

# Does social capital matter for student achievements?

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## Introduction

Social capital—a concept notably developed in the works of James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu—refers to the resources arising from the benefits of social networks. More aligned with Bourdieu’s perspective, social capital can significantly influence individuals in various ways, including how someone’s educational outcomes are determined. High levels of social capital are typically associated with better academic achievements, as strong social connections often provide access to well-resourced and high-performing schools. It shows that a good network can offer crucial support, guidance, and opportunities to enhance students’ educational experience and success. However, social capital can also reinforce existing inequalities because socioeconomic

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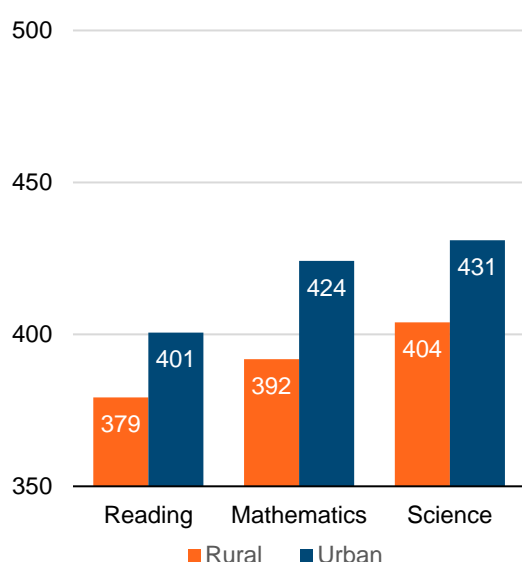
differences—such as social status—often intersect with other forms of capital, such as economic and cultural capital<sup>1</sup>.

In Malaysia, social capital's influence on education is under-researched, resulting in limited evidence of its potential impact. As such, this article aims to shed light on how social capital from various socioeconomic backgrounds can shape academic outcomes, examining outcome trends across schools and drawing on theoretical links between social capital and education.

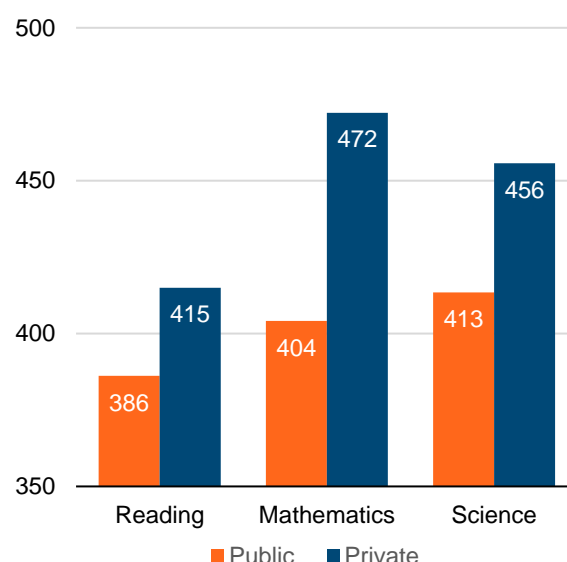
## Setting the context for diverging educational outcomes

When discussing academic achievements, one must not forget how varied socioeconomic circumstances can shape each household's daily practices or routines. These factors would then directly influence children's educational outcomes, which often remain unequal despite widespread discussions and efforts on inclusivity and universal education. For instance, score gaps are evident in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) across different strata groups (urban vs. rural) as well as types of schools (public vs. private) in Malaysia, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

**Figure 1: PISA scores by strata group, 2022**



**Figure 2: PISA scores by school type, 2022**



Source: PISA database

Data reveals that in the latest assessment year, students' average scores in rural areas and public schools were notably lower than those of their peers attending urban and private schools. This suggests that socioeconomic-related factors might play a role in determining academic outcomes, potentially linked to variations in different kinds of networks—family and school-based social

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<sup>1</sup> According to Bourdieu, economic capital refers to an individual's wealth, physical resources, and production instruments that can be transformed into money or institutionalised as property rights, as well as other forms of capital. Cultural capital can be divided into three subcategories – embodied cultural capital (i.e. knowledge and skills acquired from habitus); objectified cultural capital (i.e., books, cars and clothes); and institutionalised cultural capital (i.e., often enacted via educational qualifications).

capital<sup>2</sup>. For instance, a US-based study found that social capital from these contexts affects academic achievements, with family-based social capital having an even stronger effect<sup>3</sup>. This dynamic is attributed to different childhood experiences across social groups, particularly between middle- and working-class families<sup>4</sup>. Middle-class parents typically have access to extensive sources of information, allowing them to make more informed decisions about key factors such as the school's educational practices and reputation, as well as the social mix of the school's intake. In addition, they could be more involved in dealing with school-related matters such as parent-teacher meetings than those from the working class.

However, some also argued that solid family-based social capital may have unintended consequences— “too much of a good thing effect” cases such as disconnection from broader networks that could lead to better opportunities<sup>5</sup>. For example, past studies suggested that families with stronger family ties encouraged students to stay close to or at home, restricting their access to broader economic and educational opportunities<sup>6</sup>. This implies that the impact of social capital can vary significantly depending on the context for individuals and households, influenced by factors beyond income alone.

### **Bringing social capital into discussion – limited evidence for Malaysia**

When examining diverse academic outcomes across different socioeconomic backgrounds, one under-researched factor in Malaysia is the potential role of social capital. Generally, a large body of evidence has shown that social capital brings about positive consequences such as poverty alleviation, wider access to new opportunities, enhanced growth and welfare, improved health conditions, and better academic achievements<sup>7</sup>. In education, early international studies discovered that religious schools, including Catholic institutions, reported lower dropout rates and higher learning outcomes than public schools. This success has been attributed to strong social capital from the non-familial associations that remain across generations, creating more structured and functional communities<sup>8</sup>.

In Malaysia, while studies are limited, a local analysis in Terengganu found that there is a robust significant relationship between the level of social capital of a family (i.e. networking relationships of the family) and the educational outcomes of a child, even after accounting for other aspects such as economic capital<sup>9</sup>, human capital<sup>10</sup>, school,<sup>11</sup> and neighbourhood

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<sup>2</sup> Family social capital refers to the quality of relationships between parents and children, shared values and attitudes of family members, and the non-material investments parents make for their children. School social capital encompasses connections between students and their peers, teachers, and school organisations.

<sup>3</sup> Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman (2013)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Reeves and Deng (2022)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Abdul Hakim, Ismail, and Abdul Razak (2012)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Economic capital considers household income, number of children in the family and ratio of spending on education to total expenditure.

<sup>10</sup> Human capital encompasses education level of parents.

<sup>11</sup> School characteristics only consider student per teacher ratio.

characteristics<sup>12,13</sup>. Adopting Bourdieu's approach, which will be elaborated later, can imply that students from privileged households with greater economic capital would benefit more from broader networking relationships across generations in education access and outcomes than those from less-privileged backgrounds with lower economic capital.

For example, the Budget 2025 speech revealed that around 30% of students attending *Sekolah Berasrama Penuh* (SBP) in Malaysia—schools supported by government subsidies—are from high-income families<sup>14</sup>. This is considered a staggering figure, as SBP was originally established to provide outstanding students from low-income and rural families with better access to quality education.

The 30% share raises important questions about social capital's role in creating such enrolment patterns across schools. At the same time, it also highlights the need to consider factors beyond merely the benefits or returns of education across socioeconomic groups, such as family, school, and community characteristics. These factors contribute to the construction of social capital, which likely plays a role in determining educational outcomes.

## How does social capital impact academic achievements?

Let's briefly explore the theoretical concept to better understand the relationship between social capital and academic achievements.

Scholars define social capital in several ways, but in simple terms, the theory views capital as the resources derived from social relations<sup>15</sup>. These connections are believed to enhance the sense of connectedness between individuals and their families, friends, communities, and the rest of society. However, previous research emphasised that if not frequently used, social capital can depreciate over time or accumulate when it is frequently utilised. So, greater investments in social capital can potentially result in tangible socioeconomic benefits, including improved academic outcomes.

In education, two prominent approaches have linked social capital to educational outcomes in distinctive ways, those proposed by James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu (Table 1). Coleman views social capital as universally beneficial, emphasising that a high level of social connectedness supports academic success but does not fully account for the impact of socioeconomic disparities. Bourdieu, on the other hand, views social capital as closely linked to social, economic, and cultural structures that worsen inequalities.

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<sup>12</sup> Neighbourhood characteristics only consider ratio of student to juvenile cases to gauge the degree of safety in the neighbourhood.

<sup>13</sup> Abdul Hakim, Ismail, and Abdul Razak (2012)

<sup>14</sup> MOF (2024)

<sup>15</sup> Rogošić and Baranović (2016)

**Table 1: Theories of social capital's influence on educational outcomes**

Coleman	Bourdieu
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The level of connectedness between a child and family, community, friends and school</b> is just as critical to the child's well-being and academic development as financial and human capital.</li> <li>• <b>Views the level of parental education as an aspect of human capital.</b></li> <li>• Exceeds beyond the boundaries of individual social capital, <b>emphasising the importance of community</b>, such as organisations and institutions in the pursuit of individuals' goals.</li> <li>• Individuals engage in social interactions, relationships, and networks as long as benefits persist – <b>on the account that social capital is universally productive.</b></li> <li>• Arguments are made on the negative side of social capital due to the uneven distribution of social resources. For instance, <b>social capital is not a common benefit for everyone</b>, and <b>viewing it as a common benefit masks inherent social inequality.</b></li> <li>• While this approach tells that higher social capital contributes to better academic outcomes, <b>it does not explain that different education outcomes are the consequences of social differences (i.e., socioeconomic status).</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Total resources derived from belonging to certain individuals and groups that stem from social, economic, and cultural structures that create differential power and status</b>, enabling them to leverage the capital to achieve an academic-oriented goal.</li> <li>• <b>Views the level of parental education as an aspect of cultural capital.</b></li> <li>• Contrary to Coleman, Bourdieu is more <b>concerned with the uneven distribution of possessions and access to capital and that it reproduces social inequality.</b></li> <li>• Understanding of social capital and its influence on educational achievement <b>cannot be achieved without other capital theories – economic and cultural capital.</b> Economic capital is the foundation of having social and cultural capital.</li> <li>• <b>Drawbacks</b> of this approach include the <b>concepts of habitus and field<sup>16</sup> that tend to be complex to be operationalised in empirical research due to the high emphasis on broader social settings.</b></li> </ul>

Source: Abdul Hakim, Ismail, and Abdul Razak (2012), Claridge (2015), Rogošić and Baranović (2016)

Linking the main argument of this article to these approaches, Bourdieu's view on social capital helps to explain that students' academic achievements can be shaped by their socioeconomic status. The resources they can access to achieve expected academic goals—such as tutoring, sufficient qualified teachers, networking opportunities, and parental support—are often influenced by the social, economic, and cultural capital of their families (with the latter two less explored here). Despite the drawbacks outlined in Table 1, this perspective highlights how resource disparities reinforce academic inequalities, making Bourdieu's approach a more comprehensive lens for understanding the complex role of social capital in educational outcomes.

## Concluding thoughts

While social capital might seem beneficial for educational outcomes based on rational choice theory, it is not universally accessible when we account for social structures. Not every student is born with abundant economic capital or wide social networks that could enhance their social mobility through education. As a result, stark disparities in academic outcomes emerge between

<sup>16</sup> Habitus encompasses the assumptions, habits, ingrained ideas and ways of being while field is a sociological term referring to a social space where agents and their social positions are located. (Claridge, 2015)

students depending on which school they get to attend, such as private vs. public and urban vs. rural.

Given the limited local studies, there is a clear opportunity for this topic to be researched further. Perhaps we should start identifying key indicators contributing to social capital based on the Malaysian context. These indicators can include dimensions proposed by Abdul Hakim, Ismail, and Abdul Razak (2012): 1) groups and networks; 2) trust and solidarity; 3) collective action and cooperation; 4) social cohesion and inclusion; 5) empowerment and political action; and 6) information and communication<sup>17</sup>.

Additional insights can also be drawn from Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman (2013), who outlined distinct dimensions for family- and school-based social capital. For family social capital, these include parental trust in children, parental monitoring of homework, and parents attending school meetings and events. School social capital, on the other hand, includes students' participation in extracurricular activities, teacher morale, school environment, and teacher responsiveness to student needs<sup>18</sup>.

Considering these factors could guide the development of more informed education policies aimed at a more efficient and equitable distribution of resources, ultimately supporting improved students' academic outcomes.

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<sup>17</sup> Abdul Hakim, Ismail, and Abdul Razak (2012)

<sup>18</sup> Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman (2013)

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