
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Culturally Contingent Resource: How National Context Moderates the Link between Home Book Collections and Academic Achievement

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| ABSTRACT

Academic achievement is a key indicator of individual development and national prosperity. Although the positive impact of home resources on academic achievement has been confirmed by existing research, its underlying psychological mechanisms (e.g., through curiosity) and the moderating effects of macro-level sociocultural contexts remain underexplored. This study addresses these gaps using PISA 2022 data from 582,810 students across 67 countries/economies. We investigated the mediating role of student curiosity in the relationship between home book collections, and examined whether this pathway is moderated by a key national-level factor: the proportion of the Muslim population. Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling (MSEM) revealed that home book collections positively predicted academic achievement, a relationship that was partially mediated by student curiosity. Crucially, the positive effect of home book collections on achievement was significantly stronger in countries with a lower proportion of Muslim population. These findings highlight the cultural contingency of educational inputs. The weaker association in societies with a higher proportion of Muslims suggests that non-material knowledge transmission pathways, such as oral traditions and communal learning, may be more salient for intellectual development in these contexts. This underscores the need for culturally calibrated educational policies. While resource-provision programs may be effective in some nations, interventions designed to leverage indigenous learning structures may prove more impactful in others.

| KEYWORDS

Home book collections; Academic achievement; Curiosity; Muslim; PISA2022

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Academic achievement is a core indicator of individual development and national competitiveness (Gu et al., 2024; Heckman, 2011). In exploring the determinants of academic achievement, the family environment has consistently been a central focus of research (Chiu et al., 2010). Although the influence of structural factors such as socioeconomic status (SES) is well-documented (Sirin, 2005), their inherent stability limits their direct applicability in educational interventions. Consequently, scholarly interest has increasingly shifted toward more malleable family resources, among which home book collections have garnered significant attention for their accessibility and symbolic value as cultural capital (Evans et al., 2010).

Existing research overwhelmingly supports the positive effect of home book collections on student achievement, positing that they cultivate a "scholarly culture" that fosters educational success (Sikora et al., 2019). However, this perspective often rests on a universalist assumption—that the positive effects of home book collections are consistent across different cultures. Furthermore, the specific pathways—how home resources translate into achievement by influencing students' intrinsic traits like curiosity—remain inadequately understood. These theoretical ambiguities and empirical gaps constitute the primary impetus for the current study.

1.1 The Universalist Assumption of Home Educational Resources

A substantial body of research has consistently demonstrated a robust positive association between home book collections and students' academic achievement (Jæger, 2011; Sikora et al., 2019). The number of books in a home is considered a powerful proxy for a family's "scholarly culture"—a lifestyle that values learning, cultivates cognitive skills, and shapes dispositions favorable to educational success (Spaeth, 1976). This is because, unlike other indicators of cultural capital, home book collections represent not just economic capacity but also parental effort and a commitment to creating an intellectually stimulating environment for children (Evans et al., 2010; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

This relationship is supported by two major theoretical frameworks. The Scholarly Culture Thesis posits that a home environment rich in books fosters essential cognitive skills, vocabulary, and imagination, thereby equipping and encouraging children to advance further in their schooling (Evans et al., 2014). Concurrently, the Cultural Reproduction Hypothesis argues that advantaged cultural resources, such as books, are transmitted across generations, allowing parents to invest in their children's cultural and cognitive endowments, which in turn perpetuates educational advantage (Jæger, 2011).

Empirically, this link has been validated across diverse national contexts. Numerous studies, from single-nation analyses to large-scale international comparisons, confirm that children from homes with more books achieve higher scores on standardized tests and attain more years of schooling, even after controlling for other family characteristics (Evans et al., 2014; Heyneman & Loxley, 1983). The consistency and strength of these findings have fostered a powerful, often implicit, universalist assumption: that the educational benefits of a home library are uniform across all sociocultural settings.

Therefore, in line with this extensive body of literature and as a baseline for our subsequent analyses, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1: Home book collections positively predict academic achievement.

1.2 Unpacking the "How": The Mediating Pathway of Curiosity

The well-supported link between home book collections and academic achievement lacks a clear understanding of its underlying psychological mechanisms (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). This study proposes curiosity—an intrinsic desire to know or learn—as a crucial mediating variable. This proposition is grounded in Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory, wherein environmental factors like home resources are understood to influence behavioral outcomes such as achievement by shaping internal cognitive and affective states like curiosity. Establishing curiosity as a mediator requires substantiating its connection to both academic achievement and home book collections.

The pathway from curiosity to academic achievement is well-established in existing research. As a primary motivator for learning, curiosity fosters an openness to new experiences conducive to academic success (Lent et al., 1994), with curious individuals exhibiting greater attentional engagement, enhanced information retention, and increased persistence in problem-solving (Kashdan, 2009). Empirical work further demonstrates that curious students are more proactive learners who show higher motivation for challenging tasks and achieve superior academic outcomes (Gurning & Siregar, 2017; Jaen & Baccay, 2016).

Home book collections provide fertile ground for nurturing curiosity. A home rich in books exposes children to novel topics and narratives that stimulate a desire to explore the unknown (Maw & Maw, 1962; Pennington & Waxler, 2017), creating information-rich environments that produce the cognitive gaps and sense of wonder that curious individuals are driven to resolve (Loewenstein, 1994). A home library offers the very tools to satisfy this exploratory drive, enabling a process where books spark questions and their continued availability provides the means to answer them, thereby deepening a child's dispositional curiosity (Tough, 2013). This aligns with findings that parental stimulation of curiosity significantly boosts achievement, irrespective of socioeconomic status (Gottfried et al., 2016).

Therefore, we hypothesize that curiosity acts as a key mechanism transmitting the educational benefits of home book collections.

H2: Curiosity mediates the positive relationship between home book collections and academic achievement.

1.3 Contextualizing the Effect: Cultural Contingency as a Theoretical Lens

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory posits that the relationship between proximal processes, like family-level interactions, and developmental outcomes is contingent upon the broader macrosystem in which they are embedded (Chiu et

al., 2010). This framing suggests that the established effect of home book collections on academic achievement may not be universal but instead varies across national sociocultural contexts. While prior work has explored moderators like ethnicity and nationality, the role of a nation's religious composition—a powerful force in shaping societal values—remains underexamined (Ellison et al., 2011). Therefore, adopting a cultural contingency lens, this study investigates the national proportion of the Muslim population as a key Level-2 moderator.

We hypothesize that the positive association between home book collections and academic achievement will be weaker in countries with a higher proportion of the Muslim population, a proposition grounded in potential mechanisms tied to dominant value systems. Cultures with a strong Islamic heritage often prioritize conservative values of tradition and conformity over openness to change and self-direction (Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004), potentially altering the nature of a home's "scholarly culture." The books available might emphasize religious and moral instruction over the broad range of secular topics that cultivate PISA-assessed competencies like scientific and critical reasoning. Further more, this value orientation may also shape how children engage with learning resources, as a cultural focus on conformity and uncertainty avoidance could temper the exploratory drive that fuels intellectual curiosity. Consequently, children in such contexts, even within book-rich homes, might be less inclined to proactively engage with diverse materials or question established knowledge, thereby attenuating the conversion of home resources into academic gains. This reasoning aligns with research indicating that religious factors interact with socioeconomic resources to influence educational outcomes, such as when maternal beliefs affect the provision of home learning materials (Guler et al., 2023) and that achievement gaps between SES groups are smaller in religious schools compared to public schools (Jeynes, 2007).

Although such findings suggest a complex interplay, the specific moderating role of a national Muslim context on the relationship between home resources and academic achievement remains an open empirical question. To address this gap, we propose our final hypothesis:

H3: The positive association between home book collections and academic achievement is stronger in countries with a lower proportion of the Muslim population.

1.4 The Current Study: Research Questions and Hypotheses

While the positive effect of home book collections is well-documented, its assumed universality across diverse cultures, the psychological mechanisms driving it, and the moderating role of macro-level societal factors remain poorly understood. The present study addresses these gaps using data from the PISA 2022, a large-scale assessment of 465,442 students across 81 participating countries and economies (OECD, 2023). We propose and test a multilevel moderated mediation model (see Figure 1) guided by three primary research questions:

1. To what extent do home book collections predict student-level academic achievement?
2. Does student curiosity function as a mediator in the link between home book collections and academic achievement?
3. Is the association between home book collections and academic achievement moderated by the national proportion of the Muslim population?

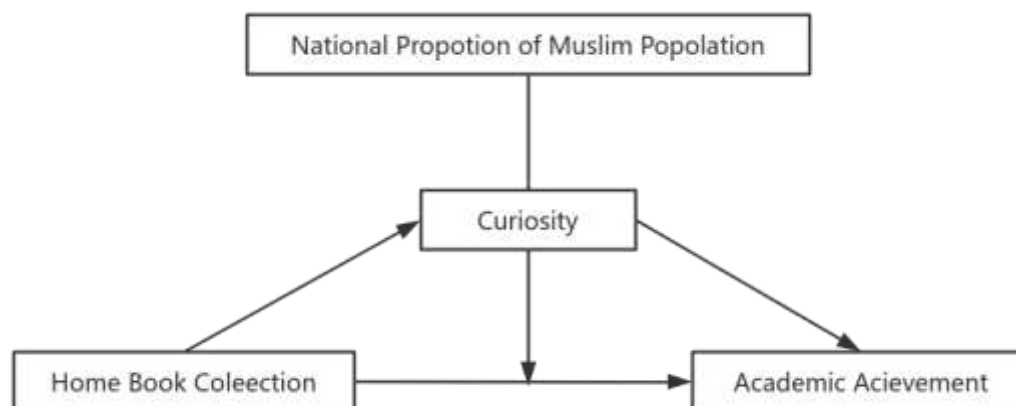


Figure 1. The Hypothesized Theoretical Model.

Accordingly, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Home book collections will be positively associated with academic achievement.

H2: Curiosity will partially mediate the positive relationship between home book collections and academic achievement.

H3: The positive association between home book collections and academic achievement will be stronger in countries with a lower proportion of the Muslim population.

By systematically examining these interconnected questions, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by offering a more nuanced understanding of how home educational resources operate, particularly through the interplay of individual psychological factors and national-level context. The findings may also hold valuable implications for the development of more context-sensitive educational policies.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants and Procedure

This study utilized publicly available data from the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a triennial OECD survey assessing the reading, mathematics, and science proficiency of adolescent's students across 81 participating countries and economies, providing a rich dataset for cross-national research.

Excluding cases with missing data on core variables yielded a final analytic sample of 582,810 students (51.4% female; $M_{age} = 15.79$ years, $SD = 0.29$) from 67 countries. The OECD's standardized data collection procedures ensured methodological rigor and ethical compliance across all participating nations.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Outcome Variable: Academic Achievement

Consistent with PISA's methodology (OECD, 2023a), Academic Achievement was represented by 10 plausible values (PVs) for each academic domain. To create a comprehensive indicator of general academic achievement, a composite score was operationalized by averaging the first plausible value from mathematics, reading, and science for each student. This approach provides a robust estimate of a student's latent academic ability.

2.2.2 Level-1 Variables: Home Book Collections, Curiosity, and Covariates

Home Book Collections (Predictor). This was measured with a composite score derived from 8 items on which students estimated the number of books in their home across various genres (e.g., classical literature, science books), using a four-point response scale (1 = zero; 2 = one to five books; 3 = six to ten books; 4 = ten or more books). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency in our sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Curiosity (Mediator). Student curiosity was measured with 10 items (e.g., "I am curious about many different things") rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. A total score was computed after reverse-scoring appropriate items, and the scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$).

Covariates. To account for potential confounding factors, the analysis included several student-level covariates known to influence academic achievement: gender (coded 1 = female), age (in years), and socioeconomic status, as measured by the PISA index of economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS).

2.2.3 Level-2 Moderator: National Proportion of Muslim Population

National Proportion of Muslim Population (Moderator). The primary Level-2 moderator was the national proportion of the Muslim population, defined as the percentage of each nation's population identifying as Muslim according to data from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA).

National Wealth (Covariate). To control for national economic development, the analysis included each country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (2024). These data, sourced from the World Bank, were log-transformed to address skewness.

2.3 Data Analysis Strategy

Given the nested structure of the PISA data, with students nested within countries, we employed Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling (MSEM) in Mplus 8.3. This approach simultaneously examines relationships at the individual (Level 1) and country (Level 2) levels, handling missing data through the robust Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimator.

The analysis began by testing a multilevel mediation model (H1 and H2) to assess both the direct effect of home book collections on academic achievement (c' path) and the indirect effect through curiosity (a*b path). We then tested H3 by introducing the national proportion of Muslim population as a Level-2 moderator, examining its influence on the direct effect (the c' path). To ensure an unbiased estimation of within-country effects, all Level-1 predictors were group-mean centered.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for individual-level variables are presented in Table 1. In line with hypotheses, family cultural resources (CULTPOSS) showed positive correlations with both curiosity ($r = .177, p < .001$) and academic achievement ($r = .354, p < .001$). Curiosity and academic achievement were also positively associated ($r = .146, p < .001$). To justify the use of a multilevel model, we first estimated a null model with no predictors. A significant portion of the variance in academic achievement resided between countries (Intraclass Correlation Coefficient, ICC= 0.282), supporting the appropriateness of multilevel modeling.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations for individual-level variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1.Age	-				
2.Gender	0.001	-			
3.CULTPOSS	0.008***	-0.056***	-		
4.Curiosity	0.027***	-0.027***	0.177***	-	
5.Achievement	0.031***	0.007***	0.354***	0.146***	-
Mean	15.79	1.49	15.11	0.05	454.51
S.D	0.29	0.50	5.13	1.02	96.98

Note. CULTPOSS=Cultural possessions at home; Achievement=academic achievement; **= $p < .01$; ***= $p < .001$.

3.2. Multilevel Path Analysis: Testing for Moderated Mediation

We tested our hypotheses using a multilevel structural equation model (MSEM) in Mplus 8.3, controlling for gender, age, and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). All continuous predictors were grand-mean centered. The full model results are detailed in Tables 3.

The unconditional random-slopes mediation model revealed a significant positive direct effect of family cultural resources on academic achievement ($B = 6.41, SE = 0.03, p < .001$). A significant indirect effect was also found through curiosity ($B = 0.27, SE = 0.01, p < .001$), supporting its partial mediating role by accounting for 4.26% of the total effect.

Significant random slope variances for the resource-to-curiosity path (the a path), the curiosity-to-achievement path (the b path), and the direct resource-to-achievement path (the c' path) (all $p < .001$) indicated that the strength of these relationships varied significantly across countries, providing the empirical justification for examining cross-level moderators.

Table 2
The direct effect of CULTPOSS and the mediating role of curiosity

Path	Estimate	S.E.	p
CULTPOSS→curiosity→Achievement (Indirect effect)	0.273	0.005	0.000
CULTPOSS→Achievement (Direct effect)	6.405	0.027	0.000

Note. CULTPOSS=Cultural possessions at home; Achievement=academic achievement

Next, Introducing the proportion of Muslim population (MUSPC) and per capita GDP (LOGGDP) as country-level predictors in a conditional model revealed no significant cross-level interactions for the indirect pathway. MUSPC did not moderate the effect of

cultural resources on curiosity ($B = 0.00$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .999$) nor the effect of curiosity on academic achievement ($B = -0.18$, $SE = 1.93$, $p = .925$).

A significant negative cross-level interaction was, however, found for the direct effect ($B = -2.47$, $SE = 0.50$, $p < .001$). As detailed in Table 5, this indicates that the positive association between family cultural resources and academic achievement is attenuated in countries with a higher proportion of Muslim population. This interaction partially explained the cross-national variance in the direct effect's slope.

Regarding the main effects of the country-level variables, per capita GDP was a significant positive predictor of national average academic achievement ($B \approx 90-93$, $p < .001$). In contrast, the proportion of the Muslim population was a significant negative predictor ($B \approx -42$, $p < .01$), an effect that remained robust after controlling for GDP.

Table 3
Moderation effect of MUSPC in the path X→Y in MSEM

	Estimate	S.E.	Est./S.E.	p
Within-group effects(level -1)				
Achievement on				
Curiosity	12.287	0.733	16.761	0.000
CULTPOSS	5.061	0.155	32.690	0.000
Age	9.452	0.936	10.101	0.000
Gender	-0.275	1.013	-0.272	0.786
Curiosity on				
Age	0.064	0.006	10.138	0.000
Gender	-0.051	0.015	-3.383	0.001
Residual Variances				
Curiosity	1.022	0.023	44.711	0.000
Achievement	6092.684	222.687	27.360	0.000
Between-group effects (level -2)				
S on				
MUSPC	-2.471	0.504	-4.905	0.000
Achievement on				
MUSPC	-42.995	13.103	-3.281	0.001
LOGGDP	89.332	8.167	10.938	0.000
Residual Variances				
Achievement	799.911	135.843	5.889	0.000
S	1.311	0.197	6.664	0.000

Note. CULTPOSS=Cultural possessions at home; Achievement=academic achievement
;LOGGDP = logarithm of GDP per capita; MUSPC=Percentage of Muslims; S = the slope of Y on X

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of Findings

Drawing on a large-scale, cross-national sample, this study examines the relationship between home educational resources and academic achievement across diverse cultural macrosystems. Consistent with Hypothesis1, our findings reaffirm that home book collections are a robust predictor of academic success, supporting the established importance of this malleable family resource (Evans et al., 2010; Sirin, 2005). These findings align with those reported by Huang et al. (2016) for students in the 32 countries included in their study. Due to schools' favoritism toward students from the dominant culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), students from abundant in books families are likely to have better school performance than their peers, as our study indicates. This partly explains why measures of cultural capital are also positively associated with educational attainment (Huang et al., 2016).

In line with Hypothesis 2, we examined the mediating role of curiosity in the link between home educational resources and academic achievement. Our results also support curiosity's role as a partial mediator in this relationship, aligning with Social Cognitive Theory's (Bandura, 1986) proposition that environmental factors like a book-rich home shape internal states to drive achievement. By stimulating inquisitiveness and exploratory behaviors, a resource-rich home may enhance a student's motivation to learn (von Stumm et al., 2011). In other words, Children who grow up in a home environment with an abundance of books are more curious, which is good for learning. A strong reading environment stimulates the desire for exploration and curiosity, and the "hunger mentality" is a central determinant of individual differences in academic performance (Von Stumm et al., 2011; Vidler, 1980). The partial nature of this mediation, however, suggests that home book collections influence academic achievement through other pathways. They likely offer direct opportunities to develop core academic skills—such as vocabulary and reading fluency—that are foundational to success independent of curiosity (Sirin, 2005). Furthermore, unmeasured variables like academic self-efficacy or parent-child reading interactions may function as parallel mediators (Bandura, 1997; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Crucially, Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the finding that the positive association between home book collections and academic achievement is significantly stronger in countries with a lower proportion of the Muslim population provides strong evidence for our central thesis of cultural contingency. This result challenges the notion of a universally positive effect of home resources, demonstrating how the broader macrosystem can alter their efficacy (Chiu et al., 2010; Miyamoto et al., 2021). The moderating effect can be interpreted through two complementary mechanisms: a divergence in the cognitive skills fostered by home resources versus those rewarded by assessments, and the culturally contingent meaning of cultural capital.

Dominant modes of knowledge transmission and cognitive styles differ across cultures. Societies shaped by "print culture" use home libraries as key arenas for fostering individualized, abstract, and critical thinking—competencies highly isomorphic with the analytical skills measured by assessments like PISA (Eisenstein, 1979; OECD, 2019). In contrast, many societies with deep Islamic traditions are historically characterized by a vibrant "oral culture" emphasizing memorization, rhetoric, and communal debate, despite a reverence for textual learning (Eickelman, 1978). The cognitive assets cultivated in such traditions, while invaluable, may not be fully captured by assessment frameworks that arguably privilege specific, Western-centric cognitive models (Henrich et al., 2010). When the practices fostered by home book collections diverge from the skills rewarded by the educational system, their predictive power for academic achievement is likely attenuated.

Furthermore, the principle of "cultural congruence" suggests a resource's utility is amplified when it aligns with environmental values (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The social meaning of a home book collection as "objectified cultural capital" is therefore not fixed but is constructed within a specific cultural field (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). In many secularized or Westernized societies, a substantial home library serves as an unambiguous signal of parental investment in the mainstream educational system (De Graaf et al., 2000). In many Muslim-majority societies, however, parental educational investment is often channeled into a broader portfolio of culturally valued avenues, where moral and religious development may be prioritized alongside or even above secular academic pursuits—a finding supported by recent evidence that parental religious beliefs shape home learning strategies (Guler et al., 2023). When family resources and aspirations are distributed across these multiple channels, the unique predictive power of a single indicator like home book collections on standardized academic achievement may be correspondingly diluted.

4.2 Practical Implication

Consistent with a large body of previous research, this study confirms a positive correlation between home book collections and adolescent academic achievement on a global scale reaffirming that investment in home literary resources remains a foundational strategy for enhancing academic performance. The central implication of our findings, however, is that in certain cultural contexts, policy and parental efforts must move beyond merely increasing the quantity of books. The focus must also be on encouraging the provision of diverse reading materials specifically designed to foster critical thinking and a spirit of scientific inquiry, as parents may inadvertently overlook these key aspects due to their cultural background, thereby creating a bottleneck for their children's academic development.

The emergence of curiosity as a key bridge connecting home resources to academic achievement underscores the need for both schools and families to cultivate environments that can ignite and sustain it. This requires educators to design inquiry-based learning activities and foster a classroom culture where students feel empowered to ask questions, while for parents, it means moving beyond simply providing books to engaging in co-reading, dialogue, and positive responses to their children's questions.

Cultural sensitivity must be integrated into educational assessment and policy formulation, particularly when interpreting results

from large-scale international assessments like PISA. The attenuated association between home book collections and PISA scores in countries with large Muslim populations, for example, should not be simplistically interpreted as a lack of parental investment in education. It may instead reflect a rational allocation of educational effort toward domains highly valued within the culture, such as religious literacy and moral character, which are not captured by PISA's focus on secular academic skills. This possibility highlights the need for a more nuanced interpretation, aligning with the broader scholarly call for greater contextual awareness in the application of standardized international assessments (Addey et al., 2021).

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Notwithstanding its contributions, the present study is subject to several limitations that concurrently offer avenues for future research.

First, the measurement of the macro-level variable was relatively coarse. The use of the national proportion of the Muslim population serves as a proxy for a complex constellation of cultural values, representing an indirect and aggregate measure. Second, the specific content of home book collections could not be distinguished. The PISA dataset quantifies the number of books but does not differentiate their genre (e.g., religious texts versus secular literature such as scientific readers or novels). Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes definitive claims of causality. Longitudinal studies are warranted to track how the interplay among home resources, curiosity, and the school environment dynamically unfolds throughout a child's development.

Furthermore, the proposed model may omit other salient variables such as parental reading engagement, the nature of the school curriculum, or the community's learning atmosphere. Meta-analytic evidence confirms that specific parental involvement behaviors are robustly linked to literacy outcomes, underscoring the need for measures more granular than simple resource counts (Castro et al., 2021). Future research would therefore benefit from constructing more comprehensive, multi-level models to explore the intricate interplay of these factors.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates a significant positive association between home book collections and adolescent academic achievement, a relationship partially mediated by curiosity and, critically, moderated by the national proportion of the Muslim population. This moderation supports the principle that a resource's utility is amplified when aligned with the values and expectations of its specific context. In societies with a smaller Muslim population, home resources may align more closely with mainstream educational systems, enhancing their academic impact. Conversely, in Muslim-majority societies, parental investment may be oriented toward culturally valued domains such as religious development, thereby attenuating the ability of home book collections to predict secular academic achievement. These findings underscore the necessity of developing culturally sensitive educational interventions and tailoring strategies to diverse contexts.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Informed consent: No Informed consent was involved.

Studies in humans and animals: All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the academic committee of Guangxi Normal University and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data availability: The data used in this study were obtained from publicly available databases and had no ethical implications. The data that support the findings of this study are available in [PISA 2022 Database] at <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html>.

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