

Unstructured after-school practices and academic achievement: socioeconomic stratification and compensatory associations in Russia

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Oct 4, 2025

Revised Feb 18, 2026

Accepted Mar 30, 2026

Keywords:

Academic achievements
Children's after-school time
Unstructured after-school practices
Cultural capital
Educational inequality
Socioeconomic status

ABSTRACT

In the Russian educational context, where structured extracurricular activities are widely promoted and institutionalized by the state, the role of unstructured after-school practices in shaping socioeconomic inequalities in academic achievement remains unexplored. This study examines how unstructured after-school activities are associated with students' academic achievement, with a particular focus on whether these associations vary across socioeconomic groups (SES). The analysis draws on a representative online survey of 4,373 students in grades 4-8 across 31 urban schools in Russia (50% female; $M=12.36$), we analyze 15 indicators of child and child-parent practices, applying multiple linear regression and SES moderation analyses. Results indicate that reading and sports participation show positive relationships with academic performance, while household chores display negative correlations; students from higher-SES families engage more often in academically beneficial practices, however, the associations between unstructured practices and achievement are largely similar across SES groups. The findings contribute to research on educational inequality by demonstrating that unstructured after-school practices are socially stratified but may function as compensatory resources insofar as they offer comparable academic benefits when access is expanded, underscoring the importance of policies that expand affordable access to cultural and developmental extracurricular opportunities through school-community partnerships.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational achievement is shaped not only by formal schooling but also by how children spend their time outside the classroom. Prior studies indicate that involvement in structured extracurricular activities such as sports teams, music lessons, and art clubs provides children with opportunities for skill development, socialization under adult supervision, and accessing culturally valued resources associated with improved educational performance [1]–[4]. In contrast, unstructured after-school practices such as meeting friends, using digital devices, reading for pleasure, completing household chores, or participating in cultural activities with parents remain far less formalized and studied. Existing evidence is mixed: some studies emphasize the benefits of reading and family cultural practices for cognitive and academic growth [5]–[7], while others highlight the potential risks of excessive screen time or unsupervised peer activities [8], [9].

More recent literature suggests that the impact of unstructured activities strongly depends on family context; the presence of parental involvement and access to cultural resources may transform such practices into powerful developmental opportunities [4]. A key mechanism here is family socioeconomic status (SES). High-SES families can afford not only structured extracurricular activities but also cultural resources—books, museums, theater, and travel—that enrich children’s unstructured time. In turn, these resources shape what Bourdieu [10] called cultural capital, which facilitates success in formal schooling. By contrast, children growing up in socioeconomically disadvantaged households tend to engage more frequently in unstructured activities that are less academically productive, including routine chores or unsupervised leisure with peers. Yet some research suggests that even in low-income families, certain cultural or family-oriented practices may partly compensate for disadvantage, providing affordable forms of enrichment and supporting academic achievement [11]–[13]. These contrasting pathways position unstructured time as an important but underexplored dimension of educational inequality.

To integrate these strands of research, we conceptualize unstructured time as a socially stratified resource shaped by family SES, affecting both the range of activities available to children and the developmental value of those activities: students from more advantaged families participate more frequently in cognitively enriching routines, whereas lower-SES children tend to have greater exposure to routine or unsupervised activities. These differentiated opportunities create systematic differences in how unstructured time may relate to academic outcomes. This framework also allows for the possibility of compensatory effects if enriching practices provide relatively greater developmental benefits for students with fewer socioeconomic resources.

In the Russian context, extracurricular education has historically been strongly institutionalized and, in recent years, further shaped by trends toward centralization and unification [14]. National policy initiatives emphasize broad student participation in structured extracurricular activities, with current estimates suggesting that approximately three quarters of schoolchildren are formally enrolled in at least one organized activity; however, participation varies substantially by type of settlement and family SES [14]. Students from lower-SES families remain significantly less involved in organized extracurricular programs, despite partial state support mechanisms such as personal certificates that subsidize participation in one activity. Importantly, even among students who participate in at least one structured activity, the average time commitment is relatively modest around three hours per week indicating that a substantial share of children’s after-school time remains unstructured [15].

At the same time, Russian schools typically offer limited on-site extracurricular provision beyond the regular curriculum, which usually ends after four lessons per day in primary grades and six lessons in lower secondary level. As a result, many students particularly those not enrolled in organized activities spend large amounts of time outside school under minimal adult supervision, and this time is not necessarily devoted to academically productive activities such as reading or homework. In this institutional setting, the organization of children’s unstructured after-school time becomes especially consequential, yet remains largely understudied.

This gap is particularly problematic because it obscures potential levers for reducing educational inequality. If unstructured practices are overlooked, policymakers and educators may miss everyday activities that can support learning, whereas assuming unstructured time to be uniformly detrimental risks obscuring its positive and compensatory dimensions. Despite growing international interest in children’s out-of-school time, large-scale, representative studies addressing these issues especially beyond Western contexts remain limited.

Drawing on previous studies, we formulate three hypotheses. The first, H1 is that participation in unstructured after-school practices is socially stratified: students from different SES backgrounds show systematically different patterns of engagement. The second, H2 is that different unstructured practices are differentially associated with academic achievement, with cognitively enriching activities (e.g., reading, hobbies, and cultural outings) showing positive associations, and less structured or leisure-oriented practices (e.g., screen time and unsupervised peer socializing) showing weak or negative associations. The third, H3 is that enriching unstructured practices have stronger positive associations with achievement for low-SES students, indicating a compensatory pattern.

This study investigates how unstructured after-school practices are associated with academic achievement among 4th–8th grade students in a large Russian City, taking into account socioeconomic differences in these relationships. The contribution of this research is threefold. It provides large-scale quantitative evidence on unstructured after-school practices, integrates the concept of family cultural capital into the analysis of everyday time use, and extends international debates on educational inequality by offering evidence from a non-Western educational context.

2. METHOD

2.1. Data and sample

The study draws on a representative online survey administered to school students in spring 2022. The sample included 4,373 students in grades 4-8 from 31 urban schools. Schools were selected using stratified sampling based on school size, which serves as a proxy for school socioeconomic status. Within each school, all classes of the target grades were invited to participate, and students completed the survey during regular class hours. The sample is balanced by gender (50% female) and represents a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds; participants' average age was 12.36 (SD=1.46).

2.2. Measures

Academic performance serves as the outcome variable and is operationalized using students' self-reported grade point average (GPA), calculated as the mean score across three subjects: Russian language, literature, and mathematics on the standard Russian 5-point scale. Self-reported GPA has been shown to correlate highly with official records in previous studies [16]. The main independent variables capture unstructured after-school practices and are divided into two domains. The child-only practices consist of eight items. Students reported the average amount of time they devote daily to the following activities: reading, sports, hobbies, household chores, screen time (computer/TV use), homework, online courses, and unsupervised peer activities. Responses were measured on a four-point time-use scale (none, ≤ 0.5 h, 1-2 h, and ≥ 3 h) and subsequently recoded into a binary indicator (0=minimal and 1=substantial engagement). This approach is common in large-scale educational and time-use research, particularly when relying on children's self-reported estimates of daily time allocations [17]. The child-parent practices include seven items capturing joint activities such as visiting museums, attending theater performances, shopping, walking in parks, watching TV together, doing household chores together, and family trips. These were measured using a 4-point frequency scale (never, very rarely, sometimes, and very often), recoded into a binary format (0=never/very rarely and 1=sometimes/very often). Together, these 15 indicators capture multiple dimensions of children's informal after-school time across both individual and family-oriented activities.

The SES of students is operationalized through parental education. For high SES, both parents have higher education degrees; medium SES-only one parent has a higher education degree; low SES-both parents do not have higher education degrees. Although SES is a multidimensional construct, parental education is widely recognized as its most stable and influential component, strongly predictive of children's academic performance and commonly used as an SES proxy in educational research [18], [19]. Gender and grade level (grades 4-8) are included as control variables.

2.3. Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, descriptive statistics and chi-square tests examine socioeconomic differences in participation in unstructured practices, with significance levels corrected using the Holm adjustment to limit Type I error [20]. Second, multiple linear regression models estimate associations between unstructured practices and academic achievement, controlling for gender, grade, and SES. Third, SES moderation is tested by including interaction terms between SES and each unstructured practice. Regression analyses were conducted using heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors [21]. This moderation analysis allowed us to examine whether associations vary across socioeconomic groups. Together, these analyses allow us to assess both socioeconomic stratification in unstructured practices and their differential associations with academic achievement. The research protocol complied with institutional ethical guidelines and the principles of the Helsinki Declaration.

3. RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, high-SES students show consistently greater engagement in academically productive practices such as reading, sports, and hobbies. Conversely, low-SES students report higher levels of unsupervised peer socializing. Family cultural practices exhibit pronounced socioeconomic stratification, with students from more advantaged backgrounds participating at higher rates in activities such as museum visits than their peers from low-SES backgrounds. These descriptive patterns indicate a socially structured landscape of unstructured time, with clear inequalities in access to enriching everyday activities.

Table 2 displays regression coefficients for models predicting GPA. Among child-only practices, academically oriented activities such as homework and reading are most strongly associated with higher achievement, followed by sports participation. Arts and hobbies demonstrate smaller but still positive associations. In contrast, unsupervised peer socializing and individual household chores exhibit negative associations with GPA, while computer use and online courses do not reach statistical significance, highlighting the heterogeneous educational value of digital activities.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of variables and differences by SES

Practices	Whole sample N=4373		Low SES N=1942		Middle SES N=1056		High SES N=1375	
	N	Share (%)	Share (%)		Share (%)		Share (%)	
Homework***	3319	75.91	71.94		76.61		81.00	
Time at the computer*	3285	75.12	73.69		78.50		74.55	
Hanging out with friends***	2913	66.61	70.75		63.64		63.05	
Arts and hobbies**	2356	53.88	51.18		53.79		57.75	
Sports***	2283	52.21	45.31		53.50		60.95	
Household chores	1507	34.46	33.68		36.65		33.89	
Reading books***	1097	25.08	21.88		26.14		28.80	
Courses**	489	11.18	9.42		11.55		13.39	
Child-parent practices								
Museum***	1119	25.59	19.16		25.76		34.55	
Cinemas***	2497	57.10	53.19		55.97		63.49	
Other cities***	2311	52.85	44.9		53.31		63.71	
Shopping	4005	91.58	90.63		92.99		91.85	
Parks and forests***	2834	64.81	62		62.88		70.25	
TV	3074	70.29	69.93		68.56		72.15	
Household chores (together)	3313	75.76	74.46		75.19		78.04	
Control variables								
Extracurricular activities *** (Yes)	2907	66.5	56.64		70.27		77.45	
Gender								
Female	2186	50						
Male	2187	50						
Grade								
4	834	19.1						
5	863	19.7						
6	931	21.3						
7	914	20.9						
8	831	19.0						
GPA***		4.07	3.92		4.09		4.25	

Note: shares represent the proportion of higher intensity involvement in the practice (level 1 of the binary variable). The mean values are presented for GPA. *p<0.1, **p<0.05, and ***p<0.01.

Table 2. Linear regression estimates for GPA

Variable	Estimate	Std. error	t-statistic
(Intercept)	4.18	0.05	80.83
Child practices			
Homework	0.12***	0.02	6.37
Time at the computer	0.02	0.02	1.28
Hanging out with friends	-0.13***	0.02	-7.29
Arts and hobbies	0.04*	0.02	2.33
Sports	0.08***	0.02	4.86
Household chores	-0.06***	0.02	-3.55
Reading books	0.09***	0.02	4.76
Courses	0.02	0.03	0.94
Parent-child practices			
Shopping	0.02	0.03	0.73
Household chores (together)	0.07***	0.02	3.36
TV	-0.01	0.02	-0.36
Parks and forests	-0.005	0.02	-0.25
Cinemas	0.03	0.02	1.78
Other cities	0.06***	0.02	3.69
Museum	0.06**	0.02	3.21
Control variables			
SES (ref. low)			
SES (middle)	0.15***	0.02	7.12
SES (high)	0.26***	0.02	13.31
Grade	-0.09***	0.01	-15.03
Sex (ref. male)			
Sex (female)	0.17***	0.02	9.93
Residual standard error=0.5347 (df=4351)			
Model fit statistics: R ² =0.18 (adjusted R ² =0.18); F(19, 4351)=50.18, p<.001			

Note: practices are coded as binary indicators (0=low; 1=substantial involvement); coefficients indicate GPA differences between substantial and minimal engagement. ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, and *p<0.05.

A different pattern emerges for joint practices with parents. None of these activities are negatively associated with GPA, and several are positively related to academic achievement. In particular, shared household chores, and family cultural activities such as museum visits and travel show positive associations, whereas activities like watching television or shopping with parents are not statistically related to

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achievement. Overall, these findings suggest that parental involvement can transform everyday activities into meaningful learning opportunities.

Moderation analyses reveal that associations between unstructured practices and academic achievement are largely stable across SES groups. Only two significant SES×practice interactions were observed. The negative association between computer use and GPA is stronger among high-SES students ($\beta=-0.14$, $p<0.01$), whereas the positive association between trips to other cities and GPA is more pronounced for students from high-SES families ($\beta=0.09$, $p<0.01$). Overall, SES moderation appears limited and practice-specific. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that unstructured after-school time is far from homogeneous. Practices differ substantially by SES, and their associations with academic achievement vary in both strength and direction.

4. DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the growing literature on how children's time outside school influences academic outcomes. While structured extracurricular activities have long been recognized as beneficial for both cognitive and socio-emotional development [22], comparatively limited research has examined unstructured after-school practices. Consistent with the first hypothesis, the results show that unstructured after-school time is socially stratified: higher-SES students are more engaged in cognitively enriching activities, whereas lower-SES students spend more time in routine or unsupervised practices. These patterns align with cultural capital theory [10], [23], and confirm that children's unstructured time is a socially structured resource rather than a neutral or random dimension of children's daily lives.

In line with our second hypothesis, unstructured time is not homogeneous in its associations with achievement. Activities that are cognitively demanding or socially embedded such as reading, sports, and cultural outings are positively associated with GPA [7], [24], whereas unsupervised peer socializing and individual household chores show negative relationships [4], [25]. Importantly, the distinction between individual and joint household chores provides new evidence for the role of parent-child interaction: tasks completed together are positively associated with achievement, supporting social learning perspectives that emphasize modeling, shared attention, and communication [13]. These findings extend prior research by demonstrating that everyday, informal practices may be as consequential for learning as organized extracurricular activities.

The third hypothesis receives more nuanced support. Contrary to expectations derived from cultural mobility perspectives [11], [12], [26], enriching practices do not yield stronger academic returns specifically for low-SES students [27]. However, this does not imply the absence of compensatory potential. Rather, the findings suggest that compensation operates primarily through access rather than differential effectiveness. Low-SES students benefit from participation in enriching unstructured practices to a similar extent as high-SES students, yet they participate less frequently. From this perspective, unstructured practices can be considered potentially compensatory insofar as they offer equal academic benefits when access barriers are reduced.

The Russian case provides an important insight into the limits of policies focused primarily on expanding participation in organized extracurricular activities. Despite strong traditions of institutionalized extracurricular education and active policy efforts to increase student involvement, a substantial share of children's after-school time remains unstructured particularly among students from low-SES families. Our findings show that existing programs do not eliminate socioeconomic inequalities in access to organized activities, leaving low-SES students with considerably more unstructured time. Crucially, this time is less often allocated to cognitively enriching practices, indicating that inequality is reproduced not only through differential access to structured opportunities but also through the everyday organization of unstructured time. These results suggest that educational policy should address not only participation in organized activities but also the quality of the environments in which unstructured after-school time unfolds, especially for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. In this context, low-cost cultural and recreational activities such as museum visits, library programs, or local cultural events may serve as accessible enrichment opportunities. Strengthening partnerships between schools and cultural institutions could broaden access to such activities, while teachers may benefit from greater awareness of students' out-of-school practices when designing inclusive pedagogical strategies.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data are based on self-reported GPA, although previous research has demonstrated the validity of such measures [28], using self-reported measures for both outcomes and predictors may introduce common method bias and lead to some inflation of the observed associations. Second, given the cross-sectional data structure, causal relationships cannot be established. Longitudinal studies are needed to capture how changes in unstructured practices influence trajectories of academic achievement. Third, the measures of digital practices are relatively broad; future research should

disentangle educational from recreational uses of technology. Fourth, SES is measured solely through parental education; although this is a widely used indicator, it captures only one dimension of socioeconomic position and may not fully represent the broader environment of families. Finally, the dichotomization of unstructured practices, while applied for analytical consistency and commonly used in large-scale time-use research [17], reduces variation and may mask meaningful distinctions between moderate and high levels of engagement as well as the quality or content of these interactions.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that unstructured after-school time is both socially stratified and educationally consequential. Students from more socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds participate more frequently in cognitively stimulating practices such as reading, sports, and family cultural activities whereas students from lower-SES families more often spend time in routine or unsupervised activities. Unstructured practices differ markedly in their associations with academic achievement: cognitively and socially enriching activities are positively related to GPA, while unsupervised peer socializing and individual household chores show negative associations. Importantly, most practices are similarly associated with achievement across socioeconomic groups, indicating that differences in academic outcomes are driven primarily by unequal patterns of participation rather than by SES-specific effects of these activities.

The results contribute to ongoing discussions about cultural capital and compensatory mechanisms by showing that compensatory potential operates primarily through access rather than differential effectiveness. While enriching unstructured practices benefit students similarly across socioeconomic groups, unequal participation patterns persist. This distinction clarifies the role of unstructured time as a socially stratified educational resource.

Evidence from Russia points to the constraints of policies centered primarily on increasing enrollment in organized extracurricular programs. Even in a context with strong traditions of institutionalized provision, substantial inequalities in access persist, and large amounts of unstructured time remain especially among low-SES students. Educational policy should therefore address not only enrollment in structured programs but also the quality of children's unstructured after-school environments. In this regard, strengthening school-museum and school-cultural institution partnerships, expanding community-based cultural and recreational programs accessible to disadvantaged families, and increasing teacher awareness of students' out-of-school time may represent important levers for reducing educational inequality.

Future research should move beyond documenting associations and focus on uncovering the mechanisms through which unstructured practices influence learning. It is also important to examine the overall structure of children's daily time including the balance between structured and unstructured activities and how different time-use patterns relate to academic and developmental outcomes. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs would be especially valuable for tracing how everyday practices unfold over time and for identifying causal pathways linking children's routines with their developmental trajectories.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This article is an output of a research project implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the HSE University (National Research University Higher School of Economics).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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Ekaterina Ostapenko	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : **O**riginal Draft

E : **E**diting

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [EO], on request.

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