

## FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Parent co-residence and parental education are shown to be significantly associated with grade attainment of youths



### Overview

Differential educational outcomes of children across different strata of society have been identified as one of the most important factors that perpetuate patterns of poverty and inequality in South Africa. The research summarized here attempts to add to our understanding of the determinants of these

heterogeneous educational outcomes by investigating the link between family background and academic performance. This is done by estimating the relationship between a number of home background variables and schooling outcomes for a sample of South African youths.

### Key Results

- **Parent co-residence is positively associated with grade attainment.** The presence of both biological parents is associated with higher grade attainment compared those who do not reside with either biological parent.
- **Mother co-residence is not significantly associated with grade attainment.** This is in sharp contrast with findings elsewhere of the mother's presence in the household being strongly correlated with children's academic performance.
- **There is a strong association between parental education and academic performance.** While parents' education is important for grade attainment, the association between mothers' education and grade attainment is twice as large as that between fathers' education and grade attainment.

By  
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The Growth to Empowerment (G2E) program within GrOW examines the impact of economic growth on women's economic empowerment.

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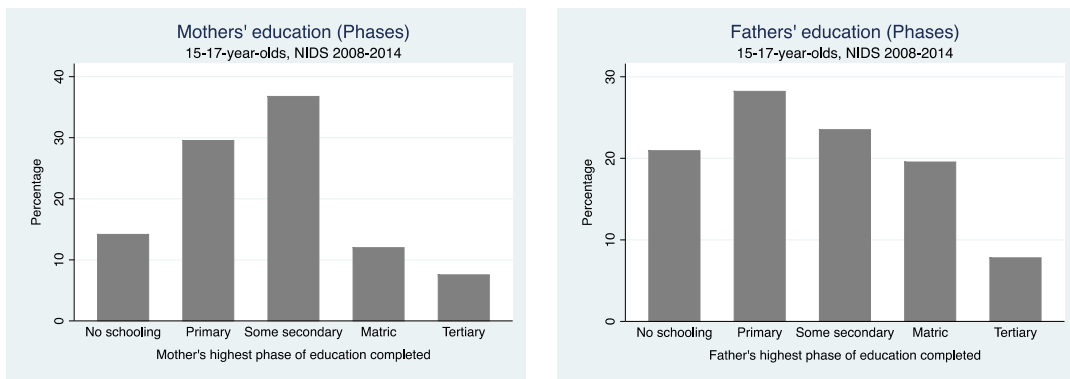
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## Background

Patterns of poverty and inequality in South Africa are largely sustained by differential educational outcomes of children across different strata of society. Most of these differences in educational outcomes are attributed to large differences in the quality of education received by children. This research adds to our understanding of the determinants of educational outcomes in South Africa by investigating the role of the family in determining these heterogeneous educational outcomes.

This question is especially relevant in the South African context, where household structures vary considerably. The author makes use of descriptive statistics to uncover some aspects of the home environments of her sample of youths. These statistics reveal that only 63% of youths resided with their mother, which is lower than the southern African average of 75-84%. Only 24% of youths resided with their fathers. One in five youths resided in skip-generation households, that is, households consisting of a grandparent and grandchild, but no parent. 12% of youths lived in three-generation households. These statistics point to the complex and non-traditional structures that characterize the households of South African schoolchildren. In addition to these diverse living arrangements, parental education also varies considerably across the sample (see Figure 1 below). Given the importance of home background for educational outcomes uncovered elsewhere in the literature, and the non-traditional household structures that characterize South African society, it is imperative that the association between the home and schooling outcomes be investigated in the South African context.

**Figure 1. Proportion of respondents by parents' education**



## Methods and Data

The research makes use of a nationally representative sample of 15-17-year-olds individuals captured in the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS). Academic achievement is measured as the number of grades the respondent has completed. Although a very crude measure of academic performance, substantial variation in this variable for the age group considered, due to widespread repetition and drop-out, suggests attainment does capture useful information about academic performance.

The NIDS data has the advantage of capturing a host of family background characteristics at the individual level, such as household size, the gender of the household head, respondents' relationship to their household head, the relationship between respondents' parents, years of education respondents' parents have completed, their parents' occupation, and household income. Further one can link relatives who reside in different households by using the unique codes assigned to each respondent. One can also use this unique identifier to derive whether a child's parents are present in the household. Together this information can provide a detailed description of the household circumstances of each respondent.

Simple OLS regressions are used to estimate correlations between these family background variables and the years of education attained by respondents. Following this, I include interaction terms in order to determine whether the estimated correlations differ when key explanatory variables are interacted with other variables.

## Main Results

**Parent co-residence is positively associated with grade attainment.** The findings of this research echo evidence in the international as well as local literature of a strong association between parent co-residence and children's academic performance. Specifically, the presence of both biological parents in the household is associated with higher grade attainment compared with youths who do not reside with either biological parent, a statistically significant result. Since 37% of respondents in the sample do not reside with a biological parent, this implies that just over one in three youths face a disadvantage in terms of grade attainment compared to their counterparts who reside with both biological parents.

**Mother co-residence is not significantly associated with grade attainment.** This is in sharp contrast with findings elsewhere of the mother's presence in the household being strongly correlated with children's academic performance. A possible explanation for this may be that the single-mother households in the sample are female-headed households by implication, since women are very unlikely to be identified as the household head when a man is resident in the household. Given the relative disadvantage faced by female-headed households in South Africa, it is likely that any positive effect of mother co-residence on academic performance is countered by the negative impact of female headship. The results from the present research support this notion.

**There is a strong association between parental education and academic performance.** While the educational attainment of both parents is important for respondents' grade attainment, the present research shows the association between mothers' education and grade attainment is twice as large as that between fathers' education and grade attainment. In general these effects are very large, with respondents whose mothers have graduated school having themselves completed, on average, 0.937 more years of education than their counterparts whose mothers have not completed primary school. In other words, respondents whose mothers have not completed primary school are almost a full year behind those whose mothers have graduated. Respondents whose fathers have completed school have themselves completed 0.419 more grades (or roughly half a year), on average, than their counterparts whose fathers have not completed primary school.

## Policy Lessons

- **Family background is strongly associated with the academic outcomes.** In a country where children’s living arrangements vary considerably and parents have very different levels of education, education policy needs to acknowledge the home as an important determinant of academic performance.
- **Existing data on school children is limited, more data is needed.** A first step toward incorporating considerations about family influence in education policy is to collect information about home background at the individual level.
- **Home background is not static.** It is likely that respondents grew up in homes that look very different from those recorded at the time of the survey. Better data on home background and educational outcomes is needed. The NIDS project constitutes an important step in this direction, however the restricted information about education captured by the survey is a major limitation.
- **Home background must be included in forming education policy.** Designing policy that incorporates the home constitutes can help improve educational outcomes.

## Further Reading

Hofmeyr, H. 2018. Home background and schooling outcomes in South Africa: Insights from the National Income Dynamics Study. [Stellenbosch Economics Working Paper Series WP01/2018](#).

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### Information

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