

Perceived Influence of Personal Guidance and Counseling Services on Dropout Risk Factors in Public Secondary Schools in Mbeere North, Embu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Dropping out of school can predispose young people to a range of negative consequences like unemployment, crime and missed opportunities. Although proper guidance and counseling (G&C) can help students deal with common socioemotional and psychological problems, subsequently strengthening their resolve to remain in school, the dropout rate among students in Mbeere North continues to rise. This paper explores the influence of personal G&C services on the risk factors associated with dropout rate among students in public secondary schools in Mbeere North, Embu, Kenya, as perceived by the participants. Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy and General Strain Theory provided the theoretical underpinning. A descriptive survey research design with a mixed methods approach was adopted. A population of 5,972, comprising 5,784 Form 2 to Form 4 students from 47 schools, 47 principals, 47 G&C teachers, and 94 Form 4 class teachers, was targeted. A sample of 375 participants was determined through Yamane's formula. Through a systematic random technique, 15 schools were selected, while 15 principals, 15 G&C teachers, and 30 Form 4 class teachers were identified through purposive sampling. Three hundred and fifteen students were selected through a simple random procedure. Quantitative data was obtained from students through semi-structured questionnaires, with interview schedules being administered to the key informants. Descriptive statistics, constituting measures of central tendency, frequency distribution, and variability, were employed for quantitative data, while thematic content analysis was used for qualitative data. Positive perceptions of personal G&C services were linked to fewer dropout risk factors. The correlation coefficients yielded an inverse relationship between personal G&C services and school dropout risk factors ($r(309) = -.16, P .003$). The paper recommends that government policy should be clear across all public schools to require the implementation of personal G&C services. Therefore, personal G&C services are effective in addressing risk factors associated with school dropout among public secondary school students and should be embraced.

Keywords: Guidance and Counseling, School Dropout, Risk Factors, Mental Health, Counseling Services

1.0 Introduction

Completing school presents numerous benefits to individuals and society, including stable employment opportunities, higher earning potential, reduced risk of poverty and better quality of life. On the contrary, dropping out leads to poverty, a high crime rate, lower life satisfaction, limited opportunities for growth, and indelible socioeconomic strains (Psyridou et al., 2024). As a social problem with immense consequences on individuals' lives and communities' overall well-being, the school dropout's phenomenon has, over the years, attracted the attention of scholars, psychologists, and researchers in the field of counseling psychology. Although many studies on this issue remain inconclusive, there is consensus that the limitations of leaving school prematurely negatively affect individuals, such as heightened delinquent behaviours, increased social vices, and unemployability (Akpeli, 2019).

Global research on the most developed nations indicates that America is among the leading countries with the highest number of high school students dropping out (Ressa & Andrews, 2022). A report released by the National Centre for Education Statistics (2023) shows that by the year 2021, over two million high school and college students in the United States failed to complete their studies. Despite stable growth in the education sector, European countries have also recorded significant dropout rates, as recent statistics show. As highlighted in the Mashhad (2021) survey, 10.2% of students from European Union countries were unable to complete their secondary education, with Romania and Spain recording the highest rates of about 16 %. Among the challenges attributable to the dropout rate in the survey were peer influence, learning difficulties, lack of mentorship and role modelling, and families' financial constraints.

Comparable trends were also observed from India, as highlighted in a United District Information Systems for Education (UDISE) (2023) report, which, based on a survey done from 2021 to 2022, shows the dropout rate to reach nearly 13%. Such a tendency points to such young adults being predisposed to challenging patterns of life experiences due to unemployability, social exclusion, and risk of poverty (Mashhad, 2021). Other negative outcomes include unfulfilled life desires, high crime rates, drug and substance abuse, suicide and related high-risk behaviours among young people deprived of life opportunities (Kontu et al., 2021). UDISE (2023) attributes the occurrence of the school dropout phenomenon in the Asian region to a number of factors like weak family

support systems, long distance from school, health-related problems and the community's low socioeconomic status.

Research also shows that the dropout challenge is rampant in the African region. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022) report, Sub-Saharan Africa has in recent years seen the number of out-of-school population increase, with Ngamaba et al. (2021) attributing the surge to factors such as socio-economic barriers, peer influence, and early marriages.

Kenya has also experienced an upsurge in the out-of-school populations. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021) report shows that about three million children of school-going age stayed out of school in the year 2021. The report revealed that up to one and a half million learners were at high risk of dropping out due to a number of risk factors, including food insecurity. According to Airo et al. (2022), poor academic performance, low family income, and orphanhood were common risk factors among students in Kisumu County, whereas Mitaru (2021) attributed the problem to parental income in Kirinyaga county. Evidence adduced from Mbeere, by Ndegwa (2019), shows that out of boys who enrolled for secondary education in 2013, 79.4% successfully completed schooling, compared to 84.5 % of their female counterparts. Nderi et al. (2021) reported a dropout rate of 12.5 %among boys compared to 6.1 %among girls completing in 2016. Sociocultural factors, family income and child labour were among the leading factors associated with the problem.

Among the common interventions for managing school dropout rate, as highlighted by Ressa and Andrews (2022), are the modification of the school environment and improvement of inclusive activities. Wayman et al. (2021) advocate for the creation of positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and learners. Others include policy improvement, sensitization of families about education benefits, poverty alleviation and introduction of stringent measures against child labour (Nderi et al., 2019). While guidance and counselling (G&C) services play an important role in building resilience among students towards dealing with various psychological and academic challenges, their significance in addressing the dropout rate challenge in the area of study has not been fully explored.

Research has shown that some of the G&C services provided in schools can be essential in helping students fulfill their psychological needs, develop positive interpersonal skills and realize successful achievement (Nkechi et al., 2016). This can be helpful in addressing individual and school factors that often cause learning difficulties and distress among students, resulting in dropping out of school (Gubbels et al., 2019). There is evidence that personal G&C services can help students deal with various developmental and learning challenges (Hrisyov & Kostadinov, 2022). Further interrogation on the import of such services is necessary, considering that factors such as peer influence and distance from school have been linked to the school dropout problem (Gagica et al., 2022). The study was therefore aimed at establishing the influence of personal G&C services on dropout-rate risk factors in public secondary schools among students, based on participants' perceptions.

2.0 The Importance of Personal Guidance and Counseling Services on Dropout Risk Factors

Personal G&C service in education is described as a form of help offered to students to promote social, emotional, spiritual, ethical, moral, and physical development (Sood, 2016). It is also described as a form of service aimed at developing mutual respect, social responsibility, and tolerance among students (Azad, 2018). Existing research has linked some social and personal difficulties, like family challenges, substance abuse, and student-teacher relationships, with school dropout (Njoku et al., 2020). Further, evidence has also shown that increased anxiety is associated with cases of truancy and school dropout among students of different age groups and gender (Syvertsen et al., 2020). However, Njoku et al. (2020) were interested in exploring the relationship between social variables and school dropout, while Syvertsen et al. (2020) focused on dropout predictors among learners with epilepsy.

In a study carried out in Bulgaria, Hrisyov and Kostadinov (2022) explored the effect of personal G&C services on learning experiences. Personal guidance and counselling services were associated with improved psychological, social, individual, and emotional well-being of the learners. It was also reported that the lack of such G & C services led to an increase in delinquent behaviours, including substance use and subsequent cases of school dropout. Nonetheless, the participants were learners from a city-based international school whose social demographic characteristics could not be generalized for the local area of study.

In Norway, Ramsdal and Wynn (2021) examined the experiences of students who had dropped out of studies and the re-enrollment process. Six participants were involved. The experiences contributing to school dropout and delayed re-enrollment included lack of endurance, memory disruption and inability to think rationally, as well as low inner motivation. The findings showed that the participants re-enrolled following the process of feeling stuck, positive support and resocialization with peers. However, the findings were based on the experiences of only six participants recruited from a small geographical area. Further, only qualitative data was used through interview schedules. All the same, given that Pruitt (2023) in the United States accredits personal guidance and counselling services that help students overcome the aforementioned socio-emotional and personal challenges, it was important to see what inferences could be drawn about the importance of personal G & C services in managing dropout rate risk factors.

Perry and Lavins-Merillat (2018) investigated whether personal G & C services aimed at strengthening students' self-esteem could help enhance school belongingness. A sample of 175 students from various grade levels from the American Midwest states was involved in the longitudinal cross-lagged panel study. Despite evidence that enhancing students' self-esteem could increase school belonging, the impact of the interventions was modest. The study also relied on longitudinal data, which are subject to bias in estimating causal effects. The study also raised some concerns about G & C service effectiveness and suggested that school counsellors needed to focus more on personal and organizational factors associated with school belongingness, such as interpersonal interactions, peer rejection, and after-school activities, which are some unexplored areas of interest for the present study.

In Nigeria, Filade et al. (2019) investigated the influence of peer influence on educational processes among the learners and the role of preventive counselling as a service for helping students modify their behaviours. The mixed-method study involved 116 undergraduate students. The results revealed negative effects of peer group influence on students' educational processes, with the research suggesting the need for teacher counsellors to offer preventive personal G & C services to facilitate modification of negative behaviours. Nonetheless, the participants were university students, and the researchers were more interested in the influence of peer pressure, and

learners' educational processes. More research is necessary to determine what bearing personal G & C specifically could have on dropout rate at the high school level.

A study by Onyemaechi (2023) also sought to establish the moderating factor of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) in building self-esteem and lowering irrational beliefs among students in Nigerian schools. Employing randomized controlled design, the study involved 55 students. The results revealed that REBT intervention, as a form of psychotherapy, had a positive effect in improving learners' self-esteem and replacing irrational views with rational ones. This validates the need to interrogate the role of personal G & C service in managing school dropout, as past research has attributed factors such as irrational beliefs and low self-esteem to academic failure and withdrawal from school (Warren & Hale, 2016).

Some of the works carried out in Kenya have also drawn parallels between personal guidance and counselling services and factors that often predispose students to deviant behaviours and subsequent desertion of school. Omollo and Yambo (2017) explored how peer pressure influences school dropout among high school students in Rongo, Migori County. Relying on a sample of 235 participants, comprising students, class teachers, and principals, the study employed a descriptive design and utilized both qualitative and quantitative data. It was established that approximately 44% of the participants perceived peer pressure as having influenced their decision to drop out of school, with socio-economic factors accounting for the remaining proportion. These findings were important in informing the present study and motivating the researcher to interrogate the usefulness of personal G & C service in addressing the aforementioned psychological and socio-economic factors.

In Murang'a, Ngure (2019) investigated the bearing of G&C on school dropout among primary school learners. One hundred and twenty-eight teacher-counsellors and head-teachers were sampled. It was reported that none of the aspects of academic and personal guidance and counselling were used despite the prevalence of school dropout among the sampled schools. The suggestions for future research pointed to the need for G&C personnel to adopt services such as life skills and those tailored to providing personal guidance and mentorship to develop positive behavior patterns as a measure to reduce dropout cases. The study, however, relied only on teacher-

counsellors and head-teachers, thus failing to incorporate learners and their experiences, a gap that the present study will address. The fact that personal guidance and counselling were forthwith recommended forms the basis for motivating the need for further investigation.

Kebati (2018) sought to establish how G&C strategies influence behaviour change among pupils in public primary schools in Kisii County. Mixed findings arose, whereby despite 95 %of the respondents agreeing that schools applied academic-oriented guidance and counseling services, only 23 %of them perceived the services offered to have catered for learners' personal and social orientation needs. It was also found that such services were neither proactive nor preventive regarding students' behaviour change. This is key in determining the usefulness of such services, given that problematic behaviour and poor interpersonal skills are regarded as risk factors for dropping out of school (Zengin, 2021). The study, however, focused on learners in primary schools, and there was a need for further research on the effectiveness of personal G&C on dropout risk factors among secondary school students in Mbeere North.

3.0 Materials and Methods

The study aimed to establish the influence of personal guidance and counselling services on dropout rate risk factors among students in Mbeere North public schools, based on respondents' perceptions. The study's theoretical orientation was presented through the tenets of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy and General Strain Theory. A mixed-methods research approach utilizing a descriptive survey design was adopted. The target population included 5,784 students in forms 2–4, 47 principals, 47 teacher-counsellors, and 94 form four class teachers. Using systematic random sampling, 15 schools were identified, and 15 principals, 15 counsellors, and 30 class teachers were purposively sampled. Three hundred and fifteen students were selected through a simple random procedure. Data was collected through questionnaires and interview schedules.

A pilot study was conducted in Mbeere South sub-county, with 42 respondents: 3 principals, 6 class teachers, 3 teacher-counsellors, and 30 students. Reliability of instruments was established through Cronbach's alpha test. An alpha value of .77 was achieved for the personal G&C services scale, and .75 for the school dropout risk factors scale. Numerical data from the questionnaire were analyzed in descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed in thematic

analysis. Out of the 315 questionnaires that were administered to students, 311 were returned, registering a return rate of 98.73%. All the interviews were successfully administered to the informants, resulting in a 100% response rate.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to establish the influence of personal guidance and counseling services on school dropout rate risk factors based on perceptions of the participants. Information was sought from students regarding the two variables. Data was analyzed and interpreted starting with descriptive analysis, inferential statistics and thematic analysis. As shown in Table 1, students were prompted to provide their ratings of how strongly they agreed or disagreed with various measures regarding the influence of personal guidance and counselling on dropout rate risk factors. The scores were based on a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree (SA) to disagree (SD) strongly.

Table 1. Students' Ratings on Influence of Personal G&C on Dropout Rate

Measure	5	4	3	2	1	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	SA	A	N	D	SD		
The regular assistance provided by the teacher counselor has helped me overcome personal problems affecting my studies	135 43.4%	106 34.1%	33 10.6%	19 6.1%	18 5.8%	4.03	1.14
Going through counseling sessions has helped me overcome peer pressure	148 47.7%	90 28.9.0%	34 10.9%	16 5.1%	23 7.4%	4.04	1.20
Counseling sessions has helped resolve personal problems affecting my studies	126 40.5%	116 37.3%	41 13.2%	17 5.5%	11 3.5%	4.05	1.03
Personal guidance and counseling services offered by teacher counselor has helped in resolving behavioral problems	160 51.4%	86 27.7%	31 10.0%	16 5.1%	18 5.8%	4.13	1.15
The assistance offered by teacher counselor has enhanced my abilities to deal with personal and developmental problems	134 43.1%	102 32.8%	44 14.1%	19 6.1%	12 3.9%	4.05	1.07
I feel more prepared to learn after attending counseling sessions offered by the teacher counselor	165 53.1%	90 28.9%	27 8.7%	19 6.1%	10 3.2%	4.22	1.05
The regular personal support provided by teacher counselor has improved my motivation to study and complete my education	169 54.3%	92 29.6%	29 9.3%	13 4.2%	8 2.6%	4.28	.97
Counseling sessions offered by teacher counselor have helped me deal with low self-esteem	147 47.3%	85 27.3%	38 12.2%	17 5.5%	24 7.7%	4.00	1.22

Note. *N* = 311, *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation.

Table 1 shows that students rated with general consensus the statement that the regular assistance offered by teacher counselors had been helpful towards overcoming various personal problems affecting their studies as exemplified by a strong mean score of 4.03 ($SD = 1.14$). The results indicate that students mostly agreed with the proposition that counselling sessions had helped them overcome peer pressure, expressed through a strong mean score of 4.04 ($SD = 1.20$). With regard to whether counselling sessions had been helpful in resolving personal problems affecting their studies, the participants generally consented, as shown by a high mean score of 4.05 ($SD = 1.03$).

The results demonstrate that for the most part, the participants affirmed the proposition that personal G&C services provided by the teacher counsellor had been helpful in resolving their behavioral problems ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.15$). There was general consensus among the participants that the assistance provided by the teacher counsellor was effective in addressing personal and developmental problems ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.07$). It is further noted that when asked whether they felt more prepared to learn after attending counselling sessions, the participants, for the most part, agreed, as demonstrated by a mean score of 4.28 ($SD = 1.05$).

On being asked to rate the statement that the regular personal support from the teacher counselor had resulted in increased motivation to study and complete the studies, the students were largely acquiesced as demonstrated by a strong mean score of 4.28 ($SD = .97$). Lastly, the participants in this group were asked to rate the statement as to whether the counseling sessions administered by teacher counselor had helped them deal with low self-esteem. Their responses were largely affirmative, as indicated by a relatively strong mean score of 4.00 ($SD = 1.22$).

Notably, the highest rating was associated with the statement that regular personal support provided by teacher counselor had led to improved motivation to study and complete education ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .97$). On the other hand, the lowest rating was associated with the measure that counseling sessions provided by the teacher counselor had helped deal with students' low self-esteem ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.22$). The results have shown that personal G&C services offered in the sampled schools were essential for addressing students' psychological, social, and emotional challenges associated with disengagement, absenteeism, and an increased risk of dropping out of

school. This upholds what Hrisyov and Kostadinov (2022) established in research from Bulgaria, which found similar services to have improved students' psychological, social and emotional well-being, subsequently lowering incidences of drug and substance abuse, delinquent behaviours and school dropout rate.

The outcomes of the present study demonstrated that providing regular assistance to students empowered them to navigate various difficulties affecting their studies. The personalized assistance helped students overcome social issues such as peer pressure and personal challenges that affect learning engagement. This implies that students at risk of dropping out benefit from personal G&C services, are equipped with coping skills, and build resilience to resist negative pressure. Consequently, such students are likely to have greater engagement in learning, improved learning outcomes, and a desire to remain in school to pursue educational goals.

The findings align with REBT principles, emphasizing that fostering self-acceptance and adaptive mindsets builds resilience toward life's challenges (Ellis, 2019). Personalized guidance and counselling help students overcome negative thinking and risky behaviours, enhancing decision-making and problem-solving (Canu & Sitinjak, 2023). These outcomes strengthen adaptability, resilience, and self-control, promoting engagement in learning and reducing dropout risk.

The results were summarized in Table 2 to establish the score range, minimum and maximum values, as well as the mean score and data dispersion for the total measures of influence of personal G&C services on dropout rate risk factors.

Table 2: Summary of Descriptive Statistics on Influence of Personal G&C Services

	Range	Mini	Max	M	SD	Skew	Kurt
Personal G&C services scores	30.00	10.00	40.00	32.84	5.53	-.85	.50
Valid N (listwise)	311						

Note. $N = 311$.

The data in Table 2 demonstrates that the range of the total scores derived from the measures of influence of personal G&C services was 30. The scores' minimum value was 10, while the maximum value was 40. A mean score of ($M = 32.84$, $SD, 5.53$) was established. Considering the minimum and maximum values, the results indicate that a high mean score was established, suggesting that all the measures were highly rated. The scores had a negative skewness coefficient of $-.85$, further attesting that the participants' scoring was high on the scale, and a positive kurtosis value of $.50$, pointing to a less peaked distribution of the scores and the presence of fewer outliers. The data was analyzed further in order to group the participants based on their rating levels, considering those who rated the measures of influence of personal G&C services with low, moderate or high levels as expressed in Table 3.

Table 3: Agreement Levels on Influence of Personal Guidance and Counseling Services

Personal G&C Services Agreement Levels		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Low	111	35.7
	Moderate	105	33.8
	High	95	30.5
Total		311	100.0

Note. $N = 311$.

The results in Table 3 indicate that 111 participants, representing 35.7% of the participants, were categorized within the group that rated the influence of personal G&C services on school dropout risk factors with low agreement levels, compared to 105 (33.8%) of those categorized within moderate levels, and 95 (30.5%) whose ratings were categorized within high agreement levels. The data indicate that when the participants were grouped into three categories, slightly more participants held low perceptions about the influence of personal G&C on curbing the school dropout rate. Nonetheless, the variance between the groups is marginal, given that the low and high rating groups were only separated by around 5 percentage points. The average ratings may be explained by various factors, including guidance counselors' training and student attitudes. As Warui (2018) observes, various aspects may result in dissenting perceptions on the influence of personal G&C services, including student attitude and counsellors' training.

The students' ratings on school dropout risk factors were also obtained and summarized as shown in the descriptive Table 4, in order to describe the range of the total scores, minimum and maximum values, as well as data dispersion, and distribution.

Table 4: Summary of Descriptive Statistics on Ratings of School Dropout Risk Factors

	Range	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skew	Kurt
SDRF	48.00	12.00	60.00	25.18	10.18	.82	.56
Valid N (listwise)	311						

Note. *N* = 311, *M* = Mean, *SDV* = Standard Deviation, SDRF = School Dropout Risk Factors

The analysis showed that participants' total ratings of factors associated with school dropout risk ranged from 12 to 60, yielding a total range of 48. The computed mean score was relatively low at 25.18 (*SD* = 10.18), indicating that respondents generally rated the intensity of dropout risk factors lower. The distribution displayed a positive skewness coefficient of 0.82, signifying a right-skewed pattern in which most scores clustered toward the lower end of the scale. The corresponding kurtosis value of .56 suggested that the data were not sharply peaked relative to a normal distribution. Taken together, the low mean values imply that most participants possessed the capacity to manage or overcome challenges commonly linked to the likelihood of dropping out. These findings align with those of Masten (2021) and Wortsman et al. (2024), who reported that both familial contexts and personal student experiences can play a crucial role in strengthening resilience to factors associated with premature school leaving.

The data was also analyzed in order to group the participants based on those that reported low, moderate or high levels of factors linked to dropping out, as expressed in the results in Table 5.

Table 5: Levels of School Dropout Risk Factors

Agreement Levels on Dropout Risk Factors	Frequency	Percent
High	101	32.5
Moderate	108	34.7
Low	102	32.8
Total	311	100.0

Note. $N = 311$.

The data presented in Table 5 reveal that 108 students, accounting for 34.7% of the total participants, expressed moderate levels of agreement in their assessments of factors associated with dropping out. From the same group, 102 students (32.8%) reported low levels of agreement on these factors, whereas 101 respondents (32.5%) expressed high levels of agreement. These findings suggest that a considerable proportion of participants fell within the low- and moderate-agreement categories, indicating that only a smaller segment of the sample perceived dropout risk factors as highly significant. This pattern implies that many of the students in the study appeared to have developed effective coping strategies and resilience in managing challenges related to dropout vulnerability. These results correspond with the conclusions of Wortsman et al. (2024) in Côte d'Ivoire, who observed that learners' personal attributes, along with their home and school experiences, play an important role in strengthening resilience against the risk of school dropout.

To establish the relationship between Personal G&C Services and risk factors contributing to dropout tendencies, bivariate correlation was performed on the scores of the two variables through Pearson's r .

Table 7: Correlation Matrix for Personal G&C Services and Dropout Rate

		Personal G&C Services	Dropout Risk Factors
Personal G&C Services	Pearson Correlation	1	-.16**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
	N	311	311
Dropout Risk Factors	Pearson Correlation	-.16**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	
	N	311	311

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note. $N = 311$.

The inferential statistics in Table 7 reveal a significant negative relationship between the scores on personal G&C services and the risk factors predisposing students to dropout tendencies ($r(309) = -.16, P = .003$). The inverse relationship indicates that the greater usefulness of personal G&C services reduced the risk of school dropout among participants. Although the correlation was weak, it can be inferred that personal G&C services contributed to students' well-being and empowered them to overcome various personal, social, and psychological issues that affected their engagement in learning and their ability to remain in school. The results validate earlier inferences by Pruitt (2023), based on a study conducted in the United States, in which personal G&C services were found to have helped students address a range of psychological, personal, and socio-emotional issues that often lead to leaving school before completion.

Thematic Analysis on the Influence of Personal Guidance and Counselling on Dropout Rate

Thematic analysis was also conducted on qualitative data, a procedure that was critical for gaining deeper insights into the perceived influence of personal G&C services on risk factors related to dropping out. The information was obtained from teacher counsellors, principals, and class teachers as key informants through interviews. The instruments first sought information from all three categories of informants regarding personal challenges students faced that they felt contributed to learners' tendencies to drop out.

Among the common thematic areas arising from the responses are drug and substance abuse, teenage pregnancies, indiscipline, low entry behaviour, low self-esteem, peer influence, and dysfunctional families, as well as family-related issues like separations and poverty. From the three categories of interviewees, it was apparent that drug and substance abuse was a major issue affecting students' concentration span, interpersonal relationships, and learning abilities. This challenge also led to cases of indiscipline, grade repetition, high rates of absenteeism, and an increased possibility of leaving school before completion.

The informants identified low entry behaviour as a major issue among students, marked by limited knowledge, poor skills, and negative attitudes that foster disengagement and dropout. They observed that family-related factors, such as separation, low socioeconomic status, and child

labour, lowered self-esteem and performance. These findings align with Agnew's (2006) General Strain Theory, linking such strains to stress, delinquency, and disrupted learning.

Teacher counsellors highlighted key themes, including personal counselling, parental involvement, collaboration with professionals and spiritual leaders, sponsorship guidance, and mentorship. They emphasized that regular counselling fosters personal growth and holistic development among at-risk students. Such interventions enhance well-being, decision-making, and resilience, enabling students to overcome personal and social challenges that hinder academic success.

The teacher and counsellors emphasized the importance of personalized guidance tailored to students' specific needs. This targeted support helped at-risk learners overcome academic challenges, develop self-worth, and strengthen social skills essential for managing personal and social difficulties linked to dropout. They also noted that involving parents addressed family-related issues, improving students' psychological well-being, school engagement, and overall learning performance. One G&C teacher, GCT04, observed that:

"We provide regular personal guidance and counseling services, which include personalized support based on individual student's needs. We also involve parents It also helps them build self-esteem, adapt to effective study habits and develop positive social and interpersonal skills for navigating various challenges affecting their academic success and learning engagement."

Comparable sentiments were communicated by another guidance counselor, GCT03, who observed:

"We offer individualized counseling to students, particularly those experiencing various challenges, including mental health issues, social and interpersonal problems that affect their concentration and learning processes. Where possible, we collaborate with parents.....and provide important information in cases of drug and substance abuse, trauma, or social issues related to the family."

These insights were also comparable to those of another teacher counselor GCT011 who revealed that apart from regular personal and individualized counseling, they also provided key information

to needy parents. Therefore, there was agreement among the teacher counselors on the effectiveness of personal G&C services in curbing school dropout rate factors.

The principals of the participating schools mostly upheld the remarks made by teacher counsellors regarding the influence of personal G&C services in addressing students' learning difficulties and supporting them to stay in school. With respect to whether such services had played any role in dropout rate risk factors among the students, one of the principals, PR015, explained:

“Certainly, they are helpful. I have personally witnessed students who have been experiencing some form of emotional distress, background receive help, develop self-esteem, improve their mental well-being and self-motivation towards being more engaged in school and class activities.”

In a related observation, another principal PR010 stated:

“... so yes, the services have been helpful..... The rate of those dropping out has also lately reduced through the services provided by G&C department.”

The services were also seen to positively contribute to the reduction of teenage pregnancy and the potential tendency to drop out among the girls. Students as well as their parents benefited from the personalized counselling on social and personal issues predisposing girls to teenage pregnancy. Regular guidance to students on healthy and positive relationships, and dealing with peer pressure, as well as helping parents to navigate challenges associated with economic hardship and societal norms, contributed to fewer cases of teenage pregnancy and higher school completion rates among the girls.

It was noted that personal G&C services helped guide the students on healthy relationships, discipline, and positive behaviour, resulting in increased engagement. Personalized support given to students based on assessment of their individual needs, and work together with parents to address social issues, foster social and emotional development, enhance self-esteem and interpersonal skills requisite for navigating various difficulties impeding engagement, academic success and school completion. This corresponds to Onyemaechi's (2023) conclusions in Nigeria that CBT-guided personalized interventions can foster high self-esteem and suppress irrational thoughts. The findings, however, do not entirely agree with those of Perry and Lavins-Merillat (2018), who found such influence to be modest.

Class teachers, counsellors, and principals agreed that collaborating with parents to provide basic needs and address family stressors improved students' mental health, engagement, and retention. Personal G&C helped counter peer pressure and behavioral issues, fostering motivation and focus. Although a few teachers doubted the personal G&C's effectiveness, overall consensus affirmed its positive impact on student outcomes.

It was deduced that personalized interventions positively influenced learning engagement and academic success, resulting in lower dropout risk factors. The findings are nonetheless inconsistent with those of Omollo and Yambo (2017), who found peer pressure to predominantly influence school dropout rate among students in Migori county, Kenya, despite the existence of personal G&C services. The presented outcomes also differ from those of Ngure (2019) in Muranga county, where it was revealed that personal G&C services were rarely administered in schools in the county despite the prevalence of dropout incidences among students in the region.

The present study demonstrated that teacher counsellors provided personal G&C services, including individual counselling tailored to students' personal, social, emotional, and psychological needs. Where possible, collaboration was done with parents and other professionals to address family-related issues, as well as promote role modelling and mentorship. These findings also contradict those of Kebati (2018) from Kisii county, who established that G&C services administered in schools were not tailored for personal or social needs, and neither were they proactive nor preventive regarding students' behaviour change.

The results from descriptive and inferential statistics, as well as qualitative findings, indicated that personal G&C services were essential for improving students' learning strategies and engagement through constant emotional support and increased motivation to study. This affirms the positive role played by such services as Ramsdal and Wynn (2021) in a study from Norway, which attributed low intrinsic motivation to increased dropout rate. These inferences were, however, hinged on a paltry sample of 6 participants and a qualitative method only. The present study expands this understanding by leveraging a larger population, a multimethod style, and testing the theoretical tenet of REBT that resilience and flexibility needed for coping with inevitable

difficulties can be fostered through a change of mindset and motivation towards self-acceptance (Ellis, 2019).

5.0 Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendations

The government should develop a policy to ensure that personal G&C services are available in all secondary schools, which would help address school dropout risk factors. Further research could be undertaken on the role of multidisciplinary support systems, such as mental health workers, psychologists, and social workers, on student retention.

Conclusion

Personal guidance and counselling services are effective in addressing risk factors associated with school dropout in public secondary schools.

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