Effect of School Culture on Student Dropout in Public Secondary Schools in Vihiga County between 2011 and 2014

Tom Shavisa¹, Judah Mualuko Ndiku² and Amadalo Maurice Musasia³

¹&²Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kakamge, Kenya
³Kaimosi Friends University College

Abstract
In this study five constructs with potentially high toll on students’ dropout were examined. They consist of school examination policy, school discipline, staff attitude, school fees policy and staff gender policy. The sample of the study was 486 respondents; consisting 386 dropouts, 40 PTA chairpersons and 40 principals respectively. The responses from dropouts revealed the magnitude for each construct on student dropout, while that of the PTA chairpersons and principals gave critical explanatory voices about the variables under study. It was found that examination policies and discipline regulations operating in contemporary schools had the main effect on student dropout. The impact of school fees policy was at 49%.

Keywords: Principal, school culture, Examination, Discipline, staff

Introduction
Mutua and Namaswa (1992) found that an education system with more dropout rates is more expensive and internally inefficient. Scheerens (2000), Heyneman and Loxvey (1983), observed that certain schools have definite influence on the learning and attitudes of pupils. This influence is hereby referred to as ‘school effect’. ‘School effect’ had more influence on dropout in developing countries in regard to quality of buildings and class size. The ‘school effect’ also provided positive retention of learners too. In this study the construct under investigation included school examination, school discipline, school fees policies, the influence of staff attitude and gender on dropout. However their respective magnitude on dropouts was uncertain making the study imperative.

Many countries have implemented policies that require high school students to pass exit examinations to obtain regular high school diplomas. However, as the students get into the latter years of high school, educational curriculum and testing became more of a challenge. This frustrates the students who perform poorly resulting to dropout amongst them (Warren and Jenkins, 2005). A study by the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar found out that persistent poor academic performance caused low self confidence in students making them feel out of place. Continous poor performance in internal examinations caused dropout in schools in USA (Fulk,
According to Logan (2010), low academic achievement was the strongest predictor for dropouts. Low grades and low test scores are factors that associated with poor academic achievement. Studies by Alexander, Entwisle and Kabbani (2001) identified low test scores as a factor strongly associated with leaving school among students. Poor performance in examinations ranked second (10%) after poverty (53%) in accounting for drop out of school girls in Edo state, Nigeria (Alika and Egbochuku, 2009).

UNESCO (2011) attribute dropout levels to unconducive examination practices in schools. High dropout rates in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal partly reflect the effects of exam failure or an aversion to risk of failure on the part of students with low achievement levels. In Senegal, the national examination administered on the final grade in schools resulted to high levels of dropout. Students considered unlikely to pass were often held back from sitting this exam while others dropout in order to avoid the costs of exam registration. Studies by the Center for Education Policy (2003) found that exams contribute to increased rates of dropout especially for children from poor families in Virginia. Similarly, Gamoran (2007) found that exit exams led to particularly large increases in the dropout rates of Black students. In contrast, Greene and Marcus, (2005) argues that examinations do not decrease dropout rates or increase graduation rates in school. Schools which perform exemplary in exams attract more students who are eager to excel in the final grade. Dismal performers may persist up to graduation if school examination policies are lenient to accommodate them. On the other hand, schools may retain students who are academically poor but extremely talented in sports to help in winning victories in competition rather than have them exit. In countries where government policies are keen on access and retention of students, poor performers persist in school on this account. In addition, there are social organizations which support under privileged students to acquire education in certain schools. The commitment they give in meeting financial obligations demanded by the school is more lucrative than if the school would have let the underperforming students drop out.

Rumberger and Lim (2008) explain that for students to remain in school, they must remain disciplined by devoting their time and attention to their schoolwork and school activities. Indiscipline through deviant behaviors increases their risk of dropping out. Such behaviors include drug and alcohol use, delinquency, violent behavior, sexual activities and truancy. There was a compelling relationship between discipline and dropout rates. Most students viewed being disciplined as unfair and tormenting. The study by Rodgers (1994) showed that constant negative labels on students, abuse of authority by prefects, students’ poor study habits and students’ restlessness in class were major contributors of indiscipline in schools. According to Rheid (2000) the rules and regulations put in place are meant to guide and control activities in school. However, when they become too much and unenforceable, they tend to breed indiscipline amongst students.

Recent times have witnessed tremendous growth in the incidences of indiscipline in African secondary schools that are a major and continuous administrative problem. In Nigeria, educators, administrators and parents are concerned about the increasing rate of indiscipline amongst students in secondary schools. As a result, a large percentage of students in urban and rural areas
of Nigeria drop out of school due to deviant behavior without fulfilling their potential in school (Abdulamid and Yarduma, 2007).

A study by UNESCO (2005) found that the gender of teachers in a school had a positive effect on retention and completion rates of students. Teachers were role models who were more often emulated by the learners. This called for schools to create gender balanced staff. In most countries, female teachers were the minority. By 2012, women made up 31% of teachers in secondary school of sub-Saharan Africa. Most countries embraced female teacher recruitment as a strategy to encourage girls’ enrollment. Examples were Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal and Niger which focused to achieve gender balance in the teaching fraternity. Studies in Malawi and Uganda cited ‘hidden’ costs are the main cause of dropouts. This secret levies which were charged on uniform, meals, field trips, private tuition, motivational fund, periodic examination and certificates were not receipted; to avoid victimization by the ministry of education. Other approaches used to deny education to students included withholding report cards and refusing to issue textbooks to their children, intimidating and humiliating families who failed to pay. When parents fail to attend annual general meetings, head teachers take advantage to charge extra levies. The government of Kenya directed schools to forward resolutions of annual general meetings to the ministry for approval and interpretation. The extra levies charged are burdensome to poor parents. Contrary to studies, poverty not only leads to school dropouts but also draws pupils to school. A study done by Veerle and Sarah (2008) in Maputo, Mozambique, asserts that education acted as a source of hope to students for future employment and away out of dire poverty. This assertion contradict findings that five students from Nyanza province who were admitted to national schools dropped out due to high fees charged hence making access to public secondary schools by the poor elusive. In addition, the government effort to provide equity and access to quality secondary education through bursaries and scholarship was biased towards rich students. This marginalizes the poor because the amount given for government bursaries was too little to sustain any meaningful students’ retention compared to the fees charged (Maritim, 2008).

A study by Kiveu and Maiyo (2009), observed that cost sharing policy in secondary schools was the cause of increased students’ dropout, absenteeism and repetition. Absenteeism led to poor performance which in turn led to repetition that overburdened the parents who were made to incur extra costs of education. Continued students repetition made students lose interest in schooling. These, coupled with bad governance associated with the distribution of bursary to poor and vulnerable students hence hindering its effectiveness (Wambu, 2012). Due to this, Lesotho, Swaziland, Philippines and Thailand have skewed gender disparity ratio in favour of girls at 140:100 (Hepworth, 2013, Jha, Bakshi and Faria, 2012).

Achoka, (2007), view school principals as key change agents. Their traditional roles of planning, organizing, staffing, leading and controlling are soon diminishing to that of advising of students, parents and teachers. Their advice focuses on emerging issues like drug abuse, poverty, violence and peer pressure; which threaten students’ retention. The principal should initiate a favorable school climate that motivates students to learn. However there is prejudice in the appointment of female principals in many countries, Kenya included. In most OECD countries, women teachers
outnumber the male counterparts, yet few women are appointed as school principals. In Portugal and the Republic of Korea, for example, less than one third of secondary school teachers are female, yet men make up to 61% and 87% respectively of secondary school principals (OECD, 2001).

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of school culture on student dropout in public secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya.

**Research Design**

This study adopted the use of descriptive survey design which facilitated expeditious collection of data from a relatively expansive scope by use of questionnaires and interview schedules.

**Data Analysis**

Inferential statistics used Multinomial Logistic Regression to predict the direction and the magnitude of school culture on student dropout. Qualitative data from interviews were thematically transcribed to highlight the effect of the study constructs on dropout. The findings of the inferential computation were presented in table 1.0 followed by relevant discourses.

**Table 1.0: Multinomial Logistic Regression for School Factors and Student dropout**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>Beta</td>
</tr>
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<td>1 (Constant)</td>
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<td>.314</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.142</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Examination Policy</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Discipline</td>
<td>.271</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Attitude</td>
<td>.280</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.203</td>
<td>.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Fees Policy</td>
<td>.311</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Gender Composition</td>
<td>.268</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** SPSS Output, 2015

A multinomial logistic regression analysis was conducted using school culture as predictors of the direction and magnitude of frequency in student dropout in public secondary schools in Vihiga County. Study findings in table 1.0 indicated that school examination policy had the highest effect on student dropout among all the 5 identified factors of the school culture with a magnitude of 73% contributor effect (Beta 0.282, T 1.325, P < 0.05). The study found that most school policies were examination oriented. The schools had programmed for termly examinations which included full examination papers, several laboratory experiments, Random
Assessment Tests (RATs) and Continuous Assessment Tests (CATs). The RATs were administered during break time and lunchtime. Although examination prompted students for constant revision, those scheduled during breaks denied them quality time for recreation.

Schools had set pass marks for students to achieve in examination. Those who failed were subjected to corporal punishment. This took the form of splitting firewood, slashing, cleaning of classrooms or toilets. Kneeling down for long hours or running around the field for several trips or getting assigned extra academic work formed part of punishment. Some students were flogged yet this had been outlawed. Other students were retained in school after closure for vacation to compensate for the dismal performance or to catch with abstract concepts. The subsequent torture following failure of examination scared off weak students who eventually exited school.

After every examination an academic assembly was convened to announce the performance. During such assemblies, the best performers were rewarded with presents, cash, food items or picnic trips but the poor performers were ridiculed. Poor performers could persist in a class for two terms only, before being asked to exit or forced to repeat on the onset of third term. As a result such students delayed before graduation. As students delayed, the opportunity cost increased, especially those from poor households. The average students got engaged to labor opportunities which put them at risk of dropping out.

Conversely, strict examination policy executed in schools, reinforced students’ persistence and ensured very good results at KCSE. Students with distinguished certificates were certain of placement in premier courses at tertiary colleges and universities. In return, this gave better social and individual returns upon graduation. Alternatively, some schools enacted inhibitive regulations to root out irregularities during examination as cited by one principal;

*The examination policy in this school prohibits any student from cheating in examination. It provide for automatic expulsion for those found. Besides that, students who consistently perform poorly in three consecutive examinations are sent packing. It is also a great offence to leave blank spaces in examination script as it indicates unpreparedness. Laziness is not tolerated from our students at all.*

Another principal observed that:

*Our students are kept academically alert through being examined throughout the year. Every day is an examination day in this school. And every examination is promptly revised.*

One principal in support of students’ motivation asserted:

*Results for every examination are announced on an academic assembly. Top achievers are rewarded by a loaf of bread and a packet of sugar. Occasionally they are taken for academic trips. This is the driving force behind our academic success.*

This study found that school discipline accounted for 67% variance in students’ dropout in public secondary schools in Vihiga county (Beta 0.271, T 1.572, P<0.05). NACADA (2007) found that alcohol, khat and tobacco were the commonly abused drugs. This possibly reflects the overall
current situation of drug abuse among the youth in the country. Most of these drugs are produced and accepted locally in Kenya. From these findings, it can be concluded that students are among the youth who abuse drugs because they are readily available within the school catchment. In homes where parents abuse drugs, students copy this behavior from their parents which is subsequently carried to school (Ngesu, Ndiku & Masese, 2008). This leads to students’ indiscipline in schools. 

Njagi (2014) noted that 82.9% of students who abuse drugs disobey school rules and regulations while 53.9% of them disrupt others leading to poor academic performance. In relation to the foregoing, one principal said:

“This is one of the top most schools in this county. For a long period, the girls perform exemplary well. This is attributed to the high academic and moral discipline orientation to the girls. A student who does not attain academic benchmarks is requested to leave. For example, in the current form four class, there are 251 students. The initial admission in form one was 402 students.”

In this study, staff attitude contributed to 55.1% on dropouts in public secondary schools in Vihiga County (Beta 0.280, T 1.529, and P < 0.05). Teachers tend to treat negatively students who hold low academic expectations. In their effort to improve their results, they eventually coerce them through corporal punishment like by canning. The humiliation and pain inflicted by canning causes panic in them, eventually leading to dropout.

Teachers were found to punish dissident learners by cleaning tasks in schools. These assignments violated the traditional gender roles for either boys or girls. The boys were disgusted when allocated to mop the premises with the view that these were feminine roles. Similarly, girls who were made to clear fields perceived the task as masculine in nature. Those learners who were allocated to clean the toilets or cattle pens perceived the tasks as masculine in nature. Those learners who were allocated to clean the toilets or cattle pens found it dehumanizing especially if it occurred during lessons. This had a negative bearing on students’ attitude and performance eventually leading to dropout (Chugh, 2011). Contrary to the above, one principal reported the following:

*Canning is outlawed. However, there are other forms of corporal punishment in force that are used in moderation. As a school, emphasis is on general civility and decorum among both students and teachers to create a harmonious learning environment and tolerance to each other.*

The phenomenon of sexual harassment had taken a steady rise in Vihiga public secondary schools. Students of both genders were victims of sexual advances from their teachers. However, female students received much brunt from male teachers. This phenomenon was common among teachers in girls and mixed schools. Although boys to male teachers’ sexual relations were reported, the degree was dismal at the time of study. The attitude by teachers to engage in sexual relationships with students cast aspersion to the professional integrity (Ersado, 2005). One PTA chairperson observed the following on issues of carnal knowledge involving teachers and students:

*Indeed, cases of sexual and physical violence between teachers and students have been reported and determined. Normally, evidence is collected and responsible teachers are disciplined. Teachers involved in sexual offences are disciplined by dismissal and removal from the register of teachers by TSC, while other offences are settled at their own merit.*
However, there is a lot of sensitization to teachers through seminars on their professional expectations. In this study, the gender composition of the school had a contributor effect to student dropout at 41% (Beta 0.268, T 1.403, P<0.05). Gender composition analyzed the placement of teachers by sex. The effect of teachers’ gender was pronounced in their pedagogical and administrative roles. This assertion was held by one of the principals who said:

“In this school, women teachers are the majority. Most of them have been teaching here for quite a long time. Initially they had an intimidating approach to students and could constantly abuse them. This leads to conflicts between teachers and students.”

In Ghana, 12% of secondary school teachers were women in 2013. This resulted to severe gender disparities in education against girls. However the retention was high in male dominated schools than female ones. The male teachers were good disciplinarians among girls in girls and mixed schools. However, the presence of more female teachers in girls’ schools allayed safety fears and helped increase girls retention. This is supported by a study in 30 developing countries that found that increasing the number of female teachers in a district increased girls’ access and retention to education (Huisman and Smits, 2009). However other studies by Young (2012); Kellecher, (2008) failed to link the low participation of boys in school or dropout to the gender teachers.

In Lesotho, statistically more girls than boys enroll at secondary education. However, the total enrollment for girls is very low and decreases significantly as they progress to the final grade. In 2009, 64% of girls at secondary school level were out of school. This was accrued to poverty and the impact of HIV/AIDS which greatly influenced students’ dropout in Lesotho. A similar scenario was echoed by a PTA chairperson in Hamisi Sub-county;

“The atrocity of HIV/AIDS pandemic and other sickness has led to increase in the number of orphans who cannot pay fees effectively. The propensity of HIV/AIDS and the accruing opportunistic ailments weaken parents’ and affected learners’ and challenge their participation in school.”

From the foregoing, it is evident that the girl child receives more attention at the expense of the boy child in secondary schools. Most developing countries’ overlook reforms on boys’ enrollment and retention at the expense of girls. This has resulted to severe gender disparity at boys’ expense.

School fees policy was found to influence students dropout up to 49.1 per cent (Beta 0.311, T 1.309, P<0.05). Among the study constructs, school fees policy prevailing in secondary schools was ranked fourth. This means school fees policy contributed to almost a half of the dropouts in the student cohort of 2011-2014. From the educational planners’ perspective, the human resources wastages associated with fee policy resources invested in these students were not optimally utilized to sustain retention and completion of secondary cycle of education.

Schools that charged high school fees had high dropout rates than those that charged fewer fees. In Kenya guidelines issued by the ministry of education in 2015 restricted annual fee for boarding schools at 53,553 shillings and for day schools at 9374 shillings. The fee guidelines
were criticized for setting very high charges for various school categories than the prevailing ones. However, some public schools within Vihiga County were found to charge double this threshold. In day schools, provision for lunch or development levy was unavailable despite the need. This made it impossible to retain students without lunch in day schools especially for those from underprivileged families. It was also tricky to fund pre existing infrastructural projects. This study established that day schools contributed to the highest number of dropouts and the trend was skewed more to boys than girls. Studies by Kiage (2014), observed that boarding fees is the largest vote head schools. This accounted for 41.86 percent. The study found that fees related factors accounted for 49.1% of dropout. However, the previous study indicated that other levies like examination fees, students personal shopping, fare and uniform accounted for 10.7%, 9.07% and 7.19% of the total cost respectively. A government subsidy alone cannot keep a student in boarding secondary school without fee compliments from parents. One of the PTA chairpersons responded in the affirmative to this findings by saying:

*There is general agreement among parents that fees is paid in first and second term only. This is essential for proper planning. However all parents contribute to a mandatory bursary fund that is managed by parents’ association. This is part of their cooperate responsibility to needy students in this school. Able parents are encouraged to adopt needy students for financial assistance as well. This arrangement on fees has served us well by retaining bright but needy students who would otherwise drop out.*

A PTA chairperson had contrary view over fee payments in relation to students’ retention:

*In as much as we appreciate the government subsidy to fees and KCSE examinations, our parents still lag behind in fee payment. Majority of the fee defaulters are form four parents.*

**Conclusion**

Most students drop out of public secondary school due to rigours of examination schedules and the high threshold of the accompanying targets. The students who fail to achieve desirable benchmark in examinations consequently are coerced to drop out of school. Similarly errant students exit from school due to incompatibility to the regulations that direct school discipline. Imbalanced staffing of teachers in regard to gender and the teachers’ emotional attitudes severally had a magnitude 55% and 41% significant effect on student dropout. This study found that school fees no longer had the foremost effect on dropout due to availability of assorted fee subsidies currently available for secondary education in Kenya. However admissions of students from disadvantaged families negatively expose the internal inefficiency of most public secondary schools on account of increased dropout rate.

**Recommendations**

All preparatory examinations that are conducted termly or annually be banned in Kenya due to consequential phobia, stress and exorbitant expenses associated with them. Instead the government permits and fully fund, only one final examination administered at the end of the secondary education for the purpose of certification. Moreover the need to provide diversified disciplines for examination is urgent to enable the students to specialize where they excel most.
Teachers’ Service Commission should audit and forecast training to the relevant skills and gender. Frequent capacity building courses for teachers are important to address affective challenges associated with negative attitudes.

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