# Influence of Learner Related Variables on Academic Performance: A Case of Public Primary Schools in Mathira, Nyeri County, Kenya

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**Abstract**

*The Government of Kenya has invested heavily in terms of human and monetary resources in the primary education system in an effort to ensure that all children are provided with access to quality education. Despite this noble undertaking, the academic performance among primary school pupils in Mathira, Nyeri County, has remained dismal. Several studies that have been conducted in the area have focused on instructional resources, school and home factors and ignored the contribution of learner characteristics as a possible causal factor to the poor academic performance. This study assessed the contribution of pupil related variables on academic achievement in public primary schools in Mathira Constituency, Nyeri County, Kenya. The objectives of the study were to; analyze learner variables that influenced academic achievement and to find out the relationship between learner variables and academic achievement in public primary schools. It had been hypothesized that there was no statistically significant relationship between learner variables and academic achievement among learners in public primary schools. The study was informed by the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) propounded by Albert Bandura, and adopted an ex post facto descriptive survey design. The population of the study consisted of 104 head teachers in public primary schools in Mathira Constituency, Kenya. Simple random sampling using Gay (2000) 10-30% was used to select the sample which yielded 31(30%) head teachers. Data was collected through a questionnaire that consisted of 8 items administered to the sampled head teachers. Internal consistency of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach alpha which yielded a coefficient of 0.817. Data analysis was done using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study established that pupils failed to complete assignments, truancy was rare, learner motivation was low, most parents did not assist in homework and the pupils' ability to engage in self-directed learning was limited. Regression analysis revealed that academic achievement in primary schools had a lot to do with; pupil failure to complete assignment, parents' assistance in assignment and pupil motivation. Based on these findings, the study recommended the need for education stakeholders to put in place measures to ensure that parents assist their children with homework, promote pupils' self-directed learning skills, and counsel pupils on negative peer pressure.*

**Keywords;** learner related variables, academic performance, self-directed learning, homework

## INTRODUCTION

All over the world the issue of poor academic achievement among learners in public primary schools has been a persistent concern for education stakeholders. Echaune, Ndiku and Sang (2015) highlights the important contribution of primary school learning to human resource development and adds that studies on primary school education have established that a positive association exists between primary school instruction and the

pupil's capability to contribute successfully in social and economic activities in adulthood. According to the World Bank (2006) governments allocate a significant percentage of their budget to the education sector as part of a strategy to expand their human resource base and achieve their development goals. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005), learning experiences equip individuals with skills, knowledge, values and viewpoints which are indispensible in stirring creativity and innovativeness necessary to sustain personal and national development. The World Bank (2008) adds that other benefits directly accrued from a literate population include; better health care, nutrition, birth control and reduced infant mortality rates. Chabari (2010) observes that the Kenya government has acknowledged the importance of primary school education and introduced the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy in 2003. The government has further demonstrated its commitment to upgrading of primary education by increased budgetary allocation and massive teacher recruitment to cater for the increased pupil enrollment (GoK, 2010). However, despite this massive investment, the academic achievement of learners in public primary schools has continued has remained.

Intervention measures to address the poor academic performance in primary schools have comprised of; provision of instructional resources, teacher training, incentives to teachers and pupils, extra tuition and safe environment, among others. Parents typically blame teachers and schools for poor academic performance despite the fact that teachers may be working hard to provide quality instruction and nurture a conducive environment (Berliner, 2009). According to Zaini, Lime, Low and Harun (2005) academic performance is affected by many factors which encompass, nutrition, socio-economic and environmental factors, genetics, home, school and student's personal factors, prenatal, natal and postnatal issues of the mother.

A study by Al-Hilawani and Sartawi (1997) established that appropriate study techniques are central to learner's realization of academic achievement. In addition, Saxena (1988) reported that the number of hours that a learner puts in private studies, positively correlates with test scores across all subject areas. More hours of study were associated with higher achievement, implying that learners require guidance to systematically plan their home study in order to realize high academic performance. However, a related study by Beedawat (1984) established that poor study skills were partly responsible to academic under achievement despite the learner putting more hours of private study. Studies on learner absenteeism by Collett (2007) and Chow (2003) found out that missing learning sessions was a significant characteristic in learner's poor academic achievement; the study established that class attendance had a statistically significant effect on student performance. Similarly, a study by Marburger (2001) concluded that the number of days a student was absent from class were significantly related to the number of incorrect responses to questions relating to material covered on absent days. A related study conducted by Arulampalam (2007) revealed that a negative correlation coefficient existed between absence and test scores, thus missing tuition time led to low scores and vise verse.

According to Hong and Lee (1999) homework plays a crucial part in education and is consequently a significant component of the primary school academic curriculum. Clasquin-Johnson, Joubert and Hartell (2010) observe that since assignments given to pupils are designed to be completed at home with the assistance of the parents, such

assignments are universally referred to as 'homework'. Involvement of parents and guardians in the education of their children is not a new dimension but is a feature that is rapidly gaining prominence in effective schools. Canter and Canter (2001) assert that, involvement of parents in helping pupils' complete assignment, results not only in better academic performance but also better behavioural and attitudinal outcomes. Warren (2010) concurs with this view and affirms the association between parental involvement and enhanced academic attainment by pupils. According to Zentall and Goldstein (1999) homework provides a podium for parents through which they can monitor their children's learning, it also creates an opening for schools to bring on board parental contributions to the education of their children. Studies by Huang (2009) in Norway and Desarrollo (2007) in Latin America found out that where parents were involved in assisting their children to complete homework there was a significant improvement in the pupils' academic performance. A similar study in Rwanda by Kaberere et.al (2013) established that parents whose children were enrolled in high performing schools assisted more in home work tasks compared to parents whose children were enrolled in poorly performing schools. A study by Spernes (2011) established that the parents of schools situated in the rural areas in were largely detached from the education of their children, including completion of homework. As a consequence, in rural areas the education of pupils was solely in the hands of the teachers and there was hardly any parental involvement in the instructional process. A study by Lesanjiu (2013) on primary schools in Samburu County Kenya established that a significant relationship existed between the involvements of mothers in the schooling of their children and the child's academic achievement. An investigation by Mulwa (2004) on factors contributing to learners' academic achievement in KCPE in Kitui District in Kenya found out that majority of the parents who achieved lowly in education, had little value for education and were uncooperative with teachers. The study further revealed that the low educational level was barrier to assisting their children complete homework. The parents also lacked the capacity to monitor the academic progress of their children which negatively affected the pupils' academic performance.

Self-directed learning is increasingly gaining acceptance as a novel dimension in education; it deals with how children use their conscience to set academic goals, self-reinforcement, make notes and provide a sense of "self-instruct." Boekaerts (1999) asserts that the capacity to engage in self-directed learning is opined by educationists as an essential constituent for scholarship not only in school but also in life. The association between self-directed culture of learning and academic achievement has generally been found to be positively related to achievement in studies at all levels of education and all disciplines (Van Den Hurk, 2006). The positive relationship between self-directed learning is exemplified in numerous studies investigating learner motivation and their learning strategies. In particular the motivational dimension of self-directed learning has revealed that performance in academics is related with intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and low test anxiety (Bong, 2001).

Echaune, Ndiku and Sang (2015) point out that public primary schools are struggling to provide quality education in an effort to address the deteriorating academic performance. Attempts to identify the underlying influences to the poor performance have largely focused on aspects that touch directly on educational results such as instructional resources; teachers, social economic status, physical facilities, books, teacher-pupil ratios among others. Unfortunately, the role of learner as a key player in academic performance has received minimal attention, yet learners are central in achievement of educational outcomes. This

study addressed this gap by assessing the influence of learner characteristics on academic attainment in public primary schools in Mathira, Nyeri County, Kenya.

**Statement of the Problem**

The Kenya Government has invested heavily in terms of human and monetary resources in the primary education system in an effort to ensure that all children are provided with access to quality education. In addition, the government has come up with clear goals, comprehensive policies and allocated resources with the hope that pupils' attain acceptable levels of learning. However, despite this noble effort, KCPE mean scores for public primary schools in Mathira, Nyeri County indicates a gloomy picture for four consecutive years; 2015 (271.34), 2016 (270.89), 2017(268.33), and 2018(265.78) (Mathira Sub County education Office, 2018). Theses mean scores indicate that academic performance has been consistently declining since 2014. There is a high rate of poor performance in KCPE in Mathira. This seems to suggest the need to identify the causal factors that affect pupil academic performance in the constituency. In addition, the studies that have been carried out in relation to poor academic performance have focused on, instructional resources, class size, social economic status and school leadership; the contribution of learner characteristics as a possible causal factor to the poor academic performance has largely evaded scholarly attention. Consequently, this study addressed this gap by assessing the contribution of learner characteristics on academic achievement in public primary schools in Mathira, Nyeri County, Kenya.

**Objective of the Study**

The main objective of this study was to assess the influence learner related variables, namely; motivation, completion of assignments, parental assistance, pupil illness, peer pressure, self-directed learning, discipline and absenteeism on academic achievement among pupils in public primary schools in Mathira, Nyeri County Kenya.

**Specific Objectives**

i. To analyze learner variables that influence academic achievement among pupils in public primary schools in Mathira Constituency, Kenya.
ii. To find out the relationship between learner variables and academic achievement among pupils in public primary schools in Mathira Constituency, Kenya.

**Research Hypothesis**

$H0_1$: There is no statistically significant relationship between learner variables and academic performance among learners in public primary schools.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by the Self-Regulation Learning (SRL) models derived from the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) propounded by Albert Bandura (1986). The concept of SRL gained widespread acceptance in educational circles in the late 1980s as researchers sought to identify characteristics of learners who were considered to be academically successful. Accordingly, SRL has been advocated as a valuable measure that can stimulate learners to be active contributors to their education. Through SRL a learner monitors his/her educational progress and guides their cognition and motivation towards completion of academic tasks. The central elements in SRL that have a positive impact on educational attainment include; setting learning goals, management of time, checking individual progress and thinking, revision of study techniques, and use of feedback and assistance

(Rowe & Rafferty 2013). SRL can be categorized in four platforms as follows; planning and setting goals, monitoring, supervisory, and reflecting. In each of the stated stages, SRL processes are organized into; thought processes, enthusiasm, behaviour and environment. Accordingly, this theory was found relevant in relation to the variables in the research because the study investigated the learner behaviours namely; motivation, completion of assignments, parental assistance in assignments, pupil illness, peer pressure, self-directed learning, discipline and absenteeism on academic achievement. These factors are largely within the control of the learner and they can be manipulated to enhance their academic achievement. Consequently, learners who are focused on their learning can influence these variables to achieve better academic performance.

## METHODOLOGY

The study used the ex-post facto descriptive research design; this was fitting as it empowered the description of the variables as they existed without being manipulated by the researcher. Mathira is located in Nyeri County roughly 150 kilometres from Nairobi. Target population consisted of 104 head teachers in public primary schools. A sample of the head teachers was selected by simple random sampling using Gay (2000) 10-30% which yielded 31(30%) head teachers. Data was gathered using a questionnaire that consisted of 8 items administered to the sampled head teachers. Of the 31 questionnaires administered, 22 were duly filled and returned which represented 71.0% of the target group. The study used Cronbach alpha to compute the reliability of the instrument which yielded a coefficient of 0.817, thus the instrument was considered reliable because according to Creswell (2014) an instrument is reliable if it yields a coefficient of 0.7 and above. Data collected was analyzed using both inferential and descriptive statistics, namely; regression analysis, frequencies and percentages. The findings were presented in tables.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are presented in accordance with the stated objective and hypothesis. The first research objective sought to analyze learner variables that influenced academic achievement in public primary schools. The learner variables were measured by means of 8 items in a six point likert scale. The responses were rated as follows; to a very small extent (1), to some extent (2), to a small extent (3), to a moderate extent (4), to a great extent (5), to a very great extent (6). Table 1 provides a summary of the findings.

**Table 1: Learner Variables that Influenced Academic Achievement**

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1.** Truancy (pupil absenteeism) | 9(41%) | 7(32%) | 4(18%) | 2(9%) | 0(0%) | 0(0%) |
| **2.** Pupils failure to complete assignment | 1(5%) | 8(36%) | 4(18%) | 7(32%) | 1(5%) | 1(5%) |
| **3.** Parents assist pupils with home work | 2(9%) | 8(36%) | 7(32%) | 4(18%) | 0(0%) | 1(5%) |
| **4.** Prevalence of pupil illnesses | 3(14%) | 13(59%) | 4(18%) | 2(9%) | 0(0%) | 0(0%) |
| **5.** Negative peer influence among pupils | 4(18%) | 12(55%) | 3(14%) | 2(9%) | 0(0%) | 1(5%) |
| **6.** Pupils ability to engage in self-directed learning | 1(5%) | 5(24%) | 7(33%) | 4(19%) | 4(19%) | 0(0%) |
| **7.** Pupil discipline | 8(38%) | 9(43%) | 4(19%) | 0(0%) | 0(0%) | 0(0%) |
| **8.** Pupil Motivation | 7(33%) | 4(19%) | 6(29%) | 1(5%) | 3(14%) | 0(0%) |

Table 1 shows that 9 of the respondents (41%) indicated that truancy among pupils occurred to a very small extent, 7(32%) to some extent and 4(18%) to a small extent, 2(9%). Pupils failure to complete assignment was as follows: 1(5%) to a very small extent, 8(36%) to some extent, 4(18%) to a small extent, 7(32%) to a moderate extent, 1(5%) to a great extent, 1(5%) to a very great extent. Parents assist pupils with homework, 2(9%) to a very small extent, 8(36%) to some extent, 7(32%) to a small extent, 4(18%) to a moderate extent, 0(0%) to a great extent, 1(5%) to a very great extent. Prevalence of pupil illnesses, 3(14%) to a very small extent, 13(59%) to some extent, 4(18%) to a small extent and 2(9%) to a moderate extent. Negative peer influence among pupils; 4(18%) to a very small extent, 12(55%) to some extent, 3(14%) to a small extent, 2(9%) to a moderate extent and 1(5%) to a very great extent. Pupils ability to engage in self-directed learning, 1(5%) to a very small extent, 5(24%) to some extent, 7(33%) to a small extent, 4(19%) to a moderate extent and 4(19%) to a great extent. Pupil discipline in schools, 8(38%) to a very small extent, 9(43%) to some extent and 4(19%) to a small extent. Pupil motivation, 7(33%) to a very small extent, 4(19%) to some extent, 6(29%) to a small extent, 1(5%) to a moderate extent and 3(14%) to a great extent.

The findings of this study show that pupils did not always complete assignments, truancy was rare, motivation of the pupils was low, most parents did not assist their children in completing homework, pupil illnesses were not prevalent, negative peer influence among pupils was not widespread while the pupils ability to engage in self-directed learning was low. These findings concur with Clasquin-Johnson, Joubert and Hartell (2010) who observed that involvement of parents in the learning of pupils was a significant facet in realizing better educational attainment. In particular, Hong and Lee (1999) posited that homework plays a key role in instructional processes and is thus a crucial component of curriculum implementation and since the tasks are done by pupils at home, parental assistance is very important. The study further finds credence in the work of Bong (2001) who underscored the constructive contribution of self-directed learning as a learning strategy to improve academic performance. Self-directed learning has also been associated with achievement in studies, motivation and self-efficacy. Consequently, the observed low levels of self-directed learning could be a major contributing factor.

**Relationship between Learner Variables and Academic Achievement**

The second objective of the study sought to establish the relationship between learner variables and academic achievement among pupils in public primary schools. It had been hypothesized ($H0_1$) that here was no statistically significant relationship between learner variables and academic performance among learners in public primary schools. To test this hypothesis the researcher computed a regression model between the learner variables understand and the pupils' academic performance. The findings on the model summary are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Regression Analysis on Learner variables and Academic Performance**

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .898[a] | .807 | .590 | .65168 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), Pupil Motivation, Pupils illness prevalence, Parents assist Pupils to do assignment, Pupil discipline, Self Directed learning, Negative Peer Pressure among Pupils, Pupil motivation, Pupil Absenteeism, Pupils Failure to complete assignment

Table 2 indicates that the value of R square was .807. This implied that of variations in the dependent variable (academic performance) can be explained by the independent variables, pupil motivation, pupils' illness prevalence, parents assist pupils to do assignment, pupil discipline, self-directed learning, negative peer pressure among pupils, pupil motivation, pupil absenteeism and pupils' failure to complete assignment.

**Table 3: ANOVA[a]**

| Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 14.214 | 9 | 1.579 | 3.719 | .039[b] |
| Residual | 3.397 | 8 | .425 | | |
| Total | 17.611 | 17 | | | |

Table 3 shows that the regression model significantly predicted the dependent variables and thus it was a good fit. Here, *p* value (.039) is less than 0.05, thus the overall regression model significantly predicted the outcome variable. The null hypothesis which stated thus $H0_1$: There is no statistically significant relationship between learner variables and academic performance among learners in public primary schools was thus rejected.

**Table 4: Coefficients[a]**

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | | -3.625 | 1.852 | | -1.957 | .086 |
| **1.** | Pupil absenteeism | -.035 | .304 | -.034 | -.115 | .911 |
| **2.** | Pupils failure to complete assignment | -.917 | .304 | 1.096 | 3.016 | .017 |
| **3.** | Parents assist pupils to do assignment | .577 | .244 | .632 | 2.365 | .046 |
| **4.** | Pupils illness prevalence | -.251 | .442 | -.189 | -.569 | .585 |
| **5.** | Negative peer pressure among pupils | .475 | .226 | .560 | 2.104 | .068 |
| **6.** | Self-directed learning | .349 | .199 | -.399 | -1.756 | .017 |
| **7.** | Pupil discipline | .339 | .502 | .206 | .676 | .518 |
| **8.** | Pupil Motivation | .803 | .380 | .556 | 2.114 | .067 |

a. Dependent Variable: Pupils Academic Performance

Table 3 on coefficients indicates the regression coefficient on pupils' absenteeism was -035. The t-statistic is for this coefficient is -.115 with a p-value of .911 which is more than 0.05. This p-value indicates that the coefficient of pupils' absenteeism was not significant at 95% confidence. We can thus conclude that pupils' absenteeism did not significantly influence academic performance. The regression coefficient on pupils' failure to complete assignment was -.917. The t-statistic is for this coefficient was 3.016 with a p-value of .017 which is less than 0.05. This p-value confirms the significance of pupils' failure to complete assignment at 95% confidence. We can thus conclude that pupils' failure to complete assignment influences had a significant negative relationship with academic performance. The regression coefficient on parents assist pupils to do assignment was .577. The t-statistic for this coefficient was 2.365 with a p-value of .046 which is less than 0.05. This p-value confirms the significance of parents assist pupils to do assignment at 95% confidence. We can thus conclude that parents assist pupils to do assignment influences had a significant positive relationship with academic performance. On pupils' illness prevalence the regression coefficient was -.251. The t-statistic is for this coefficient is -.569 with a p-value of .585 which is more than 0.05. This p-value indicates that the coefficient of pupils' absenteeism was not significant at 95% confidence. We can thus conclude that pupils' illness prevalence did not significantly influence academic performance. The study established that negative peer pressure among pupils had a regression coefficient of .475 and a t-statistic of 2.104 with a p-value of .068which is more than 0.05. This p-value indicates that the coefficient of negative peer pressure among pupils was not significant at 95% confidence. We can thus conclude that negative peer pressure among pupils did not significantly influences academic performance. The regression coefficient on self-directed learning among pupils was .349. The t-statistic is for this coefficient was -1.756 with a p-value of .017 which is less than 0.05. This p-value confirms the significance of self-directed learning at 95% confidence. We can thus conclude that self-directed learning influences had a significant positive relationship with academic performance. The study

found out that the regression coefficient on pupil discipline was .339. The t-statistic is for this coefficient is .676 with a p-value of .518 which is more than 0.05. This p-value indicates that the coefficient of pupil discipline was not significant at 95% confidence. We can thus conclude that pupil discipline did not significantly influence academic performance. Lastly, the study established the regression coefficient on pupil motivation was .577. The t-statistic is for this coefficient was 2.114 with a p-value of .067 which is more than 0.05. This p-value indicates that pupil motivation was not significant at 95% confidence. We can thus conclude that there was no relationship between pupil motivation and academic performance.

This model suggests that academic achievement of leaners in primary schools in Mathira has a lot to do with, pupil failure to complete assignment, parents' assistance to do assignment and pupil motivation. The regression equation is as follows:

$Y= \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3$
$Y= -3.625 + -.917X_1 + .577X_2 + .803X_3$
Y = Academic performance
$\beta_0$ = Constant (-3.625)
$X_1$ = Failure to complete assignment
$X_2$ = Parents assist pupils to do assignment
$X_3$ = Pupil motivation

The study findings complement existing documentation on academic achievement among learners in primary schools. Hong and Lee (1999) asserted that homework plays a critical component in the instructional process and hence it's important in curriculum implementation. Arguing in the same vein, Clasquin-Johnson, Joubert and Hartell (2010) and that since homework is done at home; parental involvement in completing the learning tasks is a central and a crucial feature in active learning. Warren (2010) study concurs with this view and adds that the link concerning parental involvement in homework and better academic performance has been established in empirical studies. According to Zentall and Goldstein (1999) homework is an avenue to bring on board parents and guardians in the education of their children, it is also an opportunity through which schools can incorporate the diverse experiences, knowledge and skills of parents to improve pedagogy. Consequently, home forms a connection between parent-teacher cooperation in the child's education. Studies by Huang (2009) in Norway and Desarrollo (2007) in Latin America found out that involvement of parental in homework was significantly related to pupils' academic performance. A similar study in Rwanda by Kaberere et.al (2013) established that parents whose children were enrolled in high achieving pupils were involved more in assisting children in homework compared to parents of low achieving children. The findings of a study by Lesanjiu (2013) in primary schools in Samburu County revealed that a significant correlation existed between the mothers' involvement in school activities and pupils' academic attainment.

## CONCLUSION

The study established that academic achievement of learners in public schools in Mathira Constituency was generally poor. The findings of this study show that pupils' care of personal items and instructional resources was moderate. However, the pupils did not have the appropriate attire to keep them warm; they rarely finished their homework and used

mother tongue while in school and there was also negative peer influence that existed to some extent. Lastly, the study revealed that incidents of truancy, boy girl relationships, drug and substance abuse, teenage pregnancies and suicide attempts were extremely rare. The regression model indicated that academic performance of learners in primary schools in Mathira Constituency has a lot to do with, pupil failure to complete assignment, parents' assistance to do assignment and pupil motivation. However, the relationship between academic performance and pupil discipline, negative peer pressure, absenteeism, illness, self-directed learning and teacher/pupil relationship were not statistically significant.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and conclusion of the study it is recommended there is need for education stakeholders to put measures in place to uplift involvement in the learning of their children, there is need to mentor pupils on self-directed learning skills, ensure pupils complete homework, counsel pupils on negative peer pressure and need to seek ways to improve teacher/pupil relationship.

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