



STAKEHOLDERS' CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SCHOOL-BASED FACTORS INFLUENCING SECONDARY SCHOOL DROPOUT IN KESSES SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

The study investigated education stakeholders' conceptualization of school-based factors influencing dropout among secondary school students in public secondary schools in Kesses Sub-County, Kenya. The study was guided by Structural Functionalism Theory. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining descriptive survey and qualitative approaches. The target population was 990 respondents comprising principals, teachers, students, area chiefs, and parents of dropout students. A sample of 307 respondents was selected using stratified, purposive, snowball, and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that stakeholders strongly conceptualize several school-based factors as contributors to dropout. These include a harsh and unfavourable school environment, complex curriculum demands, inadequate teaching and learning facilities, high teacher expectations, uncaring teacher behaviours, and slow curriculum implementation. Descriptive results indicated strong agreement among respondents that a harsh school

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environment, complex curriculum, and high teacher expectations significantly influence dropout. Correlation analysis further showed a strong positive relationship between school-based factors and dropout ($r = 0.705$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that poor school conditions are associated with increased dropout rates. Qualitative findings reinforced these results, with participants noting that rigid school environments, academic pressure, lack of resources, and negative teacher–student relationships contribute to student disengagement. The study concludes that school-based factors significantly influence student dropout, largely through stakeholders' perceptions of the school environment and its effectiveness. It recommends curriculum simplification, improvement of school learning environments, strengthening of teaching resources, and enhancement of teacher support systems to improve student retention in secondary schools.

Keywords: school-based factors, dropout, stakeholders' conceptualization

1. Introduction

Dropping out of school in a post-industrial society comes with many risks (Bell, 2020). Education is a key factor for predicting social mobility; dropping out clearly undermines one's prospects of moving up the socioeconomic ladder (Richards, Garratt Glass, Heath, Anderson & Altintas, 2016). Dropping out of high school is also accompanied by many negative outcomes, including increased criminal behaviour, lower occupational and economic prospects, reduced lifetime earnings, lower academic skills, and poorer mental and physical health (McNeal, 2017). In addition to individual consequences, areas with high concentrations of dropouts experience decreased tax revenues, increased government expenditure, higher crime rates, and reduced social and political participation (Kearney & Levine, 2014).

Further, dropout of students in secondary schools constrains the ability of countries to pursue effective economic growth and development strategies. Student dropout reduces literacy levels and creates a non-innovative environment (Khanam, Quraishi & Nazir, 2016). Students who drop out of school are unable to secure stable employment and are more likely to experience poverty and engage in social vices such as crime and substance abuse.

Secondary school dropout is caused by several factors, including school-based, home-based, and community-based factors (Ballantine, Hammack & Stuber, 2017). In terms of school-based factors, students spend a large part of their time interacting with teachers, making the social and emotional support provided by teachers critical. Negative in-class behaviours by teachers reduce students' interest and attention in classroom activities, which may eventually lead to school dropout (Strand & Granlund, 2014).

Homework also emerges as a crucial factor influencing school attendance. Students who fail to complete assignments may avoid attending school due to fear or lack of preparedness. Struggling in school daily is a major reason why students choose to drop out. Students who are not proficient in reading at early stages are significantly more likely

to drop out compared to their peers (Thornton & McCoy, 2013). Since reading underpins learning across subjects, low literacy levels make it difficult for students to cope with academic demands, increasing the likelihood of disengagement and eventual dropout.

In Kenya, despite government efforts to promote access to education through policies such as free secondary education, dropout rates remain high (Kiambati & Katana, 2020). This suggests that factors within the school environment continue to affect student retention. The persistence of dropout cases indicates that the education system may not be adequately addressing the needs of all learners, particularly in relation to teaching practices, curriculum demands, and academic support structures.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate how education stakeholders in Kesses Sub-County conceptualise school-based factors that contribute to dropout among students in public secondary schools.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Structural Functionalism Theory developed by Lane (1994). Structural Functionalism is a sociological theory that explains why society functions the way it does by emphasizing the relationships between various social institutions, particularly the education system. The theory assumes that institutions are distinct but interrelated, and therefore should not be studied in isolation since they operate within a network of relationships (Sjoberg, 1960).

According to Dempsey (2017), the functionalist perspective on education emphasizes its role in maintaining social order through socialization, skills development, and role allocation. Education socializes learners into shared values such as achievement, competition, and equality of opportunity. It also equips students with skills required for the economy and allocates individuals to appropriate roles based on merit through examinations and qualifications. Similarly, Gubanov and Gubanov (2018) view education as an institution that promotes social solidarity, cooperation, and the transmission of shared cultural values. Schools act as miniature societies where learners interact, follow rules, and acquire specialized knowledge and skills.

The theory guided this study by conceptualizing the school as a functional system responsible for achieving educational objectives through structured processes such as teaching, curriculum implementation, evaluation, and student support. School dropout is therefore viewed as a result of dysfunction within the school system. Factors such as ineffective teaching practices, negative teacher–student relationships, academic difficulties, and challenges in curriculum delivery may disrupt the proper functioning of the school system and lead to student disengagement and eventual dropout.

The applicability of the theory in this study is based on the understanding that the school environment plays a central role in shaping student outcomes. When the school

effectively performs its functions through supportive teaching, appropriate curriculum delivery, and positive learning environments, students are more likely to remain in school. However, failure of these school-based components leads to a breakdown within the system, increasing the likelihood of dropout. Therefore, this study focuses on how stakeholders conceptualize school-based factors as key determinants of dropout among secondary school students in Kesses Sub-County.

4. Literature Review

According to Njuguna (2021), school-based factors are those within the control of the school that influence students' academic performance and may contribute to school dropout. These include teaching resources, teacher adequacy, physical facilities, and the supervisory role of head teachers. Students are at greater risk of leaving school if they perform poorly academically, demonstrate misbehaviour, become less engaged in school activities, attend schools with poor academic quality, or receive limited support from teachers (Fan & Wolters, 2014).

Truancy has also been identified as a key indicator of school disengagement. According to Wilkins and Bost (2016), truancy reflects resistance to school culture and is associated with negative outcomes such as delinquency and eventual dropout. Persistent absenteeism reduces students' attachment to school and increases the likelihood of withdrawal from the education system.

Disciplinary practices within schools also contribute to dropout. School corporal punishment, which involves physically punishing students, has been reported to discourage attendance and contribute to dropout (Ali, 2015). In some schools, such practices instill fear among students, leading them to avoid school and eventually drop out. Similarly, forced class repetition has been identified as a contributing factor. Range, Dougan, and Pijanowski (2011) note that students who repeat grades often experience discouragement and stigma, which may lead them to abandon schooling. This aligns with Kipng'etich (2017), who argues that poor quality of education and school practices can reduce students' demand for education.

Peer pressure within the school environment also plays a significant role. According to Dumas, Ellis, and Wolfe (2012), peer pressure influences students' attitudes, values, and behaviours, often leading them to conform to negative group norms. Students may be encouraged by peers to disengage from school, particularly when surrounded by others who have already dropped out.

School climate is another critical factor influencing student retention. A positive school climate is characterized by safety, support, and meaningful engagement, while a harsh school climate can lead to disengagement and dropout (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Factors such as conflicts with teachers, discrimination, school violence, and lack of emotional support contribute to an unfavourable learning environment, increasing dropout rates.

Financial demands within schools, such as additional levies, also contribute to dropout. Collins and Halverson (2018) note that extra school charges, including remedial fees and other levies, may discourage students from continuing their education, particularly when parents are unable to meet these financial requirements.

Academic expectations and aspirations further influence students' persistence in school. Khattab (2015) argues that unrealistic or excessively high academic expectations may lead to frustration and eventual dropout among students who struggle to meet them. Similarly, Chirtes (2010) identified school-related factors such as discrimination, school phobia, and conflicts as contributing to dropout.

Studies from different contexts support these findings. Ajaja (2012) identified weak education systems and inadequate teacher support as major contributors to dropout, while Rumberger and Rotermund (2012) highlighted lack of interest in classes, absenteeism, peer influence, and academic failure as key reasons for student dropout.

Although existing literature has examined school-based factors influencing student dropout, most studies have been conducted in different contexts with varying socio-economic and educational conditions. Few studies have specifically focused on how stakeholders conceptualize school-based factors influencing dropout from a sociological perspective. This study therefore sought to fill this gap by examining stakeholders' conceptualization of school-based factors causing dropout among secondary school students in Kesses Sub-County, Kenya.

5. Research Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining descriptive survey and exploratory approaches. The study was conducted in Kesses Sub-County, Uasin Gishu County, which comprises four wards and has a population of 135,979. The area was selected due to its relatively high dropout rate compared to neighbouring sub-counties despite similar government interventions. The target population consisted of 990 respondents, including principals (42), teachers (350), students (504), area chiefs (6), and parents of dropout students (88). A sample size of 307 respondents was obtained using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula. Stratified sampling was used to categorize respondents, while purposive sampling was applied to select area chiefs and principals, snowball sampling was used to identify parents of dropout students, and simple random sampling was used to select teachers and students.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, interview schedules, and focus group discussions. Questionnaires containing closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale were used to capture stakeholders' perceptions of school-based factors influencing school dropout. Interviews were conducted with area chiefs and parents of dropout students to obtain in-depth information, while focus group discussions were held with students to explore their experiences and perceptions of school-based factors associated with dropout. Interviews were conducted with area chiefs and parents of dropout students to obtain in-depth information, while focus group

discussions were held with students to explore shared experiences of community influences. A pilot study was conducted in Soy Sub-County to test the instruments, while validity was ensured through expert review and reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with community-based factors yielding a coefficient of 0.972. Data collection involved obtaining necessary research permits and administering questionnaires, interviews, and FGDs to respondents. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 24, where descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used, and correlation analysis was applied to examine relationships between community-based factors and school dropout. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analyzed thematically and used to complement quantitative findings. Results were presented in tables and narrative form for interpretation.

6. Findings

6.1 Response Rate

Out of the 265(100%) research instruments distributed for data collection, 241 were filled and returned for data analysis. Therefore, the study response rate was 90.9%.

Table 1: Response Rate

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Administered	265	100.0
Returned	241	90.9

6.2 School-Based Factors That Cause Dropout

Table 2: School-Based Factors That Cause Dropout

Statements		SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
The school environment is harsh and cruel for some students to learn.	F	3	3	3	33	62	104
	%	2.9	3.2	2.8	31.9	59.2	100
Complex relevant curriculum can discourage students and hence make them drop out of school.	F	5	6	3	27	64	104
	%	4.5	5.7	2.8	25.8	61.2	100
The school lacks adequate teaching facilities and thus, poor syllabus coverage may discourage some students schooling.	F	0	3	0	40	61	104
	%	0	2.8	0	38.9	58.3	100
Very high teacher expectation can make low students drop out of school.	F	0	3	0	35	66	104
	%	0	2.8	0	33.3	63.9	100
Sometimes teachers' uncaring behaviours make students to drop out of school	F	3	0	9	29	64	104
	%	2.8	0	8.3	27.8	61.1	100

Table 2 shows teachers' responses on school-based factors that cause dropout among secondary school students showed that 62(59.2%) of the respondents strongly agree that

the education stakeholders conceptualise the school environment as harsh and cruel for some students to learn, and 33(31.9%) of the respondents agreed that education stakeholders conceptualise the school environment as harsh and cruel for some students to learn. This finding suggests that education stakeholders perceive an unfavourable school environment as a barrier to effective learning and student retention. A school environment that is harsh, unsupportive, or poorly equipped may reduce students' sense of belonging and discourage continued participation in schooling. The findings therefore suggest the need for schools to provide safe, supportive, and conducive learning environments that respond to students' academic and psychosocial needs. Some schools lack good structures to support proper learning conditions. Education stakeholders conceptualise that student tends to drop out of school because they don't see the difference from the normal structures at other recreational centres. The school environment needs to be quiet and serene for learning to be enjoyed.

Also, the study found that 64(61.2%) of the respondents strongly agreed that education stakeholders conceptualise complex, relevant curricula to discourage students and hence make them drop out of school, and 27(25.8%) of the respondents agreed that complex, relevant curricula could discourage students and hence make them drop out of school. The current school curriculum is good, but some students who are not interest in education look at it as the hardest. Education stakeholders conceptualise a complex curriculum in the education system, and some students cannot meet the needs expected of them. Some students see the education system as a nightmare in their lives. They resort to dropping out of school and pursuing a different farming lifestyle or doing business without education.

Similarly, the study found that 66(63.9%) of the respondents strongly agreed that very high teacher expectations could make slow learners drop out of school, and 35(33.3%) of the respondents agreed that very high teacher expectations could make slow learners drop out of school. The study found that education stakeholders conceptualise teachers contribute to drop out of their children when teachers have very high expectations of students after delivering lessons in class without considering slow learners. Such pressure has left other students to demean themselves when they fail to attain the desired performance, and some might lose hope in academics, thus dropping out of school.

The study findings concur with Koskei and Tonui (2015). They explained that the poor academic performance of students is attributed to several factors, including low concentration in classrooms, heavy home chores and sometimes class repetition due to poor performance. The summation of these factors lowers their self-esteem in classwork competency, hence seeking to drop out of school. Thumiki (2019) affirmed that the greater part of dropouts originated from low financial foundations, where dropout rates were alarmingly high (20-40%). Pillay (2021) argued that numerous dropouts would have gone to schools with poor offices and lacked assets. These conditions influence the students' performance and eventually their choice to leave school.

From interviewed parents, it was revealed that parents conceptualize the school environment as harsh and cruel for their children to learn.

"My boy dropped out of school because he always complained of a lot of schoolwork which he does not see importance of it".

This implies that education stakeholders conceptualize that students tend to drop out of school because they do not see the difference with the normal structures at other recreational centres. School environments need to be quiet and serene for learning to be adored.

School principals informed the study that some students drop out of school when they are sent home to collect fees. Public schools lack enough money to run the programs. Principal interviewed reported that:

"The education stakeholders conceptualize that the academic pressure on KCSE performance from both parents and teachers pushes students to an extent of making others surrender or drop out of school because they cannot contain it."

"Further, some students who drop out of school do so due to the poor attitude they have towards the whole school administration. A student may not like a certain teacher for unknown reasons, thus opting to leave the school. Characters of such students is questionable in this matter because they end up refusing to continue schooling."

One of the area chiefs supported that:

"The education stakeholders conceptualize that poor quality of education and the schools themselves act as a depressant on the demand for education by children and indiscipline among the students."

Students from focused group discussion four argued that family members always say that schooling cannot guarantee job security at the end of studying. This, therefore, made some students drop out of school and start their businesses.

The students in this group four noted that;

"Irrelevant school curriculum, in other words, does not favour all the students but thank God for the current system that is beginning to accommodate all students."

The study findings concurred with Khudadad and Mickelson (2021), who mentioned that insufficient and low quality of infrastructural and physical offices contrarily impacts the education of the students. Due to the lack of water in each family unit, it is usual practice to assign students the task of collecting water from a waterway,

a tanker, or any other appropriate source, taking away from their time in class. In addition, poor school offices don't give students the space to think in harmony.

6.3 Drop Out of Students in Public Secondary Schools

Table 3: Drop Out of Students in Public Secondary Schools

Drop Out of Students		SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
High school drop-out is contributed by the young generation who desire to work for the purpose of earning a living to support their ailing parents, or they do not have someone to support their academic needs.	F	0	1	7	33	63	104
	%	0	1	6.8	31.7	60.5	100
Lack of interest in education investment in students influences a student's decision to drop out of school.	F	0	1	3	34	66	104
	%	0	0.9	2.9	33	63.4	100
Undesirable characteristics of the school's management and pedagogical program influence students' decision to drop out of school.	F	0	0	3	39	62	104
	%	0	0.0	2.9	37.2	59.5	100
The best remedy to reduce school dropout is to teach students their subjects of choice that are career-oriented and meaningful rather than wasting time teaching subjects that are less beneficial in their life.	F	0	1	2	24	76	104
	%	0	0.9	2.3	23.3	73.5	100
Allow schools to be innovative and work closely with society on current problems facing them for the purpose of reducing dropout cases.	F	0	3	2	40	59	104
	%	0.0	2.6	1.9	38.5	56.6	100

Descriptive findings in Table 3 revealed strong agreement that socio-economic pressures and perceived low returns to education significantly influence dropout. For instance, 63 (60.5%) of respondents strongly agreed, and 33 (31.7%) agreed that students drop out due to the need to work and support their families, indicating that economic necessity remains a dominant driver. Similarly, 66 (63.4%) strongly agreed that lack of interest in investing in education influences dropout decisions, suggesting that some students perceive education as less immediately beneficial compared to income-generating activities. In addition, 62 (59.5%) strongly agreed that undesirable school management and pedagogical practices contribute to dropout, highlighting the role of institutional inefficiencies in shaping student disengagement.

Qualitative findings from interviews reinforced these patterns by revealing that many students opt out of school to pursue income opportunities or due to a lack of financial and emotional support at home. As one parent explained, *"Some children leave school because they want to work and support the family since no one can meet their school needs."* Stakeholders further noted that students increasingly view schooling as less rewarding compared to business or informal employment, with some perceiving *"the whole day in school as a waste of time."* At the same time, respondents emphasized potential solutions, with 76 (73.5%) strongly agreeing that offering career-oriented and relevant subjects could reduce dropout, while 59 (56.6%) strongly agreed that schools should adopt innovative approaches and collaborate with communities to address emerging challenges. These views were echoed in qualitative responses, where participants

stressed the need for practical, skills-based learning and flexible education systems aligned with students' socio-economic realities.

The findings demonstrate that dropout is influenced by a combination of economic pressures, negative perceptions of education value, and institutional limitations, thus requiring both structural and curriculum-oriented interventions. These findings are like Papa, Mueller and Miglietta's (2020) study, which noted that retention could be increased if the school management teams were supportive and innovative. They should develop programmes that will attract students to remain in school. A child-friendly environment and parents' involvement should be key strategies to enhance retention and diminish dropout.

6.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 4: Correlation Analysis

		School Dropout	School-based Factors
School Dropout	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
School-based Factors	Pearson Correlation	.705**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	136	136
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

The study results from Pearson Correlation in Table 4 indicated that school-based factors were positively correlated with school dropout cases ($r = 0.705$, $n=136$, $p < 0.01$). The findings showed that when school-based factors are improved, the cases of school dropouts will significantly reduce. Students should be supported fully- socially, morally, economically, and spiritually while learning so as to reduce the number of school dropouts and improve performance in general life.

7. Discussion

The study sought to establish how education stakeholders conceptualize school-based factors that contribute to dropout among secondary school students. Findings revealed that stakeholders perceive a harsh and unfavourable school environment as a major contributor to dropout. It emerged that when school environments are perceived as rigid, punitive, and unsupportive, some students, particularly those struggling with discipline or academic performance, become disengaged and eventually leave school. This suggests that the emotional and physical learning environment plays a critical role in sustaining learner motivation and school attachment.

The study further established that stakeholders view the school curriculum as generally appropriate; however, students who lack academic interest or adequate support perceive it as overly demanding. Such learners, particularly those with weak foundational support from home, often interpret the curriculum as too difficult, which

reduces their motivation to persist. In addition, inadequate staffing and insufficient coverage of syllabus content were identified as key concerns. When schools are perceived as failing to deliver the expected academic outcomes due to teacher shortages or slow curriculum implementation, stakeholders noted that students begin to lose confidence in the value of schooling, increasing their likelihood of dropout.

High teacher expectations were also found to negatively influence students' persistence in school, particularly among low-performing learners. Excessive academic pressure without corresponding academic support was reported to lower students' self-esteem, making some feel incapable of meeting expectations. Consequently, such students opt out of school and pursue alternative livelihoods such as informal employment or early economic activities. Overall, the findings indicate that school-based factors such as learning environment quality, curriculum demands, teacher adequacy, and pedagogical expectations significantly shape students' decision to remain in or exit the schooling system.

The study findings concur with Koskei and Tonui (2015). They explained that the poor academic performance of students is attributed to several factors, including low concentration in classrooms, heavy home chores and sometimes class repetition due to poor performance. The summation of these factors lowers their self-esteem in classwork competency, hence seeking to drop out of school.

These findings are consistent with Structural Functionalism Theory, which views education as a system of interrelated institutions including the school, family, and community that function together to maintain social stability. When one component of the system is dysfunctional, such as the school failing to provide a supportive learning environment or adequate instructional resources, the entire system is affected, resulting in reduced student retention. In this context, school dropout emerges as an outcome of system imbalance, where harsh school environments, complex curricula, inadequate teaching facilities, and excessive academic expectations disrupt the effective functioning of the education system and weaken student integration into schooling.

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that school-based factors play an important role in shaping secondary school dropout in Kesses Sub-County. In particular, a harsh and unsupportive school environment, inadequate learning facilities, demanding curriculum requirements, insufficient teaching support, weak student support systems, and high academic expectations were identified as important factors associated with student dropout.

The findings further indicate that stakeholders' perceptions of the school environment influence students' motivation, engagement, and willingness to remain in school. When schools fail to provide supportive learning conditions and adequate academic assistance, students experiencing academic or social difficulties may become disengaged and eventually leave school. Addressing these school-based challenges

therefore requires supportive learning environments, appropriate instructional resources, responsive teaching practices, and stronger student support systems.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the Ministry of Education should review and strengthen curriculum implementation to ensure that learning content and instructional approaches are appropriate for students with different academic abilities. Schools should also provide adequate teaching and learning resources to support effective curriculum delivery and reduce difficulties associated with academic demands.

Schools should improve the learning environment by strengthening guidance and counselling services, promoting positive teacher–student relationships, and creating supportive conditions for students experiencing academic and social challenges. Teachers should also balance academic expectations with appropriate learner support to prevent excessive academic pressure from discouraging students.

Finally, school management should strengthen collaboration with parents and local communities in identifying students at risk of dropping out and providing timely support. Such collaboration can help schools respond to the academic, social, and economic challenges that influence students' decisions to leave school.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors, Chirchir Micah Kipkurgat, Emmy J. Kipsoi, and Kefa L. Simwa, declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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