Factors influencing high and low performance in Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations: A comparative study of primary schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Examinations serve as gatekeepers in educational systems, determining learners' progression and career trajectories. In Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya, some primary schools consistently performed well in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations between 1995 and 1999, while others persistently performed poorly. Understanding the factors accounting for this variation is critical for educational planning. This study aimed to identify factors leading to high performance in some primary schools and low performance in others within Tharaka Nithi County. A comparative descriptive survey design was employed. Four consistently high-performing and four consistently low-performing schools were purposively sampled from 105 schools over five years (1995–1999). Participants included 37 Standard 8 teachers (78.4% male, 91.9% professionally qualified), 8 head teachers, former pupils, parents, and education officers. Data were collected using validated questionnaires ($\alpha = 0.501$), interview schedules, and observation checklists. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used. High-performing schools demonstrated: (a) excellent administrative organization with regular staff meetings (82.3% of teachers agreed this contributed to performance); (b) high teacher commitment (81.0% agreed/strongly agreed teachers were committed); (c) motivated learners through prize-giving systems (54% disagreed that learners were poorly motivated); (d) disciplined environments (73.0% disagreed that learners were undisciplined); (e) provision of breakfast and lunch for teachers, enabling extended learning hours from 6:30 AM. Low-performing schools exhibited: poor financial management (48.6% agreed poor management leads to low performance), teachers residing >1 km from school (78.4%), unstable parental occupations (81.1%), and high parental illiteracy (67.6% of fathers and 67.5% of mothers were non-literate). Socioeconomic factors were paradoxically both a hindrance (lack of resources) and a motivator (desire to escape poverty). School administration quality, teacher commitment, pupil discipline, and motivation systems are stronger determinants of KCPE performance than socioeconomic status alone. Interventions should focus on strengthening school leadership, teacher welfare, and community engagement.

Keywords: KCPE Performance, Primary Education, School Administration, Teacher Commitment, Pupil Discipline, Socioeconomic Factors, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

Examinations are used as sieves through which learners must pass after undergoing educational programs, determining their destiny either positively or negatively (Pearce, 1972). Bray, Clarke, and Stephen (1986) support this view, noting that examinations help individuals determine their abilities and make career decisions while also serving employers as indicators of student ability. In Kenya, Okechi and Asiachi (1992) affirm that national examinations have been used for many years as a yardstick to measure the achievement of curriculum objectives, with the Kenya National Examination Council awarding certificates for public examinations.

The importance of primary education in Kenya cannot be overstated. The Republic of Kenya (1998) provides overwhelming research evidence that a minimum of educational attainments among the majority of a country's population is a prerequisite for modern development. Investment in primary education yields higher returns for individuals, households, and society compared to post-primary subsectors, improving economic productivity in both formal and informal sectors, reducing fertility and infant mortality, improving family health and nutrition, and increasing civic participation (Republic of Kenya, 1998, p. 55). Somerset (1974) further emphasizes that the primary school examination determines the whole destiny of a child – passing well leads to government secondary school entry and ultimately incomes ten to a hundred times the per capita average, while failure results in lifetime earnings not much more than those with normal education.

Despite this recognized importance, examination performance varies significantly across schools. In Tharaka Nithi County (curved from the former Tharaka-Nithi District in 1998), statistics from the District Education Office revealed that schools in the former Tharaka Division had not performed well from 1998 down to 1995. While results improved after district creation and acquisition of a national examination code in 1999, some schools consistently performed well while others persistently performed poorly in the KCPE examinations.

This study was therefore set out to identify the factors that made some schools perform better while others performed poorly. In the absence of empirical evidence regarding primary school performance in Tharaka Nithi County, the variation between high-performing and low-performing schools remained unresolved. The specific objectives guiding this study were: (a) to find out the factors which led to high performance among some schools in Tharaka Nithi County; and (b) to find out the factors which led to low performance in some schools in the district. The following research questions were formulated: In which way does the organization of the school administration contribute to pupils' good KCPE performance? Do socio-economic factors influence KCPE performance?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in motivation theory and learning theory. According to Myers (1989), motivation is a need or desire that serves to energize behavior and direct it towards a goal (p. 349). Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides the basis for understanding motivation in educational contexts. Learners require motivation from school, family, and community to study and pass examinations well. Motivation is cyclical in nature: good performance motivates parents to provide resources and prizes, which further motivates school administration to support learning.

Thorndike's stimulus-response theory (as cited in Schunk, 1996) postulates that associations or connections are formed in learning, with responses to stimuli strengthened when followed by satisfying consequences. Teachers should reward pupils' responses to strengthen behavior – commending pupils for good performance motivates learning (Schunk, 1996, p. 62). Additionally, Gestalt psychology emphasizes that perception is crucial in learning, enabling learners to organize and interpret sensory information to meet educational objectives.

2.2 Organization of School Administration

The organization of school administration is crucial for learning. The school environment and general climate determine, to a great extent, what takes place in the classroom (Orlosky et al., 1984). Effective principals have a vision of what a good school is and systematically strive to bring that vision to life, ensuring teachers are not interrupted in their teaching and that necessary facilities and materials are in place (US Department of Education, 1986, p. 50).

Bell (1988) emphasizes that power and responsibilities within a school should not be centered on one person but divided among as many staff as possible so that all feel involved in decision-making. The head who respects the professionalism of staff will want to make them aware of complex issues (p. 17). Mbiti (1978) notes that a good school administrator must realize that the major task is to make the school's purpose clear to everyone, ensure necessary resources are available, and motivate staff, pupils, and parents to produce excellence in work performance (p. 49).

In a research study conducted in Nakuru District on factors influencing CPE performance, Kathuri (1984) identified staff meetings as the first aspect of school administration that facilitates coordination of various academic and administrative activities. Such meetings allow head teachers to convey useful information and teachers to air their views (p. 16).

2.3 Teacher Commitment and Burnout

Instead of being facilitators of learning, some head teachers become sources of problems. Byern (1986) surveyed schools in New York City and found that 93% of teachers suffered burnout associated with administrative difficulties. Teachers blamed administrators for failing to supply enough textbooks, desks, quality blackboards, and papers. Further complaints included no support from immediate supervisors, feeling of impotence while being ordered by supervisors, and seeing inferior educators being rewarded (p. 88).

Musvosvi (1998) states that teachers should be involved in decision-making about school activities because they are the implementers. School administrators should be democratic, recognizing that the program is for the people, of the people, and should be designed by the people (p. 57).

2.4 Discipline and Academic Performance

The US Department of Education (1986) identifies indiscipline as the most serious problem in American schools. Schools with high moral conduct enjoy a good academic atmosphere. Behavior and academic success are intertwined, and such success lies mainly in the hands of administrators (p. 47). Regular attendance exposes students to

greater amounts of academic content; absences result in lost learning opportunities that can lead to failure or dropping out (p. 49).

Musvosvi (1998) attributes indiscipline among pupils to their background and school environment. Packing too many pupils in a tiny classroom results in indiscipline cases. Environments do not shape undisciplined behaviors but elevate such behaviors from children whose backgrounds are undisciplined. Parents must be more involved in controlling their children's behavior from infancy (p. 201).

2.5 Socioeconomic Status and Educational Performance

Macioris (1997) asserts that the extent of schooling in any society is closely tied to its level of economic development. Low-income countries have limited access to schooling, with half the population of children in Asia attending secondary school, while Africa is worse – three-quarters of children do not make it to secondary school due to poverty (pp. 509-510). Malau (1988) cites Eshiwani's discovery that if any region lags behind in number of pupils who attend school or pass important national examinations, that region cannot participate in the democratization of education, and its socioeconomic development is likely to be retarded (p. 13).

Anderson and Sharrock (1984) agree: "Sociologists have always documented that inequalities in educational attainment are related to social factors: lower classes do less well compared to their counterparts" (p. 66). Wanjohi (1981) laments the African child's environment, noting that the black child has no toys and does not find occasions to arouse intellect. The early childhood of the black child takes place in an environment intellectually inferior to any imaginable in Europe (p. 88).

However, education can act as a balance-wheel. Sergiovanni (1982) discovered that "highly educated populace can never be permanently poor. So education acts as a balance-wheel of the social machinery which disarms the poor of their hostility towards the rich" (p. 5).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A comparative descriptive survey design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study was qualitative in nature but used descriptive statistics to analyze questionnaire data.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Tharaka Nithi County, one of twelve districts of the Eastern Province of Kenya. Tharaka Nithi County borders Meru South District to the west, Meru Central to the north, Meru North to the east, and Mwingi and Mbeere Districts to the south. The district has three educational divisions: Tharaka South, Tharaka Central, and Tharaka North, comprising twelve zones and approximately 130 primary schools. Tharaka is semi-arid in the lowlands east of Mount Kenya, with high temperatures (daily average 33°C). The area is generally undeveloped, with hunger, poverty, and illiteracy as main problems. Most people are peasant farmers and pastoralists.

3.3 Target Population and Sample

The target population comprised all primary schools in Tharaka Nithi County that sat for KCPE between 1995 and 1999 (N = 105 schools). Stratified random sampling was used. First, the district was stratified according to performance over five years. Sixteen schools were reviewed each year – eight high-performing and eight low-performing. Over five years, 80 schools were reviewed. From these, four schools that consistently performed well for five years and four that consistently performed poorly were selected. The sample included 37 Standard 8 teachers, 8 head teachers, plus parents, education officers, and former KCPE candidates who participated in interviews.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire: A 9-section questionnaire was administered to Standard 8 teachers, covering background information, school-related factors, learner factors, teacher commitment, school organization, community support, education officer support, and socioeconomic background. A covering letter explained the purpose and assured confidentiality.

Interview Schedules: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with education officers (TAC Tutors, Personnel Education Officer, Zonal Inspectors, AEOs), the District Commissioner, parents, former Standard 8 pupils, and head teachers. Interviews lasted 2–3 hours.

Observation Schedule: The researcher observed school climate starting at 6:30 AM, noting punctuality, cleanliness, discipline, cooperation, availability of staff houses, physical facilities, teacher preparedness, schemes of work, syllabus coverage, marking of exercise books, textbook availability, and furniture.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was presented to experts for content validity. Reliability was established through a pilot study. The alpha coefficient was 0.501, considered a good established reliability coefficient.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher personally delivered questionnaires to Standard 8 teachers. In some schools, questionnaires were posted. Brief discussions were held during delivery. On collection days (agreed upon in advance), interviews and observations were conducted. For education officers, prior arrangements were made and interviews conducted in their offices. Most schools were visited twice: delivery day and collection day.

3.7 Data Analysis

Completed questionnaires were examined, coded, and entered into SPSS. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used for analysis because most variables were measured at nominal level and were categorical. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Permission was secured from the District Education Officer and school head teachers. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Teachers

Table 1 shows that the majority of teachers were male (78.4%, n=29) and married (81.1%, n=30). Only 16.2% were single and 2.7% separated.

Table 1

Gender and Marital Status of Teachers (N=37)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	29	78.4
	Female	8	21.6
Marital Status	Married	30	81.1
	Single	6	16.2
	Separated	1	2.7

All teachers had ‘O’ Level (78.4%) or ‘A’ Level (21.6%) academic qualifications. Professionally, 91.9% were P1 qualified, with others holding P2, P3, SI, or ATSII certificates (Table 2). Teachers were highly qualified to teach Standard 8.

Table 2

Professional Qualifications of Teachers (N=37)

Qualification	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
P3	2	5.4
P2	1	2.7
P1	30	81.1
SI	3	8.1
ATSII	3	8.1
Total	**37**	**100**

Most teachers (32.4%) had more than 11 years of experience. Only 2.7% had two years of experience (Table 3).

Table 3
Teaching Experience (N=37)

Experience	Frequency	Percentage
2 years	1	2.7
3 years	2	5.4
4 years	2	5.4
5 years	5	13.5
6 years	4	10.8
7 years	4	10.8
8 years	1	2.7
9 years	1	2.7
10 years	1	2.7
11 years	3	8.1
>11 years	12	32.4
Total	**37**	**100**

Only 21.6% of teachers resided within the school compound. The majority (78.4%) lived 1 km to more than 4 km away. Most teachers (62.2%) walked to school; 37.8% used bicycles. No teacher used motorized transport.

4.2 School Administration and Performance

4.2.1 Organization of School Administration

Table 4 shows that 82.3% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that excellent school organization leads to good KCPE performance. Only 13.5% disagreed.

Table 4
School's Excellent Organization Leads to Good KCPE Performance (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	1	2.7
Disagree	4	10.8
Undecided	3	8.1
Agree	15	40.5
Strongly Agree	14	37.8
Total	**37**	**100**

Interviews with head teachers of high-performing schools revealed that good organization and administration were the secrets for their performance. One headmaster stated: "My greatest secret on high performance is to bring teachers together, then organize, guide, and have them see the importance of teaching." These schools had frequent meetings with Standard 7 and 8 pupils focusing on good performance, and parents were called to discuss results after every examination.

4.2.2 Learner Motivation

Contrary to expectations, 54.0% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that learners were poorly motivated (Table 5). Only 37.8% agreed that poor motivation was a problem.

Table 5
Learners Are Poorly Motivated (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	8	21.6
Disagree	12	32.4
Undecided	3	8.1
Agree	11	29.7
Strongly Agree	3	8.1
Total	**37**	**100**

In high-performing schools, prizes were given to high performers, and parents organized parties for their best-performing children at home. A former pupil of Karethani Primary School (now at Nairobi School) said: "Constant counseling from teachers and parents, among other things, motivated me." In low-performing schools, there was no cooperation between parents and teachers, no prize-giving exercises, and parent-teacher meetings turned to quarrels.

4.2.3 Pupil Discipline

Table 6 indicates that 73.0% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that learners were undisciplined. Only 21.6% agreed that indiscipline was a problem.

Table 6

The Learners Are Undisciplined (N=37)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	8	21.6
Disagree	19	51.4
Undecided	2	5.4
Agree	5	13.5
Strongly Agree	3	8.1
Total	**37**	**100**

However, interviews revealed that low-performing schools reported some degree of indiscipline linked to undisciplined parents who engaged in drinking and forced children to absent themselves. High-performing schools reported high levels of discipline. One teacher noted: "The children are conditioned to good discipline. Circumcision before completing primary school is not allowed since it affects discipline. The circumcised feel great and despise others who are not, including teachers."

4.2.4 Teacher Commitment

Table 7 shows that 81.0% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that teachers in their schools were committed to their work.

Table 7

Teachers Are Committed to Their Work (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	4	10.8
Disagree	2	5.4
Undecided	1	2.7
Agree	15	40.5
Strongly Agree	15	40.5
Total	**37**	**100**

However, interviews with former pupils who performed poorly revealed that their failure was contributed by less committed teachers. One pupil stated: "Teachers were idle and never cared. They gave a lot of exercises from work they never taught. After failing, pupils were thoroughly beaten. To avoid beating, pupils borrowed answers from neighbors."

When asked about poor pay affecting commitment (Table 8), 54.0% agreed or strongly agreed that poor pay makes teachers less committed, indicating a discrepancy between perceived commitment and the demotivating effect of low salaries.

Table 8

Poor Pay Makes Teachers Less Committed (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	5	13.5
Disagree	6	16.2
Undecided	6	16.2
Agree	12	32.4
Strongly Agree	8	21.6
Total	**37**	**100**

4.2.5 School Management

Table 9 shows that 48.6% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that poor management leads to low performance, while 43.2% disagreed.

Table 9

Poor School Management Leads to Low Performance (N=37)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	9	24.3
Disagree	7	18.9
Undecided	3	8.1
Agree	9	24.3
Strongly Agree	9	24.3
Total	**37**	**100**

High-performing schools demonstrated high-level management: fees were used to renovate classrooms, buy food for pupils and teachers, and employ temporary teachers. Low-performing schools had mismanagement issues: classrooms were not maintained, walls had fallen down, interruptions from outside were common, no lunch for teachers, and classrooms leaked during the rainy season.

4.2.6 Regular Meetings

Table 10 indicates that 70.2% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their schools organized regular staff and parents' meetings.

Table 10

Regular Staff/Parents Meetings Are Organized (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	2	5.4
Disagree	5	13.5
Undecided	4	10.8
Agree	18	48.6
Strongly Agree	8	21.6
Total	**37**	**100**

4.3 Socioeconomic Factors

4.3.1 Poverty and Parental Illiteracy

Table 11 shows that 75.7% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that most learners come from poor backgrounds. Only 16.2% disagreed.

Table 11

Most Learners Come from Poor Backgrounds (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	1	2.7
Disagree	5	13.5
Undecided	3	8.1
Agree	21	56.8
Strongly Agree	7	18.9
Total	**37**	**100**

Regarding family income, 78.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed that most learners come from rich families (Table 12).

Table 12

Most Learners Come from Families with High Income (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	10	27
Disagree	19	51.4
Undecided	2	5.4
Agree	4	10.8
Strongly Agree	2	5.4
Total	**37**	**100**

Parental literacy was low: 54.3% of teachers disagreed that fathers were literate, and 67.5% disagreed that mothers were literate (Tables 13 and 14).

Table 13

Most Fathers Are Literate (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	2	5.4
Disagree	18	48.6
Undecided	4	10.8
Agree	6	16.2
Strongly Agree	2	5.4
Total	**37**	**100**

Table 14

Most Mothers Are Literate (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	7	18.9
Disagree	18	48.6
Undecided	4	10.8
Agree	6	16.2
Strongly Agree	2	5.4
Total	**37**	**100**

4.3.2 Occupation Stability

Tables 15 and 16 show that 81.1% of teachers disagreed that fathers have stable occupations, and 83.8% disagreed that mothers have stable occupations.

Table 15

Fathers Have Stable Occupation (N=37)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	5	13.5
Disagree	25	67.6
Undecided	3	8.1
Agree	1	2.7
Strongly Agree	3	8.1
Total	**37**	**100**

Mothers Have Stable Occupation (N=37)

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Strongly Disagree	5	13.5
Disagree	26	70.3
Undecided	2	5.4
Agree	1	2.7
Strongly Agree	3	8.1
Total	**37**	**100**

4.3.3 Socioeconomic Status and Performance Paradox

Table 17 shows that 86.4% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that pupils from rich families perform better. Only 8.8% agreed.

Table 16

Pupils from Rich Families Perform Better (N=37)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	15	40.5
Disagree	17	45.9
Undecided	1	2.7
Agree	3	8.1
Strongly Agree	1	2.7
Total	**37**	**100**

Interviews revealed that poverty in Tharaka acts as a motivating factor for high performance. Former pupils now in national schools concurred that they were determined to fight poverty through education. One stated: "I noticed that the poor in Tharaka were those without education." A parent noted: "Poverty affected learning greatly. Some pupils could not afford small fees, the poorly fed could not concentrate, and they had no lamps for homework."

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 School Administration and Performance

The finding that 82.3% of teachers associated excellent school organization with good KCPE performance aligns with the US Department of Education (1986), which found that effective principals systematically strive to bring their vision of a good school to life. The high-performing schools in Tharaka demonstrated characteristics described by Bell (1988): power and responsibilities divided among staff, consultation and discussion in decision-making, and commitment to negotiation. The finding that high-performing schools held frequent staff and parents' meetings (70.2% agreement) supports Kathuri's (1984) identification of staff meetings as the first aspect of school administration facilitating coordination of academic activities.

The contrast between high- and low-performing schools in management practices is striking. High-performing schools used fees transparently for renovations, teacher meals, and temporary teachers, while low-performing schools had dilapidated classrooms and mismanaged funds. This aligns with Mbiti (1978), who emphasized that the head teacher's major task is to make the school's purpose clear, ensure resource availability, and motivate staff, pupils, and parents.

5.2 Teacher Commitment and Burnout

Although 81.0% of teachers reported being committed to their work, interview data revealed that some teachers in low-performing schools were less committed, giving exercises for untaught content and resorting to punishment. This paradox may reflect the "burnout" described by Byern (1986), where 93% of teachers in New York City schools suffered burnout associated with administrative difficulties, feeling powerless and lacking enthusiasm.

The finding that 54.0% of teachers agreed that poor pay leads to less commitment is significant. This resonates with Bray, Clarke, and Stephen's (1986) observation that teachers in Africa are forced to do other things contrary to their abilities, leading to feelings of "impotence." However, high-performing schools mitigated this by providing breakfast and lunch for teachers, enabling extended learning hours from 6:30 AM – an innovative local solution not reliant on government salary increases.

5.3 Discipline and Performance

The finding that 73.0% of teachers disagreed that learners were undisciplined suggests that indiscipline was not widespread. However, interview data revealed that low-performing schools experienced indiscipline linked to parental behavior (drinking) and cultural practices (circumcision before completing primary school). The US Department of Education (1986) emphasized that behavior and academic success are intertwined, and regular attendance exposes students to greater academic content. High-performing schools in Tharaka implemented English-speaking weeks and Kiswahili-speaking weeks to control language use – a creative disciplinary strategy.

Musvosvi's (1998) observation that environments do not shape undisciplined behaviors but elevate them from children whose backgrounds are undisciplined is relevant. The finding that some parents forced children to absent themselves and engaged in drinking supports this. The high-performing schools' prohibition of circumcision before completing primary school reflects an intentional intervention to maintain discipline.

5.4 Socioeconomic Factors: The Paradox

The most intriguing finding is the socioeconomic paradox. While 75.7% of teachers agreed that most learners come from poor backgrounds, and parental literacy and occupation stability were very low, 86.4% disagreed that pupils

from rich families perform better. This contradicts Anderson and Sharrock's (1984) assertion that lower classes do less well compared to their counterparts. Instead, poverty in Tharaka appears to act as a motivator.

This finding supports Sergiovanni's (1982) view that education acts as a "balance-wheel of the social machinery," disarming the poor of their hostility towards the rich. The former pupils' statements that they were "determined to fight poverty through education" and that "the poor were those without education" demonstrate that perceived social mobility through education can override material disadvantages.

However, the negative effects of poverty cannot be ignored. Parents' inability to pay fees, lack of lamps for homework, inadequate nutrition affecting concentration, and inability to afford textbooks and uniforms are real barriers. The finding that 51.3% of teachers agreed that some children lack three meals a day confirms these challenges. The paradox is that poverty simultaneously hinders (through lack of resources) and motivates (through desire for escape). This dual role of socioeconomic status has implications for intervention design.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

The findings support Maslow's hierarchy of needs: learners cannot focus on academic achievement (self-actualization) when basic needs (food, safety) are unmet. However, the motivation to escape poverty appears to partially compensate for unmet lower-order needs, suggesting that future-oriented goals can transcend immediate deficiencies.

Thorndike's stimulus-response theory is supported by the prize-giving practices in high-performing schools (commending pupils, rewarding with utensils and goats). These satisfying consequences strengthened desired behaviors. The theory of learning based on Gestalt psychology – that perception is crucial in learning – is supported by the high-performing schools' attention to physical environment (well-kept grass, flowered pavements) as noted by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Developers (1954).

VI. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that school administration quality, teacher commitment, pupil discipline, and motivation systems are stronger determinants of KCPE performance than socioeconomic status alone in Tharaka Nithi County. High-performing schools succeeded because of: (a) excellent administrative organization with regular meetings and transparent financial management; (b) high teacher commitment supported by provision of meals and extended learning hours; (c) disciplined pupils conditioned through school policies (e.g., postponing circumcision); (d) motivated learners through prize-giving and counseling; and (e) active parental involvement.

Low-performing schools failed because of: (a) poor management with dilapidated infrastructure and misused funds; (b) teachers living far from school, arriving tired, and lacking motivation; (c) undisciplined environments linked to parental behavior; (d) dysfunctional parent-teacher meetings that turned to quarrels; and (e) severe poverty limiting basic needs.

Socioeconomic factors present a paradox: poverty both hinders learning (through lack of resources) and motivates high achievement (through desire to escape poverty). The most successful pupils were not from rich families but from poor families who valued education as the pathway out of poverty.

6.2 Recommendations

For School Administrators (Head Teachers):

Implement regular staff and parents' meetings to coordinate academic activities and build consensus.
Establish transparent financial management systems visible to parents and teachers.
Provide meals for teachers to enable extended learning hours (e.g., 6:30 AM start).
Institute prize-giving systems for both pupils and teachers, using locally available rewards (utensils, goats).
Develop language policies (e.g., English-speaking weeks) to enhance language skills.
Address cultural practices (e.g., circumcision) that disrupt learning through school policies and community sensitization.

For Teachers:

Commit to arriving early and utilizing all available instructional time.
Provide counseling and motivation to pupils, especially those from poor backgrounds.
Mark exercise books regularly and provide constructive feedback.
Avoid excessive punishment; use progressive discipline (oral warning → written warning → suspension → dismissal) as advised by Musvosvi (1998).

For Parents:

Actively participate in PTA meetings and support school decisions.

Provide conducive study environments at home, including lamps for evening study.
Model disciplined behavior for children (avoiding excessive drinking).
Encourage and reward children's academic efforts, even with non-material recognition.

For Education Policymakers (Ministry of Education, TSC)
Prioritize teacher posting to remote, underserved areas like Maragua zone (where Karangari Primary School had 6 classes with 1 teacher).
Provide hardship allowances for teachers in arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL).
Increase capitation grants to enable schools in poor districts to provide meals and learning resources.
Develop infrastructure (roads, electricity) to improve access to remote schools.
Support school feeding programs to address nutrition barriers to learning.

For Future Research:
Conduct longitudinal studies tracking the same cohort from primary through secondary school to understand long-term effects of school-level factors.
Investigate the transferability of Tharaka's "poverty as motivator" finding to other ASAL districts in Kenya.
Evaluate the cost-effectiveness of different interventions (teacher meals vs. salary supplements vs. infrastructure).
Examine the impact of cultural practices (circumcision timing) on educational outcomes across different ethnic groups.

6.3 Limitations

This study had several limitations: (a) financial constraints limited the sample to eight schools; (b) some schools were inaccessible by road (Karangari Primary School would have required ten hours of walking); (c) teachers in low-performing schools feared the research would lead to their sacking, potentially biasing responses; (d) the nine-month timeframe was insufficient for a multi-district study; (e) findings may not generalize to districts with different conditions; (f) cultural beliefs (initiation practices seen as superior to education) hindered some respondents' cooperation.

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