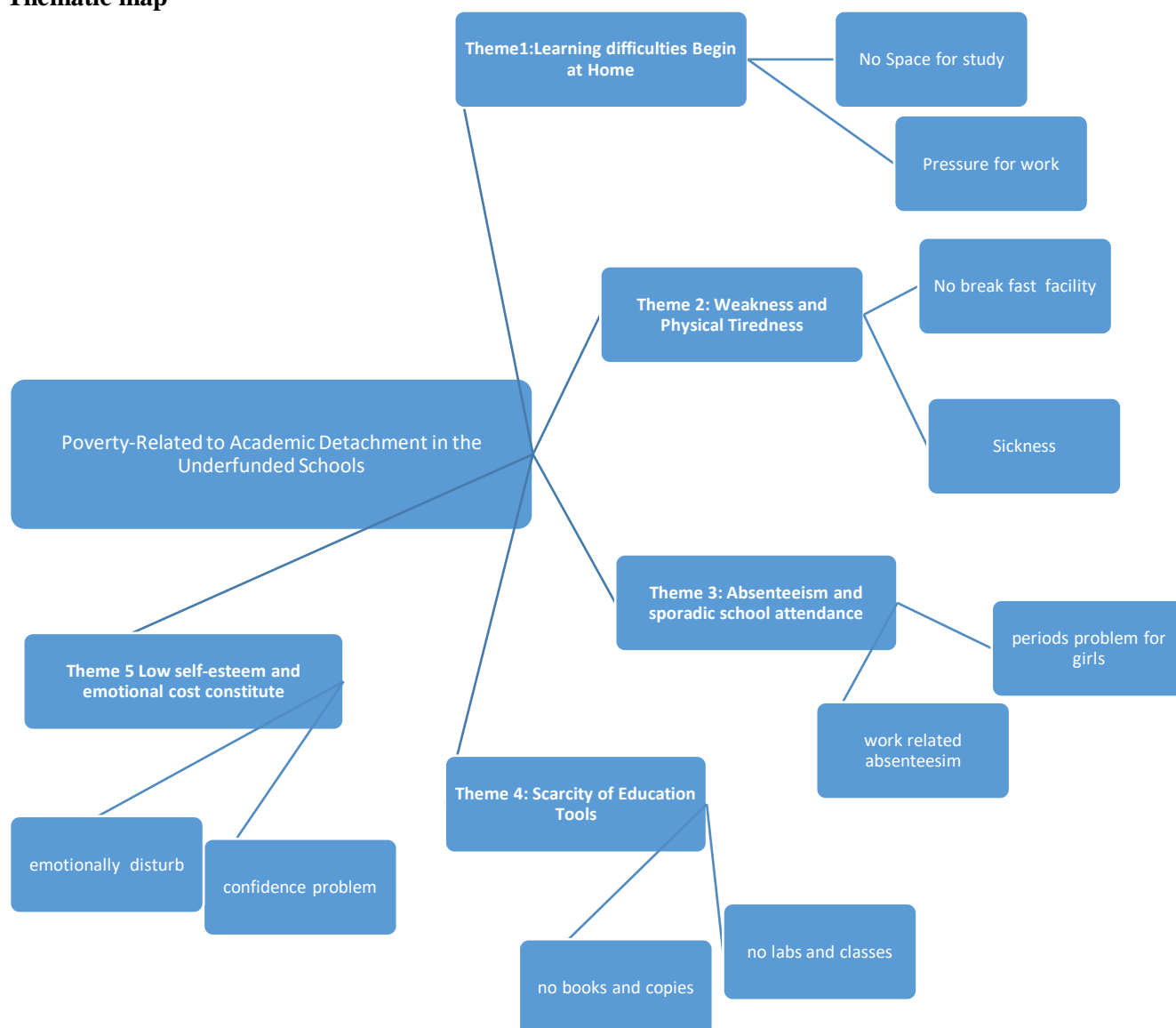
Development of Grounded Theory

One main category evolved from thematic analysis and coding

"Poverty-Related to Academic Detachment in the Underfunded Schools". This idea describes the cyclic nature of how poverty impacts academic achievement. The following components are included in the rising grounded theory model:

1. Socioeconomic Backdrop: Input Level

o Family income
o Instruction by parents
o Kind of employment
o Expectations for gender

2. School-Level Mediation:

o Inadequacies in infrastructure
o, too many students
o burnout in teachers
o Absence of psychological help

3. Outcomes at the student level:

o Infrequent attendance
o Low results
o psychological strain
o Risk of Dropout

4. Cyclic Reinforcement:

o Academic failure restricts upward mobility, hence reinforcing economic disadvantage.
o Students internalize failure, disengage from learning, and reproduce the cycle of poverty.

According to this grounded theory, poverty is an active, interacting force that compromises learning in many aspects social, emotional, architectural, and psychological rather than just a background condition.

DISCUSSION

The results back current studies (Haider and Qureshi, 2019; Aslam and Kingdon, 2015) on the damaging impacts of poverty on education. Still, this research offers depth by showing how kids live in poverty both inside and outside of the classroom. According to the grounded theory, inadequate academic achievement in underprivileged areas is not just a pupil issue but also a failure of infrastructure, policy, and support systems throughout. Students are failing because the educational system doesn't adjust to their socioeconomic circumstances, not because of sloth or lack of aptitude. Furthermore, the research uncovers the mental weight of poverty, usually unseen. Prominent were feelings of inferiority and disengagement, consistent with self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Unlike earlier investigations, this one built theory using the voices of the pupils themselves, anchored in Karachi's particular urban environment. It emphasizes the great need for leadership-directed changes going outside curriculum to solve infrastructure, counselling, gender awareness, and teacher support.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Utilizing grounded theory, this research examined how poverty impacts Karachi's government school pupils' academic achievement. Through malnutrition, absenteeism, low self-esteem, and deficient school infrastructure, poverty interferes with learning.

The grounded theory of "Poverty-Related to Academic Detachment in the Underfunded Schools". offers a framework for appreciating how institutional deficiencies interact with economic hardship to influence academic performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Introduce School Meal Programs Provide daily nutrition to students to improve attention and health.
2. 2. Schools need to provide mental health and guidance counselling for at-risk pupils.
3. 3. Teachers should be trained on poverty sensitivity so they can recognize and react to indicators of financial difficulties in their pupils.
4. 4. Collaborate with nonprofits to cover the book, uniform, and health supply gap with external help.
5. 5. Create leadership-centred initiatives enabling school heads to tackle poverty-related difficulties in their neighbourhood.
6. 6.Improved Infrastructure of classrooms and make separate toilet for girls and boys so that maintained the privacy of girls and boys that will reduce absenteeism.

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