

Parental Engagement in Children's Literacy Development Across Income Groups: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Parental engagement is a crucial element in children's literacy development. However, there are few studies focused on the influence of income levels and the consistency of support at home. This research examines the various aspects of parental engagement among the low-, middle-, and high-income families in Selangor. The data were collected via a survey administered to 419 parents of primary school children. The survey comprises 19 instruments designed to measure academic supervision, resource accessibility, emotional support, and digital engagement. This data is analysed using descriptive analysis. The results reveal that all the income groups demonstrate moderate to strong literacy support. However, there is a significant difference in the parents' engagement patterns. Parents with low incomes were highly emotionally involved and adaptable despite having limited financial resources. Parents with middle incomes were the most consistent in all areas, combining structure, access, and emotional support. High-income parents provided significant material and digital resources but exhibited comparatively lower direct academic and emotional engagement, presumably because they relied on external support systems. These results show that effective literacy engagement is not only determined by a family's income but also by parents' beliefs, the time they have, and how they adapt. The study enhances the existing literature by applying established parenting theories in a Malaysian context, offering comparative insights across income levels, and guiding targeted educational interventions that promote equitable literacy development.

Keywords: parental engagement, literacy development, income disparity, Malaysia, educational equity

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Introduction

Parental engagement is recognised as an important component in children's literacy development. This impacts children's reading readiness, academic success, and lifelong learning practices. A study by Boerma et al. (2017) emphasises "*Parents' interest in their children's reading is significantly linked to improved reading comprehension outcomes.*" In varied educational settings, active engagement through emotional support, academic oversight, or the provision of learning materials has demonstrated efficacy in enhancing language proficiency and cultivating favourable attitudes towards reading.

In Malaysia, the disparities in household income correlate with the variations in home literacy environments, resource accessibility, and parents' views on education. Parents' socioeconomic status (SES) plays a vital role in how parents engage in their children's literacy development. As Rahman et al. (2024) note, "*socioeconomic status moderates the relationship between parental involvement and young children's literacy development.*" Higher-income families have better access to books, digital tools, and enrichment opportunities. On the other hand, low-income families may struggle with these things. Nonetheless, previous studies suggest that parents with lower incomes can compensate for limited resources by being highly emotionally involved and employing flexible strategies.

Within the Malaysian context, studies on parental engagement and socioeconomic status remain scarce. Particularly, there is a lack of research on how families from different income groups promote literacy at home. Existing research has predominantly focused on general parental involvement or school-related activities, neglecting comprehensive comparative analyses that address the full spectrum of literacy support, including emotional, academic, and digital dimensions. Regardless of economic standing, Mad and Mohamed (2023) stated that parents who value literacy are more likely to create an environment that supports reading and learning. This suggests that it is necessary to examine how beliefs, resources, and engagement behaviours interact.

This study is guided by Epstein's Model of Parental Involvement framework and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Theory of Parental Involvement. This study examines parental engagement in children's literacy development among three household income groups in Selangor. Epstein's framework emphasises the importance of parental engagement at home for learning, while Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model describes how parental involvement behaviours are shaped by attitude, self-efficacy, and perceived roles. When combined, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for observing the various forms and reasons of parental involvement across socioeconomic backgrounds.

Hence, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing a systematic comparison of low-, middle-, and high-income families, focusing on the interactions among emotional support, academic involvement, and digital practices across income groups. The study will foreground findings that will support interventions to promote literacy development by addressing key challenges and family dynamics (Calzada et al., 2014). This study will investigate parental engagement in children's literacy development in three different household income levels in Selangor, Malaysia.

Methodology

This quantitative study encompassed 419 parents of primary school children living in Selangor, Malaysia. Participants were classified into three income brackets according to monthly household earnings: Group A (low-income, below RM4,850), Group B (middle-income, RM4,851 to RM10,970), and Group C (high-income, above RM10,971). The sampling was intentional, focusing on households with school-aged children enrolled in government and private primary schools in urban and suburban regions.

A structured 19-item questionnaire was used to collect data on parental involvement in six important areas of home literacy support. These areas include academic supervision, access to learning materials, daily integration of literacy practices, digital literacy guidance, development of reading habits, and emotional support related to learning goals. Each item was evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “Strongly Agree” and 5 indicating “Strongly Disagree.” Lower scores signify greater agreement or more frequent engagement in the specified behaviour.

SPSS Version 27 was used to do descriptive statistical analysis. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed for each item across the three income groups to discern trends, behavioural patterns, and notable disparities in parental engagement. Specific focus was on domains that exhibit variance across income levels, yielding comparative insights into the impact of socioeconomic status on the nature and consistency of home support. The comparative interpretation in the results and discussion sections is based on these findings.

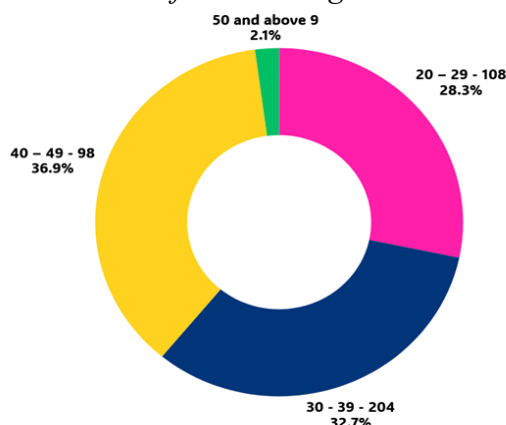
Results and Findings

This section presents the descriptive findings of parental engagement in children’s literacy development across three household income groups: Group A (low-income), Group B (middle-income), and Group C (high-income). The analysis is based on 19 items encompassing academic supervision, access to learning resources, digital literacy support, reading routines, and emotional encouragement. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed for each item to assess patterns and variations in engagement. The results highlight both commonalities and unique trends across income groups, offering insight into how socioeconomic background influences the nature and intensity of parental involvement.

Demographic Information

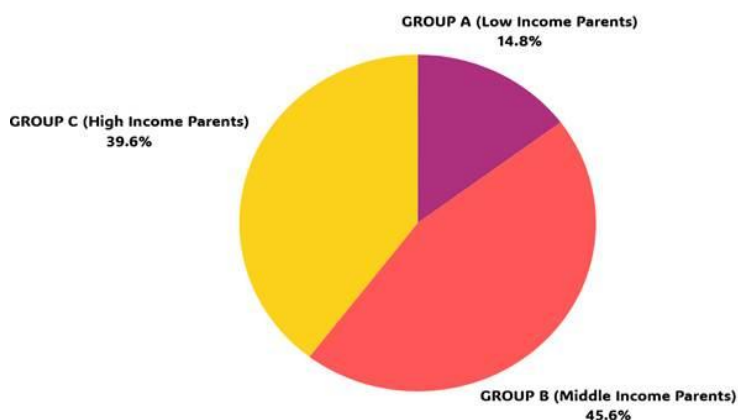
Figure 1

Distribution of Parents’ Age



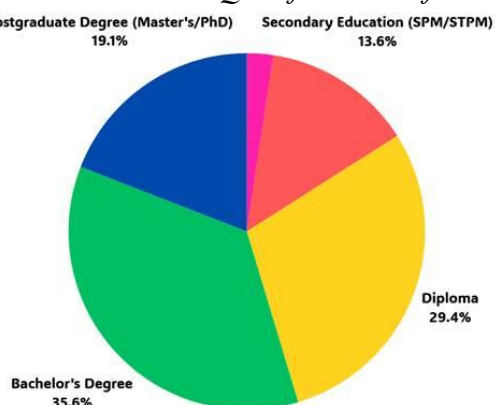
The parents' age distribution revealed the respondents' generational profile. As shown in Figure 1, most respondents were aged 30 to 39, accounting for 204 parents (48.2% of the total sample). This aligns with the common age range of parents with primary school children. The second largest group comprised parents aged 20–29 years, representing 25.5% (n = 108) of the respondents, followed closely by parents aged 40–49 years at 23.1% (n = 98). The smallest group comprised parents aged 50 and above, representing only 2.1% (n = 9) of the respondents. These findings indicate that many participants were within an active parenting age, which may contribute to their higher involvement in their children's education.

Figure 2
Distribution of Parents by Income Groups



The respondents' income distribution is illustrated in Figure 2. The largest proportion of parents fell into Group B, representing middle-income households, with 45.6% of the total sample. This was followed by Group C, comprising high-income parents, who accounted for 39.6% of respondents. The smallest proportion, 14.8%, belonged to Group A, representing low-income parents. These findings suggest that most participating parents came from middle- and high-income backgrounds, potentially influencing their capacity to provide educational resources and support for their children.

Figure 3
Highest Educational Qualifications of Parents



As illustrated in Figure 3, the majority of respondents hold a bachelor's degree, accounting for 35.6% (n = 149) of the total sample. The statistic was followed by diploma holders, who represented 29.4% (n = 123) of the respondents. A significant proportion of the respondents, specifically 19.1%, had completed postgraduate qualifications at the master's or PhD level. At

the same time, 13.6% had completed secondary school (SPM/STPM), while only 2.4% had completed primary school. These results reflect a predominantly well-educated parent population, suggesting that the respondents are more likely to engage actively and effectively in their children's academic development.

Figure 4

Group A (Low-Income Parents)

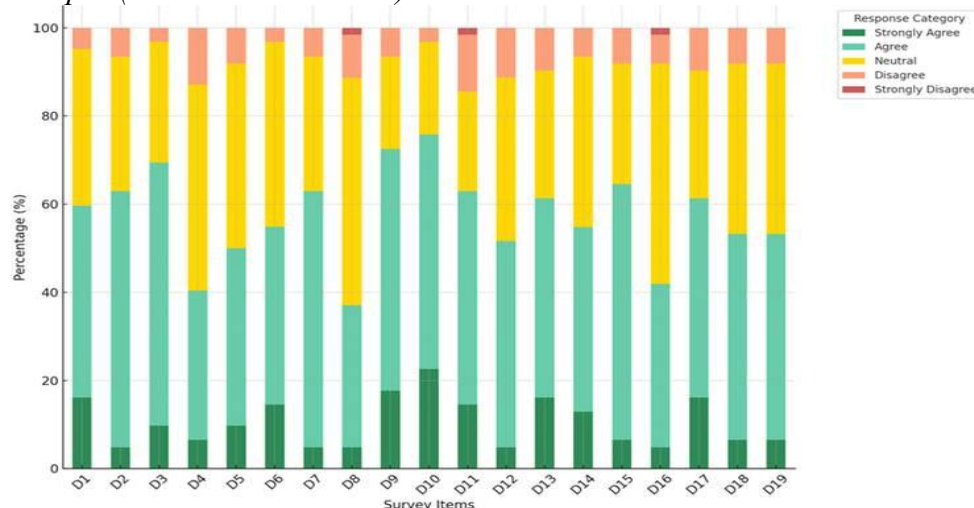


Figure 4 presents the distributions for Group A (low-income parents, $n = 62$) on 19 items measuring parental involvement in children's literacy development. The overall results indicate a moderate to strong parental engagement.

The lowest average score was observed for Item D10 ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.756$), which examines how parents seek limited other learning resources. This indicates that, despite financial limitations, these parents exhibit resilience and problem-solving skills in surmounting educational obstacles. Likewise, items D9 ($M = 2.16$) and D3 ($M = 2.24$) demonstrate significant integration of literacy into daily routines and motivational support, respectively, underscoring a practical and emotionally engaged approach to the child's education.

Items measuring support for digital literacy (D11–D13) had average scores ranging from 2.32 to 2.55. Notably, item D11, which assesses parental oversight and guidance in the utilisation of digital tools, exhibited a higher standard deviation ($SD = 0.947$), suggesting variability in digital engagement, potentially affected by disparities in technology access or parental digital proficiency.

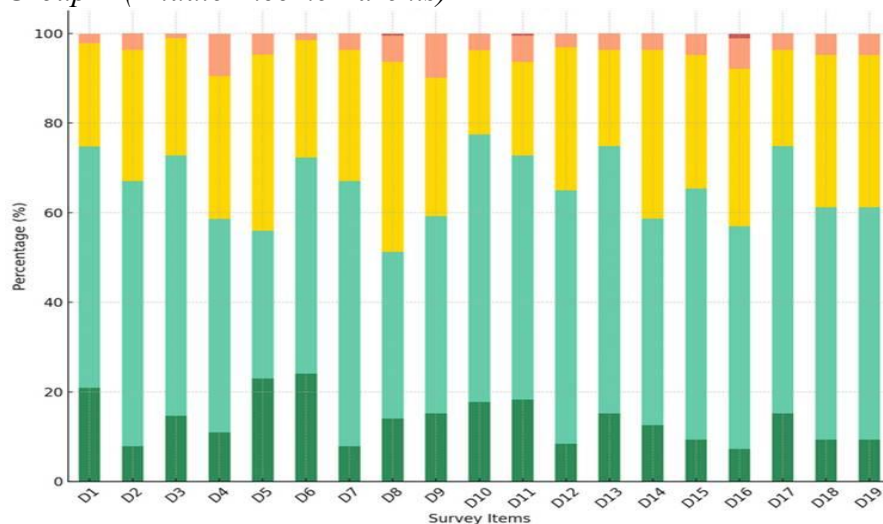
The provision of diverse learning materials (D8) recorded the highest mean score ($M = 2.71$), indicating challenges in accessing literary support among low-income parents. This is likely due to financial constraints that limit access to learning materials. Despite that, the mean score remained below the neutral point, which indicates that parents value and support literacy development despite the limited availability of learning materials.

The mean values for the emotional support indicators (D17–D19) ranged from 2.32 to 2.48, indicating that parents consistently want their children to do well in school and set goals for them. Even though they have structural disadvantages, these parents are very emotionally invested and intrinsically motivated to help their children learn to read and write.

In short, parents in Group A are highly involved in their children's literacy journey, especially in motivation, emotional support, and finding new ways to address limited resources. Nonetheless, access to educational resources and ongoing digital support remains a significant limitation. These results show how important it is to recognise and support the strengths of low-income families by making sure they have equal access to literacy tools and digital infrastructure through policies and programs.

Figure 5

Group B (Middle-Income Parents)



The income of middle-income parents ($n = 191$) was generally consistent, and they had moderately high engagement in their children's literacy development. Mean scores ranged from 2.05 to 2.45, indicating a general level of engagement across all areas.

The highest level of engagement was seen in Item D6 (“I give my child various reading materials,” $M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.752$), followed closely by D1 (“I regularly check my child's assignments,” $M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.723$) and D10 (“I address challenges in accessing resources by finding alternatives,” $M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.713$). These scores indicate robust engagement in both oversight of academic tasks and problem resolution to enhance literacy.

Digital engagement indicators (D11–D13) showed that people were participating effectively. For example, D11 (“I monitor and guide digital tool use”) had a mean of 2.16, indicating that parents with middle incomes are not only giving their children access to digital tools but also actively supervising their digital literacy activities. The standard deviation ($SD = 0.806$) indicates some variability, which may be due to differences in digital fluency or access to resources.

Emotional support and goal setting (D17–D19) also received favourable scores ($M = 2.14$ – 2.34), indicating that parents want their kids to do well in school. D17, which asked parents if they set educational goals for their child, had a mean of 2.14, which was low. This finding shows that parents were very involved in planning their child's academic path.

Nonetheless, items like D16 (“I help my child understand difficult words/concepts,” $M = 2.45$) and D8 (“My child has access to various learning materials,” $M = 2.41$) had the highest mean scores, indicating that people didn't agree with them as much. These findings may indicate that middle-income parents are more likely to promote independent reading or encounter

constraints in delivering comprehensive academic assistance. Even these numbers are below the midpoint, indicating that people are generally interested.

Parents in Group B were more balanced than parents in Group A in all areas. They provided more consistent, less variable emotional, academic, and digital support. The high level of agreement on key issues, such as D2 (homework help) and D3 (motivation), also shows that this group is taking action.

To sum up, parents with middle incomes are very involved in their children's literacy development in a strong, organised, and balanced way. This group is the most consistent in terms of both breadth and depth of involvement across the three income categories because they have the resources and time to support schoolwork, provide emotional support, and supervise digital literacy.

Figure 6
Group C (High-Income Parents)



The responses from Group C ($n = 166$), which are from parents with high incomes, show that parents are generally moderately to strongly involved in their children's literacy development. The average scores for the 19 items ranged from 1.99 to 2.55, indicating a positive trend. Lower means indicate more agreement.

The item with the most agreement was D10 ("I find alternatives to problems with getting learning resources"), which had the lowest mean score of 1.99 ($SD = 0.828$). The items D1 ("I regularly check my child's assignments," $M = 2.01$) and D3 ("I motivate my child to get good grades," $M = 2.04$) were also very close. This means that parents with a lot of money are actively involved in their children's education and are also resourceful, even though they already have enough access to learning tools.

On the other hand, D8 ("My child has access to various learning materials such as books, apps, and educational videos," $M = 2.55$) had the highest mean score, even though they were relatively privileged. This might mean people think they should have access to something rather than trying to obtain it. Furthermore, D4's higher average score ($M = 2.47$) than the other groups suggests that this group may place less importance on direct verbal reinforcement.

Digital engagement (D11–D13) had moderate means (2.19–2.29), indicating that technology was consistently used to support literacy. However, D11, which involves monitoring the use of digital tools, exhibited a higher standard deviation ($SD = 0.995$), suggesting that high-income parents may not be equally involved in their children's digital learning. The difference could mean that kids have more freedom online, that they are given more responsibility by their parents, or that they have different ideas about how much time they should spend on screens.

Emotional and routine-based support (D14–D19) also showed a moderately positive range ($M = 2.16$ – 2.27). These responses indicate that affluent parents maintain aspirational, goal-directed involvement, albeit potentially less structured than that of middle-income families. For example, D16 (“I help my child understand hard words and ideas”) had a mean of 2.42, which is a little higher. These results could mean that outside teachers give this kind of help more often or that kids in this group are more academically independent.

Even though access to resources is high, the higher mean response does not necessarily mean that parents are more directly involved. This difference is clear in the neutral or higher mean responses to items like D5 ($M = 2.40$) and D8 ($M = 2.55$), which suggests that people are less actively involved in providing materials.

In conclusion, parents in Group C provide strong material support and are moderately involved in their children's schoolwork, especially in motivating and monitoring their progress. However, their participation in emotional scaffolding and direct instructional support may be implemented more selectively, potentially due to reliance on external educational services. These findings indicate that although financial capital enhances resource accessibility, it does not necessarily lead to extensive parental engagement.

Discussion

This study investigated the differences in parental involvement in children's literacy development among three income groups in Selangor, Malaysia. While income is frequently seen as the principal factor influencing educational engagement, the findings revealed a more complex dynamic, with each income group demonstrating its own strengths and weaknesses.

The finding revealed that low-income parents exhibit strong motivation, emotional engagement, and ways to support literacy despite limited material resources. Middle-income parents demonstrated the most consistent engagement with their children. Their involvement remained balanced across academic supervision, active monitoring, and emotional support, as well as digital literacy monitoring. Lastly, high-income parents offer greater access to material resources but are less directly involved in their children's literacy engagement. These parents rely heavily on external support systems, such as tuition or enrichment programs, or on their children's emphasis on independent learning. This study shows that access to resources mainly does not mean active parental engagement.

Overall, the results suggest that parental engagement is influenced by socioeconomic status rather than its presence, illustrating the importance of tailored approaches to identify the engagement patterns of each income group.

Conclusion

This study offers an extensive comparison of parental involvement in children's literacy development across low-, middle-, and high-income families in Selangor. The findings suggest that socioeconomic status shapes that pattern of parental involvement, but it is not the only determining factor in parental engagement in literacy development. Low-income parents invest more emotional support in their children's literacy development than the two higher-income groups. Whereas the middle-income group appeared as the most consistent and balanced in their involvement, while the high-income group relied more on external academic support. In sum, the findings challenge one-size-fits-all assumptions about parental engagement in children's literacy development. There should be policies and programmes to support parental engagement to overcome the constraints and align with the strengths across income groups.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, QuillBot, and ChatGPT, AI-assisted writing software, were used for proofreading and refining the language of the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. All ideas, designs, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussions are originally written and derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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