OVERCOMING BARRIERS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON POVERTY, DROPOUT, AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

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Abstract:

School dropout rates among students from low-income backgrounds continue to be a significant issue in education systems globally. Poverty restricts access to educational resources, exacerbates family instability, lowers academic performance, and reduces student motivation, leading to higher dropout rates (UNESCO, 2020). Most studies analyze these factors in isolation, neglecting the complex connections through which poverty impacts educational outcomes. This conceptual paper presents a comprehensive framework connecting economic hardship to school dropout rates, influenced by factors such as family stress, academic disengagement, and unfavourable school environments. It also examines moderating influences like government assistance programs and community initiatives that may alleviate the detrimental impacts of poverty. By integrating perspectives from ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1973), this research provides an in-depth understanding of dropout challenges. The framework highlights crucial intervention opportunities for policymakers, educators, and social organizations aimed at enhancing school retention for disadvantaged students. Future research should empirically validate this framework across diverse socioeconomic and cultural settings to inform more effective educational policies. This paper contributes to theoretical insights in dropout research while offering practical strategies to combat educational inequality.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental driver of social mobility and economic development. However, for many students from impoverished backgrounds, completing secondary education remains a significant challenge. Globally, poverty has been identified as a primary factor contributing to school dropout rates. In Malaysia, Deputy Education Minister Lim Hui Ying highlighted that students often leave school to support their families financially, underscoring poverty as a central cause of school dropout.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has implemented initiatives such as the Comprehensive Special Model School Year 9 (K9) and Year 11 (K11) programs to address dropout rates, particularly in rural areas where students face challenges like distant schools and difficult terrains. These programs aim to provide continuous primary and secondary education, reducing the likelihood of students leaving school prematurely.

Beyond national efforts, international studies have also examined the multifaceted nature of school dropout. Research by Montoliú et al. (2024) emphasized that structural factors such as community violence, economic hardship, and complex family dynamics significantly impact students' motivation and school attendance. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive strategies that address both in-school and out-of-school factors influencing dropout rates.

This paper proposes a conceptual framework that integrates these diverse factors, offering a holistic understanding of how poverty influences school dropout. By synthesizing national policies and international research, the framework aims to guide future interventions and policies to mitigate dropout rates among economically disadvantaged students.

Literature Review

Poverty and Education: Impact of Economic Hardship on Schooling

Poverty fundamentally disrupts children's access to quality education. Montoliú et al. (2024) argued that economic hardship constrains students' ability to attend school regularly, as families often prioritize immediate income over long-term educational attainment. In Malaysia, Lim Hui Ying (2023) highlighted that poverty remains a leading cause of school dropout, particularly in rural areas with limited infrastructural support (Astro Awani, 2023). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic deepened existing inequalities. Remote learning widened the education gap as poor students struggled with digital access and conducive learning environments (Atat & Abd Majid, 2024). These findings reveal that poverty is not merely a background condition but an active, structural barrier to school engagement and completion. While much literature recognizes poverty's influence, critical gaps remain in understanding how different dimensions of poverty (e.g., food insecurity, housing instability, lack of transport) compound educational barriers beyond simple financial hardship.

Factors Leading to Dropout: Family, School Environment, Mental Health, and Community Issues

Family instability is a dominant factor. Zamora-Vélez and Bermúdez-Cevallos (2024) indicated that family dysfunction, such as parental separation, domestic violence, or neglect, amplifies students' disengagement from school. In Malaysia, family responsibilities like caregiving and early marriage have been cited as reasons for early dropout, especially among marginalized groups (Sinar Daily, 2023). The school environment also plays a role. Shihab and Rosa (2022) discovered that an unsupportive school climate, including bullying, teacher indifference, and lack of extracurricular activities, correlates strongly with dropout rates. Poor students often feel alienated in schools that do not cater to their socio-economic realities, resulting in lower academic motivation. Mental health, particularly post-pandemic, has emerged as a critical dropout factor. Atat and Abd Majid (2024) emphasized that anxiety, depression, and academic burnout, exacerbated by economic instability, negatively affect school persistence. Finally, community factors such as neighborhood violence and the normalization of school withdrawal among peers further reinforce dropout behaviors (Lynch, 2024). These layered influences suggest that interventions must extend beyond schools to include family and community engagement strategies.

Previous Conceptual Frameworks and Their Limitations

Although several conceptual models attempt to explain school dropout, most are either too narrow or outdated. For example, early models like the "push-out" and "pull-out" theories categorize dropout reasons as either school-based (push) or personal/family-based (pull) factors. While useful, these models fail to capture the complex, interactive nature of factors exacerbated by structural poverty today. Recent efforts like Montoliú et al.'s (2024) longitudinal model consider educational trajectories over time but still underemphasize the impact of abrupt shocks, such as pandemics or economic recessions. Similarly, machine learning approaches in Malaysia (Ramli, 2025) have predicted dropout risks based on income and gender but lack deeper insights into psychosocial mediators like resilience, aspirations, or belongingness. Thus, there remains a need for updated, integrative frameworks that recognize the multi-systemic nature of dropout (individual, family, school, community, societal); include contemporary disruptors (e.g., digital divide, post-pandemic trauma); and highlight mediating and moderating variables, not just direct causes.

Post-Pandemic Challenges and Educational Disengagement

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened existing educational disparities, resulting in higher dropout rates. In Texas, for instance, the 2020–2021 academic year saw a 34% rise in student dropouts compared to the 2018–2019 period, with economically disadvantaged students being disproportionately affected. A systematic literature review by Atat and Abd Majid (2024) highlighted that the pandemic intensified factors such as financial instability, mental health issues, and lack of access to digital resources, all contributing to higher dropout rates.

Cultural And Social Influences On Dropout Rates Cultural Attitudes And Social Dynamics Also Play A Crucial Role In Student Retention.

Lynch (2024) discussed how cultural norms, gender disparities, and social media influence can affect students' engagement and commitment to education. Pedagogue in Malaysia, factors such as early marriage, employment, and family responsibilities have been identified as reasons for school dropout, particularly among students from rural areas.

Policy Interventions And Support Mechanisms Governments And Educational Institutions Have Implemented Various Strategies To Combat Dropout Rates.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education, for example, has introduced the K9 and K11 comprehensive school models to provide continuous education from primary through secondary levels, aiming to reduce dropout rates in rural areas. The Vibes additionally, machine learning approaches have been utilized to analyze the impact of income inequality and gender on school completion rates in Malaysia, providing data-driven insights for policy formulation.

Key Socioeconomic Determinants Of School Dropout

Here is a summary table of key socioeconomic determinants of school dropout, based on the evidence from multiple studies and countries:

Table 1: Key Socioeconomic Determinants of School Dropout

Determinants	Evidences/Impacts
Economic Hardship	The main cause of dropout across many studies is poverty and low household income, which strongly increase dropout risk. (Kumar P, Patel S.K, Debbarma S, Saggurti N.,2023)
Parental Education/Income	Strong correlation with dropout; low parental education and low disposable income significantly raise the dropout likelihood. Ali K.,Yaseen M.R, Makhdum M.S.A, Qudoos, A. and Sardar, (2021). Parental education explains a large part of dropout differences, especially in cases of parental separation. (Satti R. A. and Jamil M., 2021)
Work Obligations	Students often leave school to support family income; part-time work over 7 hours/week is linked to higher dropout intentions. Paid work is a significant risk factor for dropout among adolescents. (Remanov E. (n.d),2023)
Family Issues	Family instability (e.g., parental separation) and lack of support increase dropout risk; family cohesion and parental interaction reduce dropout. (Kumar P, Patel S.K., Debbarma S., Saggurti N.,2023). Family violence and low parental involvement also contribute. (Remanov E. (n.d),2023)
Cultural/Social Factors	Early marriage, social expectations, caste discrimination, gender norms, and poor school relations contribute to dropout, especially among girls and marginalized groups. Social norms like child marriage and low value on girls' education increase dropout rates. (Kumar P, Patel S.K., Debbarma S., Saggurti N.,2023).
Other Factors	Poor school environment, bullying, distance to school, poor academic performance, and substance abuse among boys also increase dropout risk. Participation in sports and having role models reduces dropout. (Taylor G, Lekes N, Gagnon H, Kwan L, Koestner R.,2012)

Additional Insights

There are recent references (2019 - 2025) supporting the factors influencing school dropout and protective factors like sports participation and role models, updating the 2012 findings by Taylor et al. A 2023 study from the University of Virginia found that schools with higher levels

of bullying had dropout rates 29% above average, independent of student demographics and academic performance. The study emphasizes that bullying and negative school climate significantly increase dropout risk and calls for improved school safety and social environment to reduce dropout rates (Cornell et al., 2023). A 2023 study highlights that school location, type, and associated costs significantly affect dropout rates, with financial constraints and accessibility playing major roles in students' decisions to leave school early (Sarker, Wu, & Hossain, 2023). Part-time employment negatively affects school engagement when work hours exceed seven per week, especially if work interferes with school functioning. Remanov E. (n.d) (2023). Dropout rates are higher among adolescents from rural areas, lower castes, and poorer households. (Kumar P, Patel SK, Debbarma S, Saggurti N., 2023). Academic performance remains a critical dropout predictor, especially in early years of education. Recent research shows that low grades and poor self-concept in subjects like math increase dropout risk, while adequate academic support can reduce it (Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2024; Geisler et al.,2023). A 2024 Norwegian longitudinal study demonstrated that risky substance use (illicit drugs, high alcohol consumption) is strongly associated with increased dropout risk, even after adjusting for socioeconomic factors and mental health issues. Externalizing behavioral problems partly explain this association (Skogen et al.,2024). Systematic reviews show that adolescents who drop out of team sports experience lower intrinsic motivation and higher motivation, which correlates with higher dropout risk from school. Participation in sports is generally protective by fostering engagement and motivation (Back et al., 2022). A 2024 randomized controlled trial in China found that exposure to high-achieving role models improved academic performance and reduced depression and stress among low-performing students. Role models raise aspirations and motivation, thereby reducing dropout risk, though effects on mental health can vary by subgroup (Di, A.,2024)

Conceptual Framework

The dropout of poor students is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by interrelated personal, family, school, and societal factors. Based on the critical review of recent literature (2020–2025), this conceptual paper proposes a new framework integrating poverty as the central determinant, mediated by four key domains: family instability, school environment, mental health challenges, and community disadvantage.

Core Construct: Poverty as a Root Cause.

Poverty is positioned at the center of the framework. It directly influences educational outcomes by limiting access to resources and indirectly by triggering stressors across multiple systems (Montoliú et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

Mediating Domains

Family Instability

Economic hardship can destabilize family structures, leading to domestic conflict, neglect, early caregiving responsibilities, and early marriage, all of which increase dropout risks (Zamora-Vélez & Bermúdez-Cevallos, 2024; Sinar Daily, 2023).

Negative School Environment

Poor students often experience alienation in schools lacking inclusivity, facing bullying, academic failure, and a lack of institutional support (Shihab & Rosa, 2022). These factors weaken school attachment and motivation.

Mental Health Strain

Prolonged economic stress contributes to mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, and feelings of hopelessness, especially post-pandemic (Atat & Abd Majid, 2024).
Poor mental health negatively impacts attendance, engagement, and resilience.

Community Disadvantage

Living in impoverished, violent, or socially disorganized communities normalizes early school exit and reduces the perceived value of formal education (Lynch, 2024).

Moderators Two Key Moderating Factors Are Proposed

Post-pandemic Recovery Policies: Educational and economic recovery initiatives may buffer dropout risks.
Social Support Networks: Strong mentorship, peer support, and Non Government Organization Non Government Organization (NGO) involvement can mediate the negative impacts of poverty.
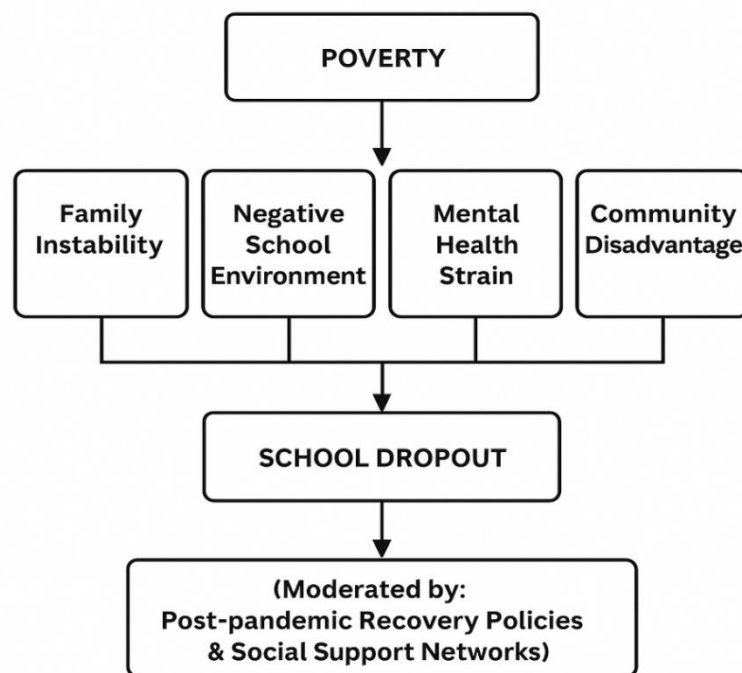
Conceptual Model Diagram

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The diagram is adapted from different sources of journals and explained as above. This conceptual framework positions poverty as the primary catalyst influencing multiple systemic domains that ultimately lead to school dropout among poor students. The framework also considers the role of moderating factors that can either amplify or mitigate this pathway.

Recommendations

Strengthen School-Based Mental Health and Counseling Services
Schools must be equipped with trained counselors to support students struggling with anxiety, trauma, or academic burnout, especially those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. As noted by Singh et al. (2022), mental health is a critical predictor of dropout risk and requires proactive intervention at the school level.

Integrate Family Support Programs into Zakat Distribution.
Zakat institutions should go beyond financial disbursement and implement family intervention programs to address dysfunction, neglect, or domestic issues. As emphasized by Lemos et al. (2022), family instability strongly mediates the relationship between poverty and educational outcomes.

Reinforce Positive School Climate Through Teacher Training
Teachers in high-risk schools must be trained in trauma-informed pedagogy and classroom management techniques. According to Wang and Fredricks (2024), students are more likely to remain in school when they feel respected, supported, and academically engaged.

Expand Community Mentorship and Peer Leadership Initiatives
Community-based programs should focus on peer mentoring, after-school programs, and youth leadership to counteract negative peer influences and neighborhood disadvantages (García-Moya et al., 2021). Engagement with local NGOs and religious leaders can provide additional moral and emotional support to at-risk youth.

Implement Targeted Recovery Programs for Post-COVID Dropout Risks
The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) *Pelan Strategik Menangani Keciciran Murid* must be localized and tracked effectively in Perlis. Real-time dropout monitoring systems should be developed in collaboration with schools and local religious bodies (MOE Malaysia, 2022; World Bank, 2020).

Conclusions
This paper presents a conceptual framework that synthesizes the multifaceted factors contributing to school dropout. Central to this framework is poverty, which exerts a cascading influence on other mediating variables, including family instability, negative school environment, mental health strain, and community disadvantage. These dimensions collectively heighten the risk of educational disengagement and eventual dropout, particularly in post-pandemic Malaysia. The model also recognizes the role of moderating factors, such as post-pandemic recovery policies and social support networks, which can either mitigate or exacerbate these outcomes. The inclusion of these moderators provides a more nuanced understanding of how systemic interventions could reduce dropout rates. This framework provides a holistic lens for researchers, policymakers, and educational stakeholders to identify the root causes of dropout and implement more targeted and integrated responses.

Acknowledgements

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