INVESTIGATING THE CAUSES OF SCHOOL DROPOUT IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN WAJIR NORTH SUB-COUNTY, WAJIR COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

Education is a fundamental human right and a critical driver of socio-economic development. Despite global efforts to achieve universal primary education, pupil dropout remains a significant challenge, particularly in marginalized regions such as Wajir North Sub-County Wajir County, Kenya. This study investigates the causes of school dropout in public primary schools in Wajir North Sub-County, focusing on socio-economic factors, school-based factors, and pupil characteristics. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study collected data from 20 head teachers and 120 teachers across 20 public primary schools. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across the sub-county. Data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study reveals that poverty, cultural practices, inadequate school infrastructure, and poor academic performance are the primary drivers of pupil dropout. The study recommends targeted interventions, including the expansion of school feeding programs, community sensitization on the importance of education, and increased government investment in school infrastructure, providing scholarships and monthly stipends to the families of girl-child as incentives to reduce early marriages, which act as a source of income for low-income families. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on educational access and retention in arid and semi-arid regions, offering actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders.

Keywords: school dropout, public primary schools, socio-economic factors, educational access, marginalized regions, gender disparities, Wajir County, Sub-Saharan Africa

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1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of human development, empowering individuals to break the cycle of poverty and contribute to national growth (Breton, 2004). However, in many developing countries, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions, access to quality education remains a significant challenge. Wajir North Sub-County, located in Wajir County, Kenya, is one such region where pupil dropout rates in public primary schools are alarmingly high. Despite the Kenyan government's introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003, dropout rates persist, undermining the gains made in educational access.

The Government of Kenya (GOK) has demonstrated a strong commitment to expanding access to education for its citizens at all levels. Policymakers, educational planners, and other stakeholders have prioritized the development of viable, effective, and sustainable strategies to enhance the growth of the education sector. Education is widely recognized as a catalyst for economic and social prosperity, fostering a dynamic workforce and equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills needed to compete and collaborate in the global arena. It also empowers marginalized groups and plays a fundamental role in building cohesive societies (World Bank, 2003).

The right to education is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, which affirms that every individual is entitled to education. This principle was further reinforced during the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, where representatives from 155 countries and organizations pledged to provide universal access to education. The follow-up conference in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 reaffirmed this commitment, emphasizing the need to ensure that children, youth, and adults benefit from educational opportunities tailored to meet their basic learning needs (Republic of Kenya, 2003). Since then, significant progress has been made in enrolling young children in primary schools across developing countries. However, the challenge has shifted from ensuring access to education to retaining learners in school, as millions of children continue to drop out before completing their education.

In regions such as South Asia, West Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, approximately one in three children who enroll in primary school drop out before completing their education (UNESCO, 2009). This premature withdrawal from school not only limits the potential of these children but also represents a significant waste of scarce national resources. Understanding the factors that influence the decision to stay in or leave school is therefore critical for addressing the dropout crisis in developing countries. In the context of Wajir North Sub-County, Kenya, where socio-economic challenges, cultural practices, and inadequate school infrastructure exacerbate the problem, identifying and addressing these factors is essential for improving educational outcomes and ensuring that children remain in school (Achoka *et al.*, 2007; Njeru & Orodho, 2003)

This study investigates the causes of school dropout in public primary schools in Wajir North Sub-County, with a focus on socio-economic factors, school-based factors,

and pupil characteristics. The findings aim to inform policy and practice, contributing to the reduction of dropout rates and the improvement of educational outcomes in marginalized regions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework
The study is grounded in the Human Capital Theory, which posits that education is an investment in human capital, leading to increased productivity and economic growth (Becker, 1964). However, in marginalized regions such as Wajir North Sub-County, socio-economic and cultural barriers often hinder access to education, leading to high dropout rates. The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen (1999), further underscores the importance of addressing these barriers to enable individuals to achieve their full potential. Sen's Capability Approach explains how systemic barriers (poverty, gender norms) restrict children's "freedom to achieve" educationally.

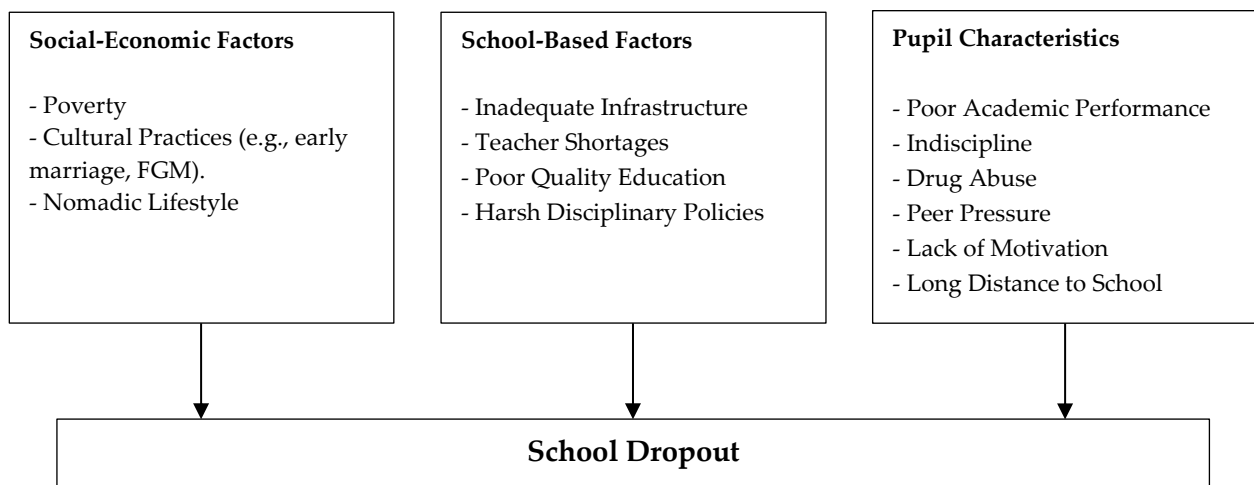| Social-Economic Factors	School-Based Factors	Pupil Characteristics
- Poverty - Cultural Practices (e.g., early marriage, FGM). - Nomadic Lifestyle	- Inadequate Infrastructure - Teacher Shortages - Poor Quality Education - Harsh Disciplinary Policies	- Poor Academic Performance - Indiscipline - Drug Abuse - Peer Pressure - Lack of Motivation - Long Distance to School

School Dropout

Figure 1: Visual Representation of the Conceptual Framework

2.2 Summary of Conceptual Framework
This conceptual framework provides a clear sound structure for understanding the causes of school dropout in Wajir North Sub-County. It aligns with the theoretical foundations and offers actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders. By addressing the interrelated factors identified in the framework, it is possible to reduce dropout rates and improve educational outcomes in marginalized regions.

3. Empirical Review

3.1 Socio-Economic Factors
Poverty is a significant barrier to education in Wajir North Sub-County, with many families unable to meet the hidden costs associated with schooling, such as uniforms and

transportation (Njeru & Orodho, 2003). Cultural practices, such as early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), further exacerbate the problem, particularly for girls (UNESCO, 2005). Additionally, the nomadic lifestyle of many families in the region poses a challenge to consistent school attendance (Achoka *et al.*, 2007). Research conducted by Can *et al.* (2017) at Babaeski Vocational College in Turkey highlights that financial difficulties are the primary reason for students leaving higher education. The study found that 55% of students who requested registration clearance did so due to economic reasons, such as the inability to afford housing, nutrition, and other educational expenses. This aligns with findings from other studies, which suggest that financial constraints are a significant barrier to educational attainment, particularly in developing countries (Chen, 2008).

In addition to economic factors, family reasons also play a crucial role in school dropouts. Can *et al.* (2017) found that 9% of students cited family-related issues as a reason for leaving school. These issues often include family obligations, such as the need to care for younger siblings or elderly relatives, which can force students to prioritize family responsibilities over their education. This is particularly true for female students, who are more likely to drop out due to family pressures compared to their male counterparts (Can *et al.*, 2017).

3.2 School-based Factors

Inadequate school infrastructure, including a lack of classrooms, toilets, and teaching materials, has been identified as a significant contributor to pupil dropout in Wajir North Sub-County (Govindaraju & Venkatesan, 2010). Teacher shortages and poor-quality education further compound the problem, leading to low academic performance and high dropout rates (Azzam, 2007). Harsh disciplinary policies and negative teacher attitudes also contribute to pupil disengagement and dropout (Njeru & Orodho, 2003). Additionally, early marriages, lack of vocational guidance, and inadequate institutional support further exacerbate dropout rates across all levels. These findings align with broader research indicating that poverty, family instability, and poor academic performance are critical factors in school dropout, with long-term implications for individual and societal development (Boyacı, 2019; Bülbül, 2012).

In Punjab, Pakistan, research by Rehman and Malik (2023) highlights that secondary school dropouts are primarily driven by financial constraints, lack of basic school facilities (such as drinking water, toilets, and electricity), and poor communication between teachers and parents. Additionally, harsh behavior from teachers, mismanagement in schools, and the burden of excessive homework further exacerbate the problem. The study also reveals that students from low-income families often drop out due to the inability to afford educational materials, while early marriages and domestic responsibilities disproportionately affect female students. Furthermore, the lack of transportation facilities and long distances to schools in rural areas contribute to absenteeism and eventual dropout. These findings align with earlier studies by Al-Hroub (2015) and Şahin, Arseven, and Kılıç (2016), which emphasize the role of socio-economic

status, family instability, and chronic absenteeism in dropout rates. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive interventions, including improved school infrastructure, financial support for low-income families, and enhanced teacher-parent communication to ensure student retention and academic success. Institutional factors, such as the lack of effective guidance and counseling systems, also contribute to school dropouts. Can *et al.* (2017) argue that students often lack sufficient information about higher education programs and their requirements, which can lead to poor decision-making and eventual dropout. This is particularly relevant in Turkey, where the rapid increase in the number of universities has not been matched by a corresponding improvement in the quality of student support services (Can *et al.*, 2017).

3.4 Pupil Characteristics

Poor academic performance, indiscipline, and drug abuse are significant pupil characteristics contributing to dropout in Wajir North Sub-County (Al-Hroub, 2015). Peer pressure and lack of motivation also play a role, particularly among adolescents who may prioritize social relationships over education (Mudemb, 2013). Additionally, the long distances that many pupils must travel to school further increase the likelihood of dropout (Saif Ur Rehman & Malik, 2023). At the high school level, academic underperformance, absenteeism, peer pressure, and family apathy are significant contributors, compounded by financial difficulties and poor school environments (Eranıl, 2024). In higher education, students often drop out due to difficulties in social adaptation, academic struggles, financial problems, and mismatches between their skills and chosen fields of study (Eranıl, 2024). Academic performance is another significant factor contributing to school dropouts. The study by Can *et al.* (2017) revealed that 62% of students who requested registration clearance had failed their classes and were repeating them. Academic failure not only prolongs the duration of education but also increases the financial burden on students and their families, leading to a higher likelihood of dropout. while Can *et al.*, 2017, highlighted academic failure in Turkey, Wajir's primary issue is socio-economic. This finding is consistent with Tinto's (1975) theory, which posits that academic performance is one of the most powerful determinants of student retention in higher education. While Can *et al.*, 2017, highlighted academic failure in Turkey, Wajir's school dropout is primarily socio-economic.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods strategy, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. A descriptive survey design was used to collect quantitative data from head teachers and teachers, while focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with parents and community leaders to gather qualitative insights. The mixed-methods approach was chosen to triangulate findings, enhance validity, and capture both the

prevalence of dropout factors (quantitative) and the lived experiences of stakeholders (qualitative) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

4.2 Target Population

The study was conducted in Wajir North Sub-County, Wajir County, Kenya. The sub-county is characterized by a semi-arid climate, with a predominantly pastoralist population with high rates of school dropout. The region faces significant challenges in terms of educational access and retention, making it an ideal location for this study. The target population included head teachers, teachers, parents, and community leaders, as these stakeholders directly influence educational access and retention.

4.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Stratified random sampling was used to select 20 public primary schools to ensure representativeness across from the 50 schools in Wajir North Sub-County. Schools were stratified by location (rural vs. peri-urban) and student enrollment size (<200 vs. ≥200 pupils) to account for variability in resource distribution and dropout patterns. From each stratum, 5 schools were randomly selected, totaling 20 schools (40% of the population). This stratification ensured a balanced representation of diverse school contexts. Within each school, 6 teachers (one from each grade level, 1–6) were randomly selected, resulting in 120 teachers. All 20 head teachers from sampled schools participated. For qualitative data, 10 FGDs (6–8 participants each) were conducted with parents and community leaders, segmented by gender (5 male-only, 5 female-only groups) to encourage open discussion on sensitive topics like cultural practices. The sample size for FGDs was determined by thematic saturation, where no new themes emerged after the 10th session (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

4.4 Data Collection Instruments

Data was collected using structured questionnaires for head teachers and teachers. The tool included closed-ended Likert-scale items (1–5) and multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire was piloted in 3 non-sampled schools to assess clarity and reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.78 to 0.84 for the scales (socio-economic, school-based, pupil factors), indicating strong internal consistency, and FGD guides for parents and community leaders contain semi-structured guides with open-ended prompts (e.g., "How do cultural practices affect girls' education?") were used to explore community perspectives. Guides were translated into Somali (the local language) and back-translated to ensure accuracy.

4.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v. 26. Descriptive statistics (frequency distributions and percentages) were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation coefficient, were used to measure the relationship between independent variables (socio-economic

factors, school-based factors, and pupil characteristics) and the dependent variable (pupil dropout). Qualitative data from FGDs was analyzed thematically through data analysis software NVivo 12 to identify key themes and patterns. An inductive coding approach identified emergent themes (e.g., "gender bias in education"). Codes were validated through intercoder reliability ($\kappa = 0.81$), and representative quotes were extracted to illustrate findings. Redundant and repetitive information in the responses was also identified and removed from the analysis.

4.6 Ethical Considerations
Ethical approval was obtained from Kenya's National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Participants provided written consent; for illiterate participants, oral consent was witnessed and documented. Anonymity was ensured by labeling schools as S1–S20 and using pseudonyms for FGD participants. Data was stored securely, accessible only to the research team.

4.7 Limitations of the Study
The research study is limited to Wajir North Sub-County, and further research is recommended to explore causes of school dropout in other sub-counties in Wajir County and among different student subsets, such as secondary school students. Responses from teachers and head teachers may reflect social desirability. Further, findings are most applicable to arid, pastoralist regions and may not generalize to urban settings.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Socio-economic Factors
The study found that poverty was the most significant socio-economic factor contributing to pupil dropout in Wajir North Sub-County, with 85% of head teachers identifying it as a major cause. Many families in the region are unable to meet the hidden costs associated with schooling, such as uniforms and transportation, leading to high dropout rates. Cultural practices, such as early marriage and FGM, were also identified as significant barriers to education, particularly for girls. Additionally, the nomadic lifestyle of many families in the region poses a challenge to consistent school attendance.

5.2 School-based Factors
Inadequate school infrastructure, including a lack of classrooms, toilets, and teaching materials, was identified as a significant contributor to pupil dropout in Wajir North Sub-County. Teacher shortages and poor-quality education further compound the problem, leading to low academic performance and high dropout rates. Harsh disciplinary policies and negative teacher attitudes also contribute to pupil disengagement and dropout.

5.3 Pupil Characteristics

Poor academic performance, indiscipline, and drug abuse were identified as significant pupil characteristics contributing to dropout in Wajir North Sub-County. Peer pressure and lack of motivation also play a role, particularly among adolescents who may prioritize social relationships over education. Additionally, the long distances that many pupils must travel to school further increase the likelihood of dropout.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that socio-economic factors, school-based factors, and pupil characteristics are significant contributors to pupil dropout in public primary schools in Wajir North Sub-County. To address these challenges, the study recommends the following:

6.1 Government Intervention

The government should expand school feeding programs and allocate more resources to primary schools in Wajir North Sub-County to ensure the success of free primary education. While expanding school feeding programs and infrastructure is critical, systemic challenges such as corruption and inefficient resource allocation in Kenya's education sector must also be addressed. Studies by Transparent International Kenya (2023) highlight how mismanagement of funds in arid regions exacerbates educational inequities. Policymakers should prioritize anti-corruption measures and transparent budgeting to ensure interventions reach intended beneficiaries. Further, the establishment of new schools should be put in place to reduce the long distance to access schools. Additionally, stringent measures should be taken against cultural practices that hinder educational access, such as early marriage and FGM. Further, the government should implement a female school stipend program to encourage parents to send their girl-child to school.

6.2 School Policies

Headteachers should establish policies to create a conducive learning environment, including the provision of adequate infrastructure and teaching materials. Schools should also focus on improving the quality of education and addressing teacher shortages. Additionally, school administration should organize meetings for teacher's parents so that parent's teacher gap is minimized. Scaling school feeding programs requires collaboration with international bodies like the World Food Programme (WFP) to secure sustainable funding and logistics. Lessons from Turkana County, where WFP partnerships reduced dropout rates by 15%, could guide implementation (WFP Kenya, 2022).

6.3 Community Involvement

The community should be involved in school development programs to support the retention of pupils in school. Community sensitization on the importance of education, particularly for girls, is also crucial. Engage local leaders as education ambassadors to advocate against harmful cultural practices (e.g., early marriage). Partner with NGOs like UNICEF to train community champions who can sensitize families on gender equity using culturally resonant narratives. For nomadic communities, leverage mobile platforms (e.g., WhatsApp groups) to maintain communication between schools and parents during migrations. Similar patterns of dropout drivers are observed in Turkana County, Kenya, and Somalia's Puntland, where nomadic lifestyles and poverty hinder education (UNICEF, 2021). However, Wajir's unique cultural practices (e.g., FGM) demand localized strategies distinct from urban contexts like Nairobi.

6.4 Further Research

Further research is recommended to explore dropout causes in other sub-counties in Wajir County and among different student groups, such as high school students.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. This research received no external funding. Ethical approval was granted by Kenya's National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI).

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