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Economic Support Programs and Student Participation in Schooling in Public Secondary Schools in Meru County, Kenya

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigated the effectiveness of economic support programs on student participation in schooling in public secondary schools in Meru County, Kenya. The research examined how bursaries, scholarships, work-study programs, and alternative fee payment modes influence student engagement in educational activities.

Methodology: A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining descriptive and correlational research designs. The study sampled 331 respondents from 1,903 participants, including 13 principals, 12 Parent Association chairpersons, 147 class teachers, 144 student leaders, and 3 Constituency Development Fund managers. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, self-report questionnaires, and focus group discussions. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and inferential statistics (Chi-square tests), while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.

Results: Descriptive findings revealed that only 33.06% of class teachers and 24.36% of student leaders confirmed readily accessible economic support programs in their schools. Chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 = 12.909$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrated that economic support programs significantly influence student participation in schooling. The Contingency Coefficient measure indicated that 28.4% of the total variance in student participation could be attributed to economic support programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Economic support programs are effective in facilitating student participation in schooling; however, their accessibility remains critically low in public secondary schools. The study recommends enhanced implementation of economic support initiatives, improved coordination between stakeholders, and diversification of funding sources to ensure sustainable access to these programs.

Keywords: Economic support programs, student participation, bursaries, scholarships, work-study programs, secondary education, Meru County

I. Introduction

Student participation in schooling represents a fundamental component of educational success, encompassing active engagement in curricular and co-curricular activities, consistent school attendance, and meaningful classroom involvement. The significance of this participation extends beyond individual academic achievement to encompass broader societal development and human capital formation. In Kenya, particularly within Meru County, challenges related to student participation have been consistently documented, with economic constraints identified as a primary barrier to sustained educational engagement.

The economic dimension of education access has gained considerable attention in educational discourse, with scholars and policymakers recognizing that financial barriers can significantly impede student participation regardless of other favorable conditions. Economic support programs, including bursaries, scholarships, work-study opportunities, and alternative fee payment mechanisms, represent critical interventions designed to address these financial obstacles and enhance student participation in schooling.

Statement of the Problem

Public secondary schools in Meru County continue to experience challenges related to student participation in schooling, manifested through irregular attendance, limited engagement in co-curricular activities, and suboptimal academic performance. Despite various interventions implemented by the government and stakeholders, the effectiveness of economic support programs in addressing these challenges remains inadequately understood. The persistent nature of these participation challenges, coupled with the significant investment in economic support initiatives, necessitates a comprehensive evaluation of their effectiveness in facilitating student engagement in schooling.

Research Objective

The study aimed to find out the effectiveness of economic support programs on students' participation in schooling in public secondary schools in Meru County, Kenya.

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II. Literature Review

Theoretical Review

The theoretical foundation for understanding economic support programs and student participation draws from multiple perspectives, including human capital theory and social constructivism theory. Human capital theory posits that investment in education, including financial support mechanisms, yields return for both individuals and society. This theory provides a framework for understanding how economic support programs can enhance student participation by removing financial barriers that might otherwise prevent sustained educational engagement.

Social constructivism theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions and institutional structures in shaping educational experiences. From this perspective, economic support programs represent institutional interventions that can reshape the social context of education, enabling students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to participate meaningfully in schooling.

Empirical Review

Research on economic support programs and student participation has demonstrated varied outcomes across different contexts. Samba (2022) examined the influence of financing initiatives on student participation in university education in The Gambia, establishing a positive significant correlation between financial support and student participation. The study revealed that increased funding support led to enhanced student engagement in educational activities.

Similarly, Mobegi and Kara (2022) investigated methods of financing university education and their implications for access, quality, and completion rates. Their findings indicated that inadequate funding allocation negatively affected student access, academic progression, and completion rates. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds resorted to manual labor to supplement their education costs, which compromised class attendance and learning outcomes.

International studies have also highlighted the critical role of economic support in educational participation. Research in various developing countries has shown that financial constraints represent one of the most significant barriers to sustained educational engagement, particularly at the secondary level where opportunity costs become more pronounced.

III. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive and correlational research designs to comprehensively examine the effectiveness of economic support programs on student participation in public secondary schools in Meru County, Kenya. A total of 331 respondents were purposively and randomly sampled from 1,903 participants, comprising 13 principals, 12 Parent Association chairpersons, 147 class teachers, 144 student leaders, and 3 Constituency Development Fund managers. Data was collected through self-report questionnaires for class teachers and student leaders, semi-structured interviews with administrators and PA chairpersons, and focus group discussions with student leaders. Content validity was established through expert consultations at Chuka University, while construct validity was confirmed through Exploratory Factor Analysis (factor loadings > 0.4). A pilot study in Tharaka Nithi County with 67 respondents ensured instrument reliability, achieving Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.829 for class teachers and 0.822 for student leaders. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and inferential statistics (Chi-square tests) via SPSS version 27.0, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes related to economic support program effectiveness.

IV. Results and Discussion

The study sought to find out the effectiveness of economic support programmes on students' participation in schooling in public secondary schools in the Meru County, Kenya. Economic support programs included bursaries, scholarships, work-study programs, and alternative payment modes, as essential for students' ability to attend school regularly and enhance their participation in schooling. Both class teachers and student leaders expressed concerns over the adequacy and accessibility of these programs as reported in the findings.

Response Rate

The study achieved a response rate of 96.7% from the targeted sample of 331 respondents, ensuring robust data collection across all participant categories.

Table 1: Response Rate

Respondent	Sample	Responses	Percentage
Principals	15	13	87%
PA chairpersons	15	13	87%
Class teachers	149	147	99%
Student leaders	149	144	97%

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CDF fund managers	3	3	100%
Total	331	319	96.7%

Source: Survey Data (2024)

Reliability Results

Table 2 presents the reliability results for economic support program scales where all items exceeded the recommended threshold for social research of 0.70.

Section	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**No. Items**
Class Teachers	0.829	5
Student Leaders	0.822	5
Economic Support Programs	0.81	5

Source: Survey Data (2024)

Descriptive and Qualitative Findings per Variable

Descriptive findings

The extent to which aspects of economic support programs contribute to students' participation in schooling in Meru County secondary schools was assessed using five Likert scaled statements for class teachers and student leaders. The Cronbach Alpha for statement from class teachers were 0.829 while that from student leaders was 0.822 making both relatively reliable. Table 3 presents descriptive data obtained from class teachers.

Table 3: Economic Support Programs (Class Teachers).

Learners readily access;	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Bursary programs.	20.4	42.9	2.0	31.3	3.4	100.0
Financial aid programs like scholarships	21.8	47.6	2.0	24.5	4.1	100.0
Work study programs for the needy	25.9	53.7	8.2	6.8	5.4	100.0
Alternative fee payment modes such as supply of firewood/foodstuffs.	20.4	16.3	18.4	30.6	14.3	100.0
Individual and group donations.	9.5	35.4	10.2	33.3	11.6	100.0

SD-Strongly Disagree; D-Disagree; N-Neutral; A-Agree; SA-Strongly Agree

Information obtained from the table on class teachers indicates that slightly more than a third of the sampled teachers (34.7%) confirmed that students in their schools readily benefit from bursary programs, more than a quarter (28.6%) could readily access financial aid programs like scholarships while only an eighth (12.2%) had work study programs for the needy. Similarly, less than half of the sampled class teachers indicated that their learners could readily access alternative fee payment modes such as supply of firewood/foodstuffs (44.9%) as well as individual and group donations (44.9%). The above findings show that about a third of the sampled (33.06%) class teachers confirmed that learners in their schools could readily access economic support programs while majority felt that these programs are not readily accessible.

Information was also sought from student leaders and findings presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Economic Support Programs (Student Leaders)

Learners readily access;	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Bursary programs.	17.2	19.5	14.9	25.3	23.0	100.0
Financial aid programs like scholarships	28.7	50.6	8.0	9.2	3.4	100.0
Work study programs for the needy	20.7	48.3	23.0	4.6	3.4	100.0
Alternative fee payment modes such as supply of firewood/foodstuffs.	32.2	23.0	17.2	16.1	11.5	100.0
Individual and group donations.	19.5	33.3	21.9	13.8	11.5	100.0

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SD-Strongly Disagree; D-Disagree; N-Neutral; A-Agree; SA-Strongly Agree

Information obtained from the table on student leaders show that less than half of the sampled student leaders (48.3%) confirmed that students from their schools can readily access bursary programs, about an eighth (12.6%) indicated that they could readily access financial aid programs like scholarships less than this proportion (8.0%) said their schools had work study programs for the needy. Similarly, more than a quarter of the sampled student leaders indicated that students in their school could readily access alternative fee payment modes such as supply of firewood/foodstuffs (27.6%) and that they could readily access individual and group donations (25.3%). From the findings it is evidenced that only about a quarter of the sampled (24.36%) student leaders confirmed that students in their schools could readily access economic support programs.

Inferential Analysis

The study thus sought to assess the effectiveness of economic support programs in facilitating student participation in schooling. Quantitative data obtained on aspects of economic support programs was cross tabulated against aspects of students' participation. Table 5 presents findings on cross-tabulation while Table 25 its Chi-square interpretation. Results from cross tabulation showed that fewer teachers (43.5%) reported high student participation in schooling, a greater proportion (23.8%) indicating high community school infrastructure support compared to those who had a low level of support (19.7%).

Table 5: Economic Support Programs and Students' Participation (Cross-tabulation)

			Economic support program		
			Low	High	Total
Student participation	Low	f	71	12	83
		%	48.3%	8.2%	56.5%
	High	f	38	26	64
		%	25.9%	17.7%	43.5%
	Total	f	109	38	147
		%	74.1%	25.9%	100.0%

Regarding community school infrastructure support, fewer teachers (40.8%) indicated a high level of support compared to those who reported low support (59.2%). Table 6 presents an inferential interpretation of this observation.

Table 6: Economic Support Programs and Students' Participation (Chi-Square)

	Value	df	Ass Sig.	Exact Sig,	CC
Pearson Chi-Square	12.909[a]	1	0.000		0.284
Continuity Correction[b]	11.580	1	0.001		
Likelihood Ratio	12.968	1	0.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				0.000	
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.821	1	0.000		
N of Valid Cases	147				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 20.52.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Chi square results $X^2(1) = 12.909$, $p<0.001$ showed that economic support programs significantly influence student participation in schooling. Contingency Coefficient measure of Association (CC) illustrated that 28.4% of the total variance in student participation in schooling could be attributed to economic support programs. Findings therefore mean that economic support programs are effective in facilitating students' participation in schooling.

Qualitative findings

The study sought to understand the effectiveness of economic support programmes on students' participation in schooling in public schools in Meru County. Qualitative data collected from targeted principals, PA chairpersons, CDF fund managers and students in Focus group discussions is analyzed b. The responses of interviewees were recorded as indicated.

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Interviewee P1:	The school is not well supported in sufficient allocation by NGCDF and other bursary programs. There is also a noted lack of transparency in fund allocation coupled with Late disbursement of allocated funds."
Interviewee P3-P5:	Few students benefit with roughly 20% receive bursary. Bursary given not sufficient to clear their school fees as the amount allocated is small and criteria for allocation not fair.
Interviewee P7:	Bursary allocation is fair though it doesn't meet expectations. Learners get between 2000-3000 shillings per academic term which is not adequate. Makes parents reluctant to pay fees before its allocation."
Interviewee PAC2:	Bursary funds allocate are not adequate. The criteria used is not involving and there are delays in disbursement. Issuance of bursary cheques not centralized."
Interviewee FGD 15:	Not many students get bursaries. The majority apply but only a few get. I feel that there is Favoritism in its allocation.
Interviewee FGD 43:	Bursaries allocated are mainly MP and governor bursaries. These are Mostly pegged on student performance and given to the bright and needy only."

Qualitative findings revealed significant challenges with bursary programs that undermined their effectiveness in supporting students' education, with principals highlighting transparency issues and delayed disbursement from the National Government Constituencies Development Fund (NGCDF) and other bursary programs that created financial uncertainty for students and families, as only about 20% of students received bursary support with inadequate individual allocations of Kenya shillings 2,000 to 3,000 per term that failed to cover school fees, causing parents to delay fee payments while awaiting bursary assistance and further complicating school financial management. PA chairpersons corroborated these concerns by emphasizing inadequate funding, non-inclusive allocation criteria, delayed disbursement, and complications from non-centralized cheque issuance, while student leaders expressed frustration with perceived favoritism, noting that despite many applications, few students received support and observing that MP and governor bursaries were primarily awarded to high-performing students from disadvantaged backgrounds, creating a narrow beneficiary pool. Despite their crucial role in enabling educational access regardless of economic background, bursary programs fell short of expectations, with county and sub-county schools showing greater reliance on these programs compared to national and extra-county schools, suggesting disparities in support mechanisms, leading respondents to conclude that inadequate amounts, opaque criteria, and delayed disbursement significantly affected student participation in schooling, highlighting the gap between program importance and implementation effectiveness.

The researcher sought to establish the views of the Fund managers on the question of allocation of funding. Responses were as indicated below:

Interviewee CDF 1:	Range depends on the availability of finances per year. Ranges from 3000 in day schools to 6000 in boarding schools per student for school fees allocation.in an academic term"
Interviewee CDF 2:	"Students can be awarded full or partial scholarships. Ranges between 50000 to 60000 per year."
Interviewee CDF 3:	Range differs from student to student and day school boarding schools to universities, depending on the individual needs and fund availability."
Interviewee CDF 1:	Mostly based on the needy students from vulnerable backgrounds."
Interviewee CDF 2:	There is a committee that is comprised of the local community representatives (parents) and the local administration (chief, subchief, Assistant County commissioner ACC)."
Interviewee CDF 3:	In my constituency, there is a constituency executive committee involved in advising on the allocation of funds."

CDF fund managers confirmed that bursaries constituted a crucial component of financial support for students in need, with allocation amounts determined by annual fund availability, student need levels, and educational requirements. According to CDF1 and CDF2, financial support varied significantly, ranging from 3,000 Kenya shillings per term for day school students to 6,000 Kenya shillings for boarding students, while full or partial scholarships reached 50,000 to 60,000 Kenya shillings annually, with allocations differing based on individual circumstances and distinctions made between day and boarding school students as well as university attendees. CDF3 noted that the allocation process emphasized socioeconomic background as the primary criterion, prioritizing students from vulnerable backgrounds for greater support through a structured committee system comprising local community representatives including parents and local administration officials such as chiefs, sub-chiefs, and Assistant County Commissioners, with the constituency executive committee providing additional advisory oversight to ensure the process balanced community input with official guidance. CDF managers 1, 2, and 3 emphasized high public involvement in the allocation process, reflecting the fund's community-centered approach to educational support, though despite these systematic procedures, the effectiveness of bursary programs remained constrained by limited annual fund availability and varying student needs across different educational levels and school types.

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The study also sought to establish the policies that guide the allocation process of CDF funds from CDF fund managers. Their responses were recorded as follows;

Interviewee CDF 1: Yes. Every constituency has its own policy. Depending on the population, number of students, and project priorities."

Interviewee CDF 2: We are guided by the NG-CDF Act 2015, amended in 2016."

Interviewee CDF 3: We are guided by the 2023/24 circular on NG-CDF."

Data obtained from the CDF fund managers indicated that each constituency had its own policy framework tailored to its specific needs. These policies considered the population size, the number of students seeking bursaries, and the project's priorities within the constituency. Interviewee CDF1 confirmed that every constituency formulated its own policies based on these factors. Additionally, the managers emphasized that they were guided by overarching national regulations, such as the National Government CDF Act. Interviewee CDF2 noted that they adhered to the NG-CDF Act 2015, which was amended in 2016, while Interviewee CDF3 mentioned that they also followed the directives outlined in the 2023/24 circular on NG-CDF. These policies and regulations provided a structured approach to fund allocation, ensuring that the process was responsive to local needs while remaining compliant with national guidelines.

Financial aid programs, including scholarships, play a vital role in supporting students from low-income backgrounds by covering tuition fees and other educational expenses, allowing them to pursue their studies without disruptions. The interviewees gave the following responses on financial aid programs.

Interviewee P1: We have received a few scholarships from bodies like Wings to Fly, KCB foundations, Elimu scholarships, and County governments."

Interviewee P3: Two students from marginalized areas have benefited from the Elimu scholarship."

Interviewee PAC5: MCA’s scholarship BOM scholarship and Alumni scholarships available though they are not fully funded to sustain the learner throughout the course."

Interviewee PAC8: The school receives financial aid from the BOM scholarships, church organizations, and community based like SISEF."

Interviewee PAC11: No scholarships from anyone including wealthy people in the community. A few benefits from the MP scholarship."

Interviewee FGD 2: The school only has BOM scholarships, but these were pegged on performance – students with over 350 marks."

Interviewee FGD 23: "Students benefit from sponsorships funded by different organizations e.g., Wings to Fly, KCB foundation, Coop Bank Foundation, Elimu Foundation, Alumni. Pegged on performance."

Interviewee FGD 32: No sponsorships available."

Interviewee FGD 54: Students benefit from sponsorships funded by different organizations e.g., Wings to Fly, Mastercard Foundation, KCB foundation, Coop Bank Foundation, Elimu Foundation, and Alumni. Pegged on performance."

Data revealed that while interviewees were familiar with scholarship programs, beneficiaries were typically limited to students from marginalized areas or those with exceptional academic performance, with funding coming from diverse sources including local MPs, MCAs, alumni associations, foundations such as Wings to Fly and KCB Foundation, Elimu Scholarships, Board of Management initiatives, church organizations, community-based groups like the South Imenti Schools Education Fund (SISEF), and county governments. Parents' representatives provided varying perspectives on availability, with PAC5 highlighting scholarships from MCAs, BOM, and alumni that were often partially funded and insufficient to sustain students throughout their education, PAC8 indicating financial aid from BOM scholarships, church organizations, and community-based groups like SISEF, while PAC11 reported limited availability with only a few benefiting from MP scholarships and no support from wealthy community members. Student leaders confirmed that BOM scholarships existed but were performance-based, requiring students to achieve over 350 marks for eligibility, with FGD23 and FGD54 noting that students benefited from sponsorships through organizations like Wings to Fly, KCB Foundation, Coop Bank Foundation, Elimu Foundation, and alumni networks that emphasized academic performance as key criteria, though FGD32 reported no available sponsorships in their school. The findings demonstrated that the presence or absence of economic support programs significantly influenced students' participation in schooling, with these programs serving as either facilitators or barriers to educational engagement in public secondary schools across Meru County.

The role of the CDF in providing financial aid programs including scholarships was espoused by the fund managers as an essential role they played in supporting students who face financial challenges. The Interviewees responses were as indicated.

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Interviewee CDF 1: Scholarships are advertised followed by application vetting and awarding of said scholarships."

Interviewee CDF 2: Awarded according to the needs."

Interviewee CDF 3: The NG-CDF committee members visit the homes of the applicants and choose those to be awarded depending on the funds available."

From the information above, CDF fund managers emphasized the essential role it plays in providing financial aid including scholarships to support students facing financial challenges. All Interviewees confirmed that their offices were involved in awarding both partial and full scholarships to students within their constituencies. Interviewee CDF1 for instance explained that the scholarship process involved advertising, application vetting, and awarding the scholarships. Interviewee CDF2 noted that scholarships are awarded based on student needs, ensuring that those in the direst financial situations receive assistance. Interviewee CDF3 elaborated that NG-CDF committee members visit applicants' homes to verify their financial needs before deciding on scholarship awards, which depend on available funds. This thorough process aims to ensure that financial aid reaches students who genuinely require support, allowing them to continue their education without financial burden.

Information on work-study programs provide students with opportunities to earn money to cover their educational expenses while gaining valuable work experience. Equally, alternative fee payment modes also provided student with options to pay their outstanding fees and thus stay in school. Responses from the Interviewees concerning these programs noted that:

Interviewee P1-P4: This is a common theme in the school where parents provide maize, beans, Green grams, firewood and animals as a form of fees payment. I also hire students and their parents over the holidays and utilize part of their wages as fees payment."

Interviewee P10-P11: This is not offered by the school."

Interviewee P12: we are involved in Planting and maintaining trees by learners to cater for school fees."

Interviewee FGD 13: Available for both students and parents over the holidays in construction of the school. All hires of non-teaching staff within the school are sourced first from the students and their parents before sourcing for staff elsewhere."

Interviewee FGD 26: Students are sometimes engaged to do school cleaning, arrange the library, and conduct repair and maintenance in the school. Student engaged in planting and maintaining trees for fees."

Interviewee FGD 59: Payment through kind including cereals, animals, firewood, construction material, milk supply, Napier grass. Though very limited"

The researcher investigated the implementation of work-study programs in schools and the types of work available to students, finding that these programs were mainly practiced in sub-county schools while most other schools were unfamiliar with the concept, though some students expressed interest in introducing these programs believing they would help alleviate the burden of school fees on their parents. P12 noted that their school involved students in planting and maintaining trees as a means to cover school fees, while FGD13 concurred that during school construction projects, both students and parents were hired with non-teaching staff sourced from the student body and their families before seeking external candidates, and FGD26 added that students sometimes engaged in tasks like school cleaning, library organization, repairs, and tree maintenance, though majority of respondents noted that these programs were not often offered in most schools. Respondents also noted that some schools offered alternative fee payment options through goods and services rather than cash, with goods including cereals, firewood, animals, construction materials, milk, and Napier grass, while services involved hiring students or their parents for various tasks such as cleaning the school, participating in construction projects, or performing casual labor during school holidays. P1 through P4 noted that parents commonly provided maize, beans, green grams, firewood, and animals as fee payment, with students and their parents being hired during holidays and part of their wages going toward fees, while P10 and P11 reported that their schools did not offer these programs.

Economic support to students was also assessed through group or individual donations. Responses from sampled principals, parents' representatives and students' leaders were recorded as follows:

Interviewee P1: There is Low support by the alumni and the church."

Interviewee P2-4: These donations are mainly given as Church donations, orphans and children's fund, SOS program."

Interviewee PAC3: Donations given as Church donations, BOM donations to the needy and performing."

Interviewee PAC8: None."

Interviewee FGD 33: Yes. We have a few cases of individuals like the local MP and MCA making donations."

FGD B: Rarely happens/found."

Interviewee FGD 43: Few donations from well-to-do community members, members of the board, politicians, alumni, etc."

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From the findings interviewees indicated that most schools experienced a lack of these contributions, and many felt that support from individuals and organizations in the area was generally low. Some Interviewees perceived that the few donations made by individuals were politically motivated and intended to enhance the donor's societal and political standing. For instance, Interviewee P1 observed limited support from alumni and the church, while Interviewees P2 and P4 noted that donations were primarily made through church programs, such as the Orphans and Children's Fund and save our souls (SOS) programs. Similarly, Interviewee PAC3 reported that donations came from the church and the Board of Management (BOM) to support needy and high-performing students, whereas Interviewee PAC8 noted the absence of donations altogether. Interviewee FGD33 acknowledged occasional donations from individuals like the local MP and MCA, while FGD B described such contributions as rare. Additionally, Interviewee FGD43 mentioned that a few donations came from affluent community members, board members, politicians, and alumni.

V. Discussion of findings

The study examined the effectiveness of economic support programmes on students' participation in schooling in public secondary schools in Meru County, Kenya. The study found that economic support programs, encompassing bursaries, scholarships, work-study programs, and alternative fee payment modes, are essential for students' regular school attendance, though their accessibility remains significantly limited.

Bursary programs emerged as the most accessible form of economic support, with 34.7% of teachers and 48.3% of student leaders confirming ready access. However, this indicates that only about half of respondents can readily access these programs. Qualitative findings revealed that bursary programs are crucial for students who would otherwise be unable to afford education, ensuring access regardless of economic background. The study identified an over-reliance on bursaries among parents, particularly in county and sub-county schools, while national and extra-county schools demonstrated less dependence on such programs. These findings align with Tanui et al. (2022), who highlighted the complex relationship between bursary-based revenue streams and educational outcomes in Kenya's North Rift Region.

Financial aid programs, including scholarships, showed more limited accessibility, with only 28.6% of teachers and 12.6% of student leaders reporting ready access. Despite this limitation, qualitative data confirmed that scholarships play a crucial role in supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds by covering tuition fees and educational expenses. The programs were funded through diverse sources including MP foundations, MCAs, alumni financing, Wings to Fly, KCB Foundation, church organizations, and community-based groups, though beneficiaries were primarily limited to students from marginalized areas and exceptional performers.

Alternative fee payment modes, such as supplying firewood and foodstuffs, were accessible to 44.9% of teachers and 27.6% of student leaders. These programs provided flexibility for parents struggling with traditional cash payments, allowing them to contribute goods like cereals, firewood, animals, and construction materials, or services such as cleaning and construction work. The study found these arrangements primarily implemented in sub-county schools, with many other institutions unfamiliar with the concept.

Individual and group donations showed similar accessibility rates, with 44.9% of teachers and 25.3% of student leaders reporting ready access. While these donations from alumni, community members, and organizations could significantly supplement school funding, most schools lacked such support. Respondents noted generally low community support, with some viewing donations as politically motivated rather than educationally focused.

The overall assessment revealed that only 33.06% of teachers and 24.36% of student leaders confirmed adequate access to economic support programs across their schools, indicating minimal accessibility for most public secondary schools. However, inferential analysis demonstrated that economic support programs significantly influence student participation in schooling ($\chi^2(1) = 12.909$, $p < 0.001$), with 28.4% of the total variance in student participation attributed to these programs. This finding corroborates research by Samba (2022) and Mobegi and Kara (2022), who established positive correlations between financial support and educational participation while highlighting the inadequacy of current funding methods. The study concluded that while economic support programs are effective in facilitating students' participation in schooling, their limited accessibility represents a critical barrier to enhanced educational engagement in Meru County's public secondary schools.

VI. Conclusion

The study conclusively established that economic support programs are highly effective in facilitating student participation in schooling in public secondary schools in Meru County, Kenya, with statistical analysis demonstrating that these programs account for 28.4% of the variance in student participation, indicating their substantial impact on educational engagement. However, despite their proven effectiveness, the research revealed a critical implementation gap, as only about one-third of schools provided adequate access to economic support initiatives such as bursaries, scholarships, and work-study programs. This disconnect between program effectiveness and accessibility represents a significant systemic challenge that undermines optimal student participation in schooling. The findings support the theoretical proposition that economic barriers constitute major obstacles to educational participation, and while well-implemented economic support programs can effectively address these challenges, their current implementation in Meru County falls short of meeting student needs. The study therefore concludes that although economic support programs are necessary and effective tools for enhancing student participation in schooling, their limited accessibility across the majority of public secondary schools in Meru County represents a critical barrier that must be addressed to maximize their potential impact on educational outcomes.

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VII. Recommendations

Research outcomes demonstrate that social-based interventions serve crucial functions in promoting learner engagement in schooling. Qualitative and quantitative findings also illustrated the low effectiveness of access by schools to the sociological interventions implying that more effort needs to be put in place to enhance public secondary schools' access to these interventions to enhance students' participation in schooling. Specifically, it is recommended that concerted efforts should be put in place to ensure that:

The schools' Board of Management in collaboration with school management should put strategies to enhance parental involvement. Specific areas of focus could include regular communication strategies with parents through newsletters, social media platforms, parent-teacher meetings, and workshops to educate them on the importance of their involvement in their children's education.

The schools' Boards of Management in collaboration with other stakeholders should strive to enhance the level of parental involvement in their students' schooling. This may be through the introduction of activities that require attendance of both parents and the students through active participation in PTA's, Attending School Events, providing opportunities for parents to volunteer as assistant teachers, guidance and counselling officers, mentors, and encouraging participation in extracurricular activities.

Parents should be implored to provide more academic support to their students through stocking the library, providing formalized tutoring services, providing mentoring and counselling services, and other support as required by the students.

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