

Socio-Economic Disparities in Educational Attainment and Career Aspirations: A Study of Students in Thrissur District, Kerala

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i05.003 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i05.003>

Received: 24 April 2025 / Accepted: 15 May 2025 / Published: 27 May 2025

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of socio-economic factors on the educational experiences and aspirations of college-going students in Thrissur district, Kerala. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research investigates how family income, parental education, and occupation shape students' academic performance, access to resources, and career ambitions. The findings indicate that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds face significant challenges, including financial constraints, limited educational support, and fewer career opportunities, which adversely affect their academic outcomes and long-term aspirations. In contrast, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds enjoy better access to educational resources, parental support, and stronger aspirations toward higher education and prestigious careers. The study also highlights the role of parental education and occupation in influencing students' educational trajectories and ambitions. The research calls for educational policies to reduce inequalities, such as providing financial assistance, enhancing parental involvement, and offering career counseling to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study emphasizes the need for a more inclusive approach to education to promote socio-economic mobility and bridge the existing educational divide in Kerala.

Keywords: Socio-economic Status; Educational Attainment; Career Aspirations; Parental Education; Kerala

1. Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a vital tool for both individual advancement and national development. It serves as a pathway to economic mobility, social integration, and personal

empowerment. While educational systems worldwide aim to offer equitable learning opportunities, disparities in educational outcomes remain prevalent, particularly along socio-economic lines. Socio-economic background—which includes income level, parental education, occupation, and access to material and intellectual resources—profoundly influences students' academic performance, aspirations, and long-term outcomes. These differences manifest early in a child's life and compound over time, leading to systemic inequality in access to quality education and future employment prospects.

Extensive research has been conducted globally to explore how socio-economic status (SES) affects educational outcomes. Studies have consistently found that children from wealthier and more educated families enjoy advantages in terms of cognitive development, school readiness, and academic performance. Scholars have also examined the role of early childhood education, parental involvement, and material resources in shaping students' academic journeys. These findings have informed a range of policy interventions aimed at narrowing educational disparities, including subsidized schooling, midday meal programs, and targeted scholarships.

Despite these broad investigations, limited empirical research has been conducted at the local level in the Indian context—particularly in districts like Thrissur—to examine how socio-economic variables concretely impact educational attainment. Existing studies often generalize findings across states or focus on urban versus rural divides, thereby overlooking the nuanced challenges that students face within specific districts. There is also a lack of localized data on how socio-economic disadvantages intersect with students' motivation, access to resources, and long-term occupational outcomes. Furthermore, little is known about how SES influences higher education experiences rather than primary or secondary education alone.

This study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on the college-going population in Thrissur district. It provides a detailed analysis of how socio-economic background—including factors like family income, parental occupation, and educational qualifications—affects students' academic experiences and aspirations. The paper also examines barriers to educational success and assesses the role of education in occupational attainment among youth from diverse economic backgrounds. By focusing on higher education, this study offers a fresh perspective on socio-economic inequality at a critical transition point in students' lives.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform local educational policy and practice. By highlighting the real-world implications of socio-economic inequality within Thrissur's educational landscape, the research provides actionable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers. The findings can guide the development of targeted support mechanisms—such as mentorship programs, financial aid, and academic counseling—that can enhance

educational equity and empower students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education and social justice in India.

2. Review of Literature

Educational aspirations are a critical component of human capital formation, shaping both academic outcomes and long-term labour market trajectories. A significant body of research has consistently shown that students from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds tend to report lower educational aspirations compared to their more advantaged peers, even when they demonstrate comparable academic potential (Gutman & Akerman, 2008; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Berrington et al., 2016; Anders, 2017; Guyon & Huillery, 2020).

The determinants of these aspiration gaps are multifaceted. Traditional economic theories attribute differences in aspirations to rational utility-maximizing behavior, wherein disadvantaged students may select lower educational goals based on cost-benefit assessments that include perceived barriers and returns (Dalton, Ghosal, & Mani, 2016). However, recent empirical work has emphasized the role of non-cognitive factors—particularly students' personal experiences and attitudes—in shaping educational choices (Agasisti and Maragkou 2023) contribute significantly to this discourse by employing detailed survey data linked with administrative records from secondary schools in England to explore the mechanisms underpinning SES disparities in educational aspirations. Their study examines both experiential factors—such as the provision of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), and exposure to bullying—and attitudinal dimensions, including locus of control and academic self-perception. Their findings reveal that while experiential variables like IAG and bullying victimization do not significantly explain the SES gap in aspirations, attitudinal factors play a more substantial role. Specifically, differences in attitudes account for up to 22% of the observed disparities, suggesting that internal psychological orientations such as self-esteem and perceived academic ability are critical in aspiration formation. These insights underscore the importance of school-level interventions aimed at enhancing student confidence and resilience, particularly among disadvantaged groups.

By integrating decomposition techniques such as Gelbach's (2016) method, the study provides robust evidence that structural inequality in aspirations is not solely a function of external informational deficits but is also deeply rooted in internalized attitudes shaped by socio-economic context. This growing literature emphasizes the need for multidimensional policy interventions that go beyond informational outreach. Programs that build student self-concept and address psychological barriers are increasingly seen as necessary complements to traditional academic support strategies in reducing educational inequality.

3. Methodology

The study employs a primary survey-based approach to examine the impact of socio-economic factors on educational attainment and career aspirations among college-going students in Thrissur district, Kerala. A total of 100 students were selected using convenience sampling from various socio-economic backgrounds, ensuring diversity in family income, parental education, and occupation. A well-structured questionnaire was designed to capture demographic information, socio-economic status (SES), academic performance, and career aspirations. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, and the responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means to identify patterns and trends. The study also explored the barriers faced by students in achieving their educational goals, including aspirations related to higher education, government jobs, and migration. Ethical considerations were adhered to, with informed consent obtained from participants and their anonymity ensured. Despite its valuable insights, the study is limited by its small sample size and the use of convenience sampling, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, self-reported data may introduce response biases. Overall, the methodology allows for a focused exploration of how socio-economic factors influence educational experiences and career aspirations in this specific region of Kerala.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings based on primary survey data collected from 100 students in Thrissur district, Kerala. The analysis investigates the influence of socio-economic background—measured in terms of family income, parental education, and occupation—on students' academic performance, educational support systems, and career aspirations. The findings underscore the intersection of economic conditions with educational inequality and student motivation.

Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

Understanding the socio-economic background of students is crucial for analyzing their access to educational opportunities and overall academic engagement. In this study, family income is used as a primary indicator of socio-economic status (SES). The distribution of students based on monthly family income is presented in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, a significant proportion of students (64%) come from households earning less than ₹25,000 per month. This indicates that a majority of the respondents belong to low and lower-middle-income groups. Such income distribution is in line with broader economic patterns in rural and semi-urban areas of Kerala. The implications of this finding are critical. Students from lower-income households often face barriers in accessing supplementary educational

resources such as private tutoring, internet connectivity, and digital learning tools. Additionally, economic constraints may affect their ability to participate in extracurricular activities, pursue higher education, or compete on equal footing with peers from more affluent backgrounds. This socio-economic context thus serves as an important determinant of educational outcomes and future aspirations among students.

Table 1: Distribution of Students by Monthly Family Income

Monthly Family Income (INR)	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Below 10,000	26	26%
10,001 – 25,000	38	38%
25,001 – 50,000	22	22%
Above 50,000	14	14%
Total	100	100%

Source: primary data

Parental Education and Student Performance

Parental education plays a critical role in shaping children's academic outcomes by influencing the home environment, academic support systems, and overall educational aspirations. In this study, the relationship between parental education levels and students' academic performance was analyzed and is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Academic Performance by Parental Education

Highest Parental Education	Average Academic Score (%)	Number of Students
No formal education	58	12
Up to SSLC	64	35
Higher Secondary	68	28
Graduation & above	74	25

Source: primary data

Table 2 reveals a clear positive correlation between the level of parental education and the academic performance of students. Students whose parents have completed graduation or higher

report the highest average scores (74%), whereas those with parents lacking formal education have the lowest average (58%). This trend supports the widely recognized theory that educated parents are more likely to be involved in their children’s education, provide academic guidance, and foster an environment conducive to learning. They are also better positioned to navigate educational systems, access academic resources, and set high expectations for academic achievement.

Impact of Occupation on Educational Support

Parental occupation is a critical socio-economic factor influencing the nature and extent of academic support children receive at home. The type of employment often reflects not only income levels but also the time availability, awareness of educational needs, and the overall value placed on education. Table 3 presents students’ perceptions of the level of educational support they receive, categorized by their parents' occupation.

Table 3: Perceived Parental Support by Occupation

Parental Occupation	Strong Support (%)	Moderate Support (%)	Weak/No Support (%)
Unskilled Labor	25%	45%	30%
Skilled/Clerical Work	41%	39%	20%
Government/Salaried Job	60%	30%	10%
Business/Professional	58%	35%	7%

Source: primary data

The results indicate that students whose parents are employed in government, salaried, or professional occupations report the highest levels of strong educational support (60% and 58%, respectively). This support likely stems from greater job stability, higher educational awareness, and the capacity to invest time and resources in children’s education. Conversely, children of unskilled laborers report the lowest levels of strong support (25%) and the highest percentage of weak or no support (30%). This gap may be attributed to a combination of long working hours, limited educational background, and financial stress, which can restrict parental involvement in academic activities. These findings highlight the structural disparities in educational support

linked to occupational status. Students from lower occupational backgrounds may benefit from institutional interventions such as mentorship programs, community learning centers, and targeted parental engagement initiatives to help bridge the support gap and promote more equitable educational outcomes.

Barriers to Educational Attainment

Educational attainment is not only influenced by personal motivation or school infrastructure but also by socio-economic barriers that affect students' ability to pursue and sustain education. Table 4 illustrates the key challenges—financial difficulties, lack of educational resources, and family pressure to work—faced by students across different income groups.

Table 4: Reported Educational Barriers by Income Group

Income Group (INR)	Financial Barrier (%)	Lack of Resources (%)	Family Pressure to Work (%)
Below 10,000	81%	73%	62%
10,001 – 25,000	66%	58%	47%
25,001 – 50,000	38%	33%	19%
Above 50,000	14%	11%	4%

Source: primary data

The data clearly demonstrates that students from lower-income households face significantly higher educational barriers. For instance, 81% of students from families earning below ₹10,000 per month report financial constraints, compared to only 14% among those from the highest income group. Similarly, access to basic educational resources is most limited among the poorest, with 73% reporting inadequate learning materials. Additionally, 62% of students from the lowest income group experience family pressure to work, a factor that can lead to reduced classroom engagement, absenteeism, and even school dropout. These burdens are not merely short-term disruptions but reflect structural disadvantages that hinder educational mobility and reinforce intergenerational poverty.

Aspirations and Occupational Goals

Students' aspirations and occupational goals reflect not only their educational experiences but also their socio-economic environment. Table 5 highlights the differences in career aspirations

based on socio-economic status (SES), showing how socio-economic background influences students' long-term educational and professional goals.

Table 5: Occupational Aspirations by SES

SES Category	Higher Education Aspiration (%)	Government Job Aspiration (%)	Migration Aspiration (%)
Low SES	42%	48%	34%
Middle SES	63%	56%	22%
High SES	81%	49%	15%

Source: primary data

The data clearly illustrates that higher socio-economic status (SES) is strongly associated with higher educational aspirations. A significant 81% of students from high SES backgrounds aspire to pursue higher education, compared to only 42% from low SES backgrounds. This indicates that students from affluent families are more likely to see higher education as a viable and accessible pathway, while those from lower-income families may perceive immediate employment or migration as more pressing priorities. In terms of government job aspirations, the proportion is quite high across all SES categories, with the highest percentage (56%) seen among middle SES students, followed closely by low SES (48%). However, a noticeable difference arises in the desire for migration—students from low SES backgrounds are more inclined to seek employment abroad (34%), likely motivated by the potential for better financial opportunities and improved living conditions. This disparity in aspirations underscores how socio-economic background shapes the trajectory of students' future plans. Students from low SES backgrounds tend to prioritize short-term economic stability over long-term educational goals, while those from higher SES backgrounds typically have access to resources and opportunities that enable them to aim for higher education and professional careers.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the deep-rooted socio-economic disparities that influence educational attainment and career aspirations among college-going students in Thrissur district, Kerala. The research clearly demonstrates that a student's socio-economic background—defined by family income, parental education, and occupation—has a profound impact on their academic

performance, access to educational resources, and long-term aspirations. The analysis reveals that students from lower-income households face significant barriers, including financial difficulties, lack of educational support, and family pressures to contribute to household income. These challenges not only hinder academic performance but also limit their aspirations for higher education and professional careers. In contrast, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to have better access to resources, more educational support, and stronger aspirations toward higher education and prestigious professions.

The study also underscores the critical role of parental education and occupation in shaping the educational experiences of students. Parents with higher educational qualifications tend to provide more support, both academically and emotionally, fostering an environment that values and prioritizes education. In contrast, parents with lower educational qualifications or those in lower-income occupations often struggle to provide similar levels of support, which exacerbates existing inequalities. This disparity in parental involvement is reflected in the academic performance of students, with those from higher educational backgrounds achieving better results.

Furthermore, the study draws attention to the varying aspirations across different socio-economic groups. While students from high socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to aim for higher education and long-term career growth, students from low socio-economic backgrounds often prioritize immediate employment or migration to secure financial stability. This highlights a critical intersection of socio-economic status and future career goals, where the lack of access to resources and opportunities limits the long-term vision of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The findings of this research have important policy implications. To address the educational inequalities that persist in Thrissur, and similar regions, targeted interventions are necessary. Educational policies should focus on reducing the financial burdens faced by low-income students, increasing access to quality educational resources, and providing mentorship and academic counseling services. Additionally, initiatives aimed at increasing parental engagement, particularly for those in lower-income occupations, could help bridge the support gap. Policies should also consider the career aspirations of students, ensuring that they have access to information, guidance, and opportunities that can help them pursue both higher education and meaningful careers.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader understanding of socio-economic disparities in education and underscores the need for a more inclusive approach to education that accounts for the diverse needs of students across different socio-economic strata. By fostering an environment that supports students from all backgrounds, we can help bridge the educational divide and enable greater socio-economic mobility for future generations. The findings of this research

should inform local and national policies aimed at promoting equitable educational opportunities and achieving long-term social and economic development.

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