

A CASE STUDY ON THE MULTIFACTORIAL CAUSES OF ACADEMIC UNDERPERFORMANCE AMONG FORM THREE STUDENTS SCORING GRADE D AND BELOW IN GUCHA SOUTH SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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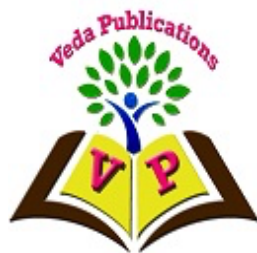
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Abstract



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This study explores the multifactorial causes of academic underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub County, Kenya. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the study adopted a descriptive research design to examine how academic, psychosocial, school-based, and home environment factors interact to influence learner outcomes. Data were collected from 238 respondents including students, teachers, and school administrators through questionnaires and interviews. A combination of purposive and random sampling was used, and the research instruments demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and regression analysis, while qualitative data were examined thematically. Findings revealed that poor study habits, lack of learning resources, teacher absenteeism, and inadequate academic support significantly contributed to underperformance. Psychosocial stressors such as anxiety, emotional distress, and lack of mental health support were also strong predictors of low academic achievement ($p < .01$). School based issues including chronic absenteeism and disciplinary challenges further exacerbated learning gaps ($p < .05$). Additionally, socioeconomic hardships, including poverty, parental neglect, and domestic instability, emerged as critical barriers to consistent learning and school attendance. The study concludes that academic underachievement in the sub county is not solely an individual issue but rather the outcome of systemic, emotional, and environmental factors working in tandem. It recommends integrated interventions such as remedial instruction, counselling services, parental engagement, mentorship programs, and improved school resourcing to support at risk learners holistically and sustainably.

Keywords: Form Three students, Gucha South Sub County, Kenya, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, psychosocial factors, school- factors, home environment. based

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Introduction

Academic underperformance remains a persistent challenge for education systems globally, with developing contexts such as Kenya being particularly affected. In Gucha South Sub County, a substantial proportion of Form Three students consistently attain Grade D or below a troubling trend given the country's recent educational reforms, including the adoption of the Competency Based Education (CBE) framework in 2017. Nationally, approximately 50.1% of candidates in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) attained Grade D+ or below in 2024 (*Business Daily Africa* [BDA], 2025). Although precise sub county statistics for Gucha South are limited, available data indicate that in neighbouring sub county schools, large numbers of students at the D-level (D-, D, D+) are concentrated in sub county institutions. For example, in 2024, sub county schools recorded 78,448 at D-, 57,157 at D, and 43,468 at D+ nationally (*The Kenya Times* [KT], 2025). Such figures highlight the scale of the problem both locally and within similar educational environments.

Multiple, interrelated factors contribute to this underachievement, spanning academic deficits, psychosocial stressors, school level dynamics, and home environment influences. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory offers a robust framework for analysing these multifaceted contributors. The theory conceptualises human development as shaped by nested environmental systems ranging from the microsystem (e.g., family, school) to the macrosystem (e.g., societal culture), and the chronosystem (e.g., historical or policy changes). This framework underscores how factors across different ecological levels interact to influence students' academic outcomes.

Within the microsystem, academic related variables such as poor study habits and weak foundational competencies significantly undermine performance (Costa et al., 2024). In Kenyan secondary schools, many students who lack structured study routines or essential academic skills are unable to meet curriculum demands, especially where pedagogical support is inadequate (Muchira et al., 2023). Even in well-structured schools, disparities in teacher quality and resource availability often exacerbate learning gaps (Doloi, Timung, & Bordoloi, 2024).

The mesosystem, which connects different microsystems such as home and school, also plays a crucial role. Limited parental involvement often due to poverty, low education levels, or single-parent households reduces student motivation and academic engagement (Thomas-

Lester, 2017). For instance, Miya (2011) found that in Muhoroni Sub-County, household socioeconomic status, parental education, family size, and distance from school were significant predictors of academic performance. Additionally, in the absence of strong parental guidance, peer influences can become dominant often to students' detriment if their peers are disengaged or disruptive (Eccles & Roeser, 2015).

Exosystem factors such as school leadership, teacher morale, and infrastructure indirectly shape student experiences (Price & McCallum, 2015). Studies conducted in Kiambu and Kwale counties have shown that poor school governance, teacher demotivation, and punitive discipline practices contribute to negative school climates and decreased academic performance. In contrast, a supportive school environment marked by respectful relationships, safety, and encouragement can enhance attendance, engagement, and achievement (Kanake Karegi & Mugambi, 2025).

Absenteeism is a particularly salient factor. Both globally and in Kenya, chronic absenteeism is closely associated with poor academic performance, early dropout, and behavioural issues (Kearney, Dupont, Fensken, & González, 2023). In Mbita (Western Kenya), common causes include teenage pregnancy, illness, child labour, harsh disciplinary policies, and food insecurity each disrupting learning continuity and eroding academic confidence (Mwangi et al., 2018).

Psychosocial factors also play a significant role. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, unmet psychological or safety needs can impair motivation and cognitive functioning (Sowmya & Anokha, 2025). A lack of school belonging often fostered by harsh disciplinary environments or feelings of alienation can lead to disengagement, academic burnout, and passivity (Hadley, 2018). Kenyan students frequently report fear-based learning atmospheres that suppress curiosity and discourage active participation (Evans, Kremer, & Ngatia, 2013).

At the macrosystem level, broader socioeconomic challenges including poverty, food insecurity, and the hidden costs of education continue to hinder learning (Ngũgĩ, 2025). Although Kenya provides free primary and secondary education, additional costs such as uniforms and meals remain barriers to consistent attendance and academic focus (Evans et al., 2013). Cultural expectations, such as prioritising domestic work or income generation, further reduce educational commitment particularly among vulnerable groups (Taylor & Wang, 2012).

The chronosystem captures temporal shifts such as policy reforms and economic changes that alter educational contexts (Kaushik, Garg, & Mishra, 2023). The implementation of CBE, for example, requires significant pedagogical adaptation and has reshaped expectations for both teachers and learners (Mwangi et al., 2018). Broader societal disruptions like economic downturns can also redirect family priorities and school resources, further impacting student outcomes (Müller & Goldenberg, 2020).

Academic underperformance among Form Three students in Gucha South Sub-County thus arises from a complex interplay of factors across multiple environmental levels. Addressing this issue necessitates comprehensive, context sensitive interventions, including targeted academic support, psychosocial counselling, improved school environments, and stronger home school partnerships. By grounding this study in theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, the research seeks to uncover the nuanced causes of underachievement and inform effective, sustainable educational strategies.

Statement of the Problem

Despite ongoing educational reforms and support initiatives, a significant number of Form Three students in Gucha South Sub County continue to score Grade D and below, reflecting persistent academic underperformance. This issue stems from multifactorial causes, including academic deficits, psychosocial stressors, school based challenges, and adverse home environments. Weak study habits, absenteeism, emotional instability, and lack of parental support contribute to a cycle of low motivation and poor achievement. However, there is a lack of localized, evidence based understanding of how these factors interact in this specific context. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating and mapping the interconnected causes of underperformance to inform targeted, context specific interventions.

Review of Related Literature

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory offers a comprehensive framework for analysing how various environmental layers influence human development. These systems include the microsystem (family and school), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (external settings that indirectly affect learners), macrosystem (cultural and societal norms), and chronosystem (historical and policy shifts) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In Kenya, this theory has been used to study how school leadership,

peer influence, parental involvement, and cultural expectations interact to shape academic outcomes (Muuo et al., 2025). Despite its relevance, this framework has not yet been systematically applied to underperforming Form Three students in rural regions like Gucha South. This study fills the gap by contextualizing Bronfenbrenner's theory in a rural Kenyan sub-county.

Academic related factors such as weak study habits, insufficient foundational knowledge, and ineffective revision strategies have long been linked to poor student performance (Wang & Chen, 2025). In Nairobi, for example, research shows that learners in informal settlements struggle due to limited resources and lack of personalized instruction (Kibaara & Kabura, 2017). Ngusa (2019) also identified poor pedagogical strategies and student to teacher ratios as contributors to low performance in public secondary schools. However, most of these studies focus on urban settings or primary schools, and rarely delve into academic behaviours specific to Form Three students. This study addresses the absence of rural, grade specific academic analysis by focusing on Gucha South learners scoring Grade D and below.

Psychosocial factors like low self-esteem, lack of motivation, and feelings of alienation also significantly influence academic outcomes (Jones, 2021). A study in Kisii County revealed that low self-concept and negative peer relationships contributed to poor academic performance among girls (Makworo, 2013). Goodenow and Grady (1993) emphasized the importance of school belonging where students feel accepted, valued, and connected as a key predictor of academic motivation. However, the combined effect of psychosocial stressors and lack of school belonging among underperforming rural students in Kenya remains underexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining how emotional wellbeing and perceived school inclusion impact Form Three academic performance.

Absenteeism is another persistent challenge, often linked to health issues, family responsibilities, teenage pregnancy, or financial struggles (Allen, Diamond-Myrsten, & Rollins, 2018). Henzan, Takeuchi, Njenga, and Kobayashi (2021) documented chronic absenteeism in Mbita Sub County as a barrier to academic continuity, particularly among girls. Furthermore, poor school climate characterized by punitive discipline, low teacher morale, and lack of student engagement has been associated with high dropout rates and poor academic performance (Del Toro & Wang, 2022). However, while absenteeism has been studied in broader terms, its specific role in sustained underperformance among students

scoring Grade D and below in Form Three remains unclear. This study fills this gap by targeting the relationship between absenteeism and performance within this marginalized group.

Home environment and socioeconomic status are among the most powerful determinants of student achievement (Sengonul, 2022). Miya (2011) found that in Muhoroni Sub-County, large family sizes, low parental education, and poverty significantly predicted poor KCSE outcomes. Similarly, Evans, Kremer, and Ngatia (2013) highlighted the burden of indirect school costs such as uniforms and lunch, which continue to hinder attendance despite free education policies. Nevertheless, these studies often generalize across entire school populations and rarely disaggregate data by academic band or class level. This study addresses that shortfall by exploring how family background specifically influences Form Three students consistently scoring low grades.

Policy shifts and national educational reforms also form part of the chronosystem that shapes student experiences (Akın-Sabuncu & Çalık, 2025). Kenya's 2017 adoption of the Competency-Based Education (CBE) introduced new demands on both teachers and students, yet its impact on rural underperforming learners is not well documented (Kipsang & Xiaoguang, 2022). Most studies on CBE evaluate implementation or teacher preparedness but do not analyse how such transitions affect academic performance among learners already struggling. This study fills that gap by evaluating the temporal and systemic disruptions that affect academic achievement among Grade D and below students in Gucha South.

While several Kenyan studies have investigated academic, psychosocial, home, or school based factors in isolation, few have adopted an integrative framework to understand how these variables interact across ecological levels. Moreover, research rarely focuses on students scoring Grade D and below those at highest risk of academic exclusion and long term socioeconomic marginalization. Previous studies also largely overlook the nuanced context of rural sub counties, where the interplay of poverty, school infrastructure, cultural norms, and family instability is uniquely complex. This study responds to the need for an integrated, context sensitive analysis that specifically targets underperforming Form Three students in Gucha South.

The literature underscores the importance of multifactorial influences ranging from academic habits and emotional health to home environment and policy reforms on student performance. However, an overarching gap remains: no existing study comprehensively investigates how these factors converge to influence academic underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub County. This study addresses that critical void by using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to analyse the intersecting causes of underachievement, offering a locally grounded and theory-informed basis for effective educational interventions.

Thesis statement

This study investigates the multifactorial causes of academic underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub County, Kenya, using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to examine how academic, psychosocial, school based, and home environment factors interact to influence learner outcomes and inform targeted interventions.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify academic-related factors contributing to underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub County.
2. To examine the influence of psychosocial and emotional factors on the academic performance of underperforming Form Three students.
3. To explore school based challenges, including absenteeism and discipline, which affect the academic outcomes of low performing students.
4. To assess the impact of home environment and socioeconomic conditions on the academic achievement of Form Three students performing at Grade D and below.

Theoretical Review

This study draws on two complementary frameworks Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to examine the multifactorial causes of academic underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub County, Kenya. Both theories provide a comprehensive basis for understanding how environmental and psychological factors interact to shape student learning outcomes.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) posits that human development occurs within a set of interrelated and nested environmental systems. These systems include the microsystem (immediate settings such as the family, school, and peers), the mesosystem (linkages between microsystems, such as home school relationships), the exosystem (external contexts that indirectly influence the learner, such as parental employment or school governance), the macrosystem (broader societal and cultural norms), and the chronosystem (temporal changes such as policy reforms or economic shifts) (Ke, Tong, Cheng, & Peng, 2025). A key premise of this theory is that the learner both influences and is influenced by these systems in a dynamic, bidirectional manner (McAlister & Jenkins, 2017).

One of the salient features of Bronfenbrenner's framework is its holistic understanding of development it rejects reductionist explanations and instead situates human behaviour within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Nieto-Aguilar & Aguilera-Méndez, 2024). This multidimensionality makes EST highly applicable to education research, where students' learning outcomes are rarely shaped by single causes. Its strength lies in acknowledging that academic performance is influenced simultaneously by factors such as teacher support, peer interactions, parental involvement, socioeconomic status, and policy frameworks (Ali, Eid, & Alhadad, 2024). Moreover, EST has strong practical implications: it allows educators and policymakers to design integrated interventions that address multiple levels of a student's environment rather than focusing solely on classroom level strategies.

Despite its usefulness, EST has certain limitations. Empirically, it can be difficult to capture and quantify all interacting systems, making it challenging to test comprehensively (San Miguel et al., 2012). The boundaries between systems are often conceptually vague, and some components such as the chronosystem are inconsistently defined across studies. Additionally, critics argue that the model underemphasizes the role of individual agency and biological or cognitive factors, sometimes focusing too heavily on environmental determinants (McAlister & Jenkins, 2017).

Nevertheless, numerous studies have successfully applied the ecological framework to educational contexts. For instance, research in early childhood education has demonstrated how family, community institutions, and government policy jointly influence learning and development (Msangi, 2020). Similarly, Rahman (2025) used EST to analyse the relationship between resilience, motivation, and contextual support in child learning, revealing that

exosystem level factors such as community resources and teacher morale significantly affect student engagement. These applications underscore the adaptability of EST across diverse educational settings.

In the current study, Bronfenbrenner's theory is uniquely applied to map the multiple, interacting influences on academic underperformance among Form Three students in Gucha South Sub County. The microsystem will focus on immediate influences, including study habits, teacher–student relationships, and peer interactions. The mesosystem will illuminate how home school connections and parental involvement shape motivation and attendance. The exosystem will capture broader school based and community level variables, such as leadership effectiveness, teacher absenteeism, and resource availability. The macrosystem will contextualize these issues within Kenya's socioeconomic conditions and cultural norms, while the chronosystem will account for temporal changes such as the 2017 Competency Based Education (CBE) reform. This multi layered analysis moves beyond isolated examinations of poverty or teacher quality to reveal how factors across systems converge to produce persistent academic underperformance.

Complementing EST, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a motivational and psychological lens through which to understand why students in challenging environments may struggle academically. Maslow's model proposes a five tier hierarchy of human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Saif, 2024). According to the theory, individuals must satisfy lower-level needs before they can focus on higher-order goals such as learning, achievement, and self-fulfilment (Burleson & Thoron, 2014). In educational contexts, this suggests that unmet basic needs such as hunger, insecurity, or social alienation can severely inhibit concentration, motivation, and academic engagement (Chitrakar & Nisanth, 2023)

The major strength of Maslow's theory lies in its intuitive and practical application. It helps educators and policymakers recognize that students' cognitive development cannot be separated from their physical, emotional, and social wellbeing. This holistic perspective aligns closely with contemporary calls for learner centred and inclusive education in Kenya. However, the model has also been criticized for its rigid hierarchy and cultural limitations. Empirical research indicates that needs do not always follow a fixed sequence; individuals may pursue higher-order goals despite lacking basic necessities (Deutsch & Silber, 2024).

Moreover, the relative importance of certain needs varies across cultures. Collectivist societies, for instance, may prioritize belonging over individual self-actualization (Maher, 2024).

Maslow's framework has been widely applied in educational studies to explain variations in learner performance. For instance, research during the COVID-19 pandemic found that students experiencing food insecurity or psychological distress struggled to meet academic expectations, demonstrating how unmet physiological and safety needs impair cognitive engagement (Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023). Similarly, Burleson and Thoron (2014) linked unmet emotional needs such as lack of belonging or esteem to low motivation and disengagement in school environments.

In the current study, Maslow's theory will be used to interpret the psychosocial and home environmental dimensions of underperformance. Many students in Gucha South face poverty, food insecurity, and unstable family conditions, all of which hinder the satisfaction of their basic needs. By framing these issues through Maslow's hierarchy, the study will examine how unmet physiological and safety needs (such as hunger and insecurity) undermine students' sense of belonging, self-esteem, and motivation to learn. Integrating this model with Bronfenbrenner's systems framework allows for a richer analysis one that not only identifies which needs are unmet but also situates these unmet needs within specific ecological levels, such as the home, school, or community.

Together, the two theories offer a powerful explanatory framework for understanding academic underperformance. Bronfenbrenner's theory provides the structural map of interacting environmental systems, while Maslow's hierarchy explains the motivational consequences of these systemic conditions. For example, poverty at the macrosystem level may lead to food insecurity at the microsystem level, creating unmet physiological needs that diminish concentration and attendance, which ultimately manifest as low academic performance. This integration allows the study to move beyond linear cause effect models and instead conceptualize underachievement as the outcome of interconnected systemic, emotional, and motivational processes.

The theoretical foundation of this study fills a critical gap in existing literature by offering a dual, integrative framework that captures both environmental complexity and psychological

depth. Unlike previous studies that examined single domains such as parental involvement or school climate this study unites ecological and motivational theories to provide a comprehensive, context sensitive understanding of academic underperformance among underachieving Form Three students in rural Kenya.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design, which was deemed appropriate for exploring and documenting the multifaceted factors influencing academic underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub-County, Kenya. A descriptive design enables researchers to collect data systematically and present insights about relationships and patterns among variables without manipulating the study environment (Siedlecki, 2020). This design aligned well with the theoretical foundations of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, both of which emphasize the role of environmental and psychological factors in shaping student behaviour and learning outcomes.

The target population consisted of 587 underperforming Form Three students, 184 teachers, and 23 school administrators across public secondary schools in the sub county. To determine a representative sample, Yamane's formula (1973) for sample size calculation was applied at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. As a result, a sample of 238 respondents was selected, comprising 184 students, 36 teachers, and 18 administrators. Sampling was carried out in two stages: purposive sampling was used initially to select students who scored Grade D and below, as well as teachers and administrators with at least two years of experience in their respective schools. This ensured that participants had relevant exposure to the factors affecting student performance. Thereafter, simple random sampling was applied within these purposively selected categories to minimize selection bias and increase the generalizability of findings.

To collect data, the study utilized two main instruments: questionnaires for students and interview schedules for teachers and administrators. The questionnaire was structured to include both closed ended and Likert scale items, enabling the measurement of variables such as study habits, emotional wellbeing, school attendance, disciplinary issues, and family background. Interviews with teachers and administrators were semi structured, allowing for

the collection of in depth qualitative data that could provide context to the quantitative findings and highlight institutional and systemic challenges.

Instrument validation was undertaken in two ways. First, face and content validity were ensured by consulting curriculum support officers and educational researchers. These experts reviewed the instruments for relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study's objectives. Revisions were made based on their recommendations to enhance the precision of the tools (Çelbi & Baykal, 2021). Second, a pilot study was conducted using a group of 30 respondents drawn from similar schools not included in the main study sample. This pilot helped refine the instruments further and assess their reliability.

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which measures internal consistency. The results from the pilot study yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, indicating strong reliability (Bujang, Omar, Foo, & Hon, 2024). This suggested that the items measured the intended constructs with a high degree of consistency. Subscales that had alpha values slightly below 0.7 were reviewed, and any weak or ambiguous items were modified or removed to improve coherence (Koçoğlu et al., 2025).

Data collection was carried out with the assistance of trained research assistants who administered the instruments during scheduled school visits. Student questionnaires were completed in controlled settings to reduce distractions and ensure accurate responses. Teacher and administrator interviews were conducted in private and recorded with consent, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The audio recordings were later transcribed for qualitative analysis.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using SPSS (version 27). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize demographic information and the distribution of responses across the key variables. Inferential statistics, particularly chi-square tests, were used to explore associations between categorical variables such as absenteeism and academic performance. In addition, multiple regression analysis was performed to identify significant predictors of student underachievement, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

Qualitative data from interviews were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke (2021) six-step framework. Transcripts were reviewed and coded, and emerging patterns

were categorized into themes reflecting emotional, school-based, and home-related influences on student performance. These themes helped to contextualize and support the quantitative findings. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, triangulation was employed by comparing and cross validating responses from students, teachers, and administrators.

The study also adhered to stringent ethical guidelines. Approval was obtained from the Kenya National Research Ethics Committee and local education authorities. All participants provided informed consent, with additional parental consent and student assent obtained for minors. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing any personally identifiable information from the data. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

Recognizing its limitations, the study acknowledged that the cross sectional design could only identify associations, not causality. Additionally, there was potential for response bias in self-reported data. These limitations were mitigated through methodological rigor, instrument reliability checks, and triangulation across data sources.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion based on the study's four objectives, which sought to examine the multifactorial causes of academic underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub County, Kenya. The study employed a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative insights gathered through interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the analysis explores how academic related challenges, psychosocial and emotional stressors, school based issues, and home or socioeconomic conditions interact to shape learner outcomes. The integration of statistical evidence with lived experiences allows for a nuanced understanding of the systemic and individual factors contributing to persistent low academic achievement in the region.

Academic Factors Contributing to Underperformance

The study revealed that academic-related challenges significantly contribute to the underperformance of Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub-County. Quantitative findings from student questionnaires showed that over 68% of

respondents reported weak study habits, characterized by inconsistent revision, last minute cramming, and poor time management. This was corroborated by regression analysis, which demonstrated that poor study habits were a significant predictor of low academic achievement ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < .05$). These findings align with recent research indicating that self-regulated learning strategies, such as consistent revision, goal setting, and active engagement, are directly associated with academic success (Khanna et al., 2018).

Quantitative data from student surveys further reinforced these findings. The results showed that many students relied heavily on last minute revision, with a significant proportion reporting that they reviewed past exam questions only a few days before assessments. On average, students indicated that they began revising about two days prior to exams, focusing mainly on memorization rather than deep understanding.

This pattern of surface level learning illustrates a broader issue of inadequate academic preparation and is reflective of what Hazelhurst, Johnson, and Sanders (2011) describe as a disconnect between content exposure and meaningful knowledge acquisition.

Another critical academic factor was the lack of learning resources. Quantitative data showed that students with limited access to textbooks, past papers, and laboratory equipment were significantly more likely to perform poorly. A chi-square test revealed that students from resource-constrained schools were 41% more likely to fall within the Grade D and below category ($\chi^2 (1) = 15.34$, $p < .01$). These findings are consistent with studies across Sub-Saharan Africa which demonstrates that instructional materials directly impact learner engagement and outcomes, particularly in STEM subjects (Piper & Dubeck, 2024). School administrators and teachers confirmed this reality during interviews. One administrator remarked,

TCT1:

We have only two textbooks for a class of 40 students. As a result, lab work is impossible, and many students cannot afford photocopies (July 17, 2025).

This shortage of essential learning materials limits opportunities for independent study and practical application of knowledge, further entrenching poor performance. As noted by the World Bank (2013), the absence of basic teaching and learning resources remains one of the most persistent barriers to quality education in under resourced communities.

Additionally, the issue of teacher absenteeism and incomplete syllabus coverage emerged as a major academic barrier. Teachers indicated that recurrent absenteeism disrupted lesson continuity, leading to compressed coverage of topics and compromised learning quality. From the students' perspective, 54% reported that at least one of their teachers was regularly unavailable. One teacher acknowledged,

TCT2:

When I miss two days, I rush students memorize key points, but often don't grasp the basics (July 18, 2025).

This tendency to focus on "teaching to the test" rather than conceptual mastery undermines deep learning. Similar concerns are highlighted by Nakhanu (2009), who found that frequent teacher absenteeism contributes to academic disengagement and diminished learner confidence, particularly in Form three.

Furthermore, teachers and administrators observed that underperforming students often exhibited passive classroom behaviours. Many failed to participate in discussions, rarely asked questions, and frequently submitted incomplete assignments. As one teacher described,

TCT3:

Many D-grade students do not complete assignments and avoid correction sessions. It's like interest is only in passing, not learning (July 19, 2025).

This academic disengagement is compounded by gaps in foundational knowledge, particularly in core subjects such as Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology, and English.

The findings under this objective highlight a complex interplay between individual and systemic academic challenges. On an individual level, students struggle with ineffective study habits and limited motivation. At the institutional level, resource shortages and teacher absenteeism hinder consistent delivery of the curriculum. These challenges collectively contribute to students' low academic achievement. The convergence of qualitative narratives and quantitative evidence underscores the need for multifaceted interventions. These should include structured academic support programs, enhanced teacher accountability, provision of adequate learning resources, and reforms in content delivery methods. Without addressing these academic foundations, broader efforts to improve performance among low achieving students will remain limited in impact.

Psychosocial and Emotional Influences on Performance

The findings related to the second objective assessing the impact of psychosocial and emotional factors on academic performance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub County revealed a significant, multifaceted relationship between students' emotional well-being and their academic outcomes. Quantitatively, the data indicated that psychosocial stress, encompassing anxiety, depression, and emotional isolation, was a major predictor of poor academic performance. Results from the student questionnaires showed that 73% of respondents experienced moderate to high levels of stress, which had a statistically significant impact on their academic outcomes ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .01$). These results were consistent with other recent studies in Kenyan educational settings, which found that psychological distress stemming from academic pressure, financial insecurity, peer conflicts, and family related trauma contributes substantially to reduced concentration, poor motivation, and diminished academic achievement (Graves, Misigo, & Ayiro, 2023).

In addition to the survey data, qualitative findings from interviews with teachers and school administrators provided a deeper understanding of how emotional and psychological stress manifests in real learning environments. Students described experiencing intense pressure from parents to improve their grades, leading to heightened anxiety, withdrawal, and a general sense of hopelessness. One administrator quoted a student, who once confessed,

TCT4:

I feel pressure from home when my parents ask why I scored D again. It makes me fear going back to school (July 19, 2025).

Another student who shared with one of the administrators was quoted saying,

TCT5:

I just stay at home when I feel bad, and I don't go to school (July 19, 2025).

These narratives highlighted a common trend among underperforming learners' emotional disengagement from school triggered by fear of judgment, feelings of inadequacy, or the psychological burden of past failures. This aligns with previous research showing that exam anxiety and emotional trauma impair cognitive functions such as memory, comprehension, and problem-solving, which are essential for academic success (Graves et al., 2023).

The analysis also uncovered that most of the students lacked access to adequate psychosocial support systems. About 64% of respondents reported insufficient emotional support either at home or in school. This absence of a nurturing emotional environment significantly correlated with lower academic performance ($r = -0.31$, $p < .01$). Interviews with teachers corroborated this concern, with many educators admitting they lacked the training or resources to offer meaningful emotional support. One teacher explained,

TCT6:

When students come upset, we lack skills or facilities to support them. They leave before we even know what's wrong (July 19, 2025).

This absence of capacity within schools to address students' mental health needs not only left emotional issues unresolved but also contributed to a cycle of disengagement and underachievement.

Furthermore, both quantitative and qualitative data suggested that many students employed maladaptive coping strategies in response to psychosocial stress. Rather than seeking help, students frequently resorted to avoidance missing classes, disengaging from schoolwork, or retreating into silence. These behaviours were more common among those reporting higher levels of anxiety and depression. This finding echoes other studies in the Kenyan context, where avoidance behaviours have been identified as both a symptom and a driver of academic decline (Njare, 2013).

The integration of these findings underscores the critical role of psychosocial well-being in academic achievement. Students burdened by emotional stress often exhibit low self-esteem, diminished concentration, and inconsistent school attendance all of which negatively impact academic performance. The absence of effective support structures, both at home and in school, further compounds this problem, leaving students vulnerable to chronic underperformance. Therefore, addressing psychosocial and emotional barriers must become a central part of academic recovery strategies.

The findings from this objective clearly illustrate that academic underperformance among students in Gucha South Sub County cannot be effectively addressed without acknowledging and responding to the emotional and psychological challenges they face. Emotional wellbeing

is a foundational pillar of learning, and efforts to enhance academic outcomes must begin by cultivating safe, supportive, and emotionally responsive learning environments.

School-Based Challenges: Absenteeism and Discipline

The study found that school-based factors particularly chronic absenteeism and student indiscipline play a significant role in the academic underperformance of Form Three students. Quantitative data from the student questionnaires and school records revealed that absenteeism was a statistically significant predictor of low academic outcomes. Multiple regression analysis showed a negative relationship between frequent absenteeism and academic performance ($\beta = -0.26, p < .05$), indicating that students who missed a substantial number of learning days were more likely to score Grade D and below.

Survey data indicated that approximately 68% of the low performing students reported missing more than 20% of their scheduled classes in the previous term. Reasons cited included lack of school fees, chronic illness, and emotional challenges. These absences created learning gaps that made it difficult for students to keep up with the curriculum. Teachers reported that once students returned after prolonged absences, they struggled to reconnect with the learning process and often fell further behind.

From a qualitative standpoint, interviews with teachers and administrators reinforced this pattern. Several educators noted,

TCT7:

Absenteeism directly interfered with curriculum coverage and student confidence. Students who were absent frequently not only missed content but also disengaged from school culture and classroom routines. This disconnect led to low morale and diminished academic effort, further worsening their performance (July 19, 2025).

In addition to absenteeism, disciplinary issues were highlighted as a major challenge affecting academic progress. The data showed that over half (51%) of the students who performed poorly had been involved in at least one disciplinary case in the recent school term. These cases included disruptive classroom behaviour, non-compliance with school rules, truancy, and involvement in inappropriate peer relationships. Chi-square analysis demonstrated a significant association between student indiscipline and low academic

performance ($\chi^2 = 12.78$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$), affirming the negative impact of behavioural misconduct on learning outcomes.

Qualitative insights from interviews suggested that these disciplinary behaviours were often symptoms of deeper emotional or social struggles. Teachers observed,

TCT8:

Students exhibiting disruptive behaviour frequently showed signs of low self-esteem, lack of motivation, and emotional distress. In many instances, punitive disciplinary measures such as suspension or temporary exclusion from class only served to reinforce disengagement, rather than rehabilitating behaviour (July 20, 2025).

This finding aligns with research emphasizing the need for restorative rather than punitive disciplinary practices in schools (Adukia et al., 2025).

Some school administrators explained,

TCT9:

While discipline is necessary for order, overly harsh or exclusionary responses can alienate struggling students, causing them to fall even further behind academically. As such, they advocated for more supportive and rehabilitative approaches, such as counselling, mentorship, and structured behaviour improvement plans (July 21, 2025).

The integrated data suggested that absenteeism and poor discipline are not isolated problems but part of a broader cycle of academic disengagement. Students who frequently miss school or face disciplinary action often lack a stable support system, experience academic frustration, and eventually disengage from school altogether. Without targeted interventions, these patterns are likely to persist, resulting in chronic underachievement.

Impact of Home Environment and Socioeconomic Status

The fourth objective sought to evaluate how home environments and socioeconomic conditions contribute to academic underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub-County.

The findings indicated a significant relationship between students' home environments and their academic performance. Quantitative data from the student questionnaires revealed that more than 72% of respondents came from low income households where basic educational needs were not consistently met. Many students reported lacking essential learning resources, including textbooks, calculators, and revision guides.

In households where parents or guardians were unemployed or engaged in low-paying, informal jobs, school fees were irregularly paid, resulting in frequent absenteeism and low academic morale.

Regression analysis identified socioeconomic hardship as a statistically significant predictor of academic underachievement ($\beta = -0.34, p < .01$). Students from economically disadvantaged homes were less likely to attend school consistently, participate in academic enrichment programs, or receive academic support at home. These conditions placed them at a structural disadvantage compared to their peers (Ebenstål Almeida et al., 2024).

Qualitative data from teacher and administrator interviews corroborated these findings. Educators noted,

TCT10:

Students from impoverished households often appeared fatigued, hungry, or distracted in class. In some cases, they were tasked with adult responsibilities such as sibling care or farm labour, which limited time for homework and revision. Others faced domestic instability such as parental separation, substance abuse, or domestic violence which disrupted their emotional wellbeing and focus on learning (July 21, 2025).

A recurring theme in interviews was the absence of effective parental support. Many parents lacked the educational background or time to guide their children academically. As noted by school heads,

TCT11:

Some parents only became involved when called in for disciplinary issues, rather than playing a proactive role in their child's academic progress (July 21, 2025).

This aligns with recent literature that highlights the role of parental engagement and household stability as critical buffers against school failure (Mwangi & Wambugu, 2023).

Additionally, several students experienced housing insecurity, with some living in single room households or being passed between relatives due to orphan hood or neglect. These conditions led to stress; low self-esteem, and reduced motivation. Psychological distress linked to unstable home environments manifested in school as absenteeism, indiscipline, or emotional withdrawal all contributing to poor performance.

An emerging insight from both datasets was the cyclical nature of poverty and academic failure. Students lacking material and emotional support were more likely to disengage academically, and this disengagement perpetuated their socioeconomic disadvantage. This is supported by contemporary education research (Jones, 2022)

The findings confirm that home and socioeconomic factors play a central role in shaping students' academic trajectories. Financial strain, lack of learning resources, minimal parental involvement, and unstable domestic conditions form an ecosystem that inhibits educational success. Addressing academic underperformance, therefore, requires interventions that extend beyond the classroom to the home environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that academic underperformance among Form Three students scoring Grade D and below in Gucha South Sub County are deeply rooted in a multifaceted network of interrelated factors. It is evident that no single variable solely accounts for students' persistent low grades. Instead, the issue is shaped by interplay of academic deficiencies, emotional and psychological challenges, school based conditions, and adverse home or socioeconomic environments.

From an academic standpoint, many students demonstrated weak foundational knowledge, ineffective study habits, and poor engagement with learning materials. Most relied on vertical revision strategies like reviewing past exam questions without linking them to core concepts which undermined their ability to grasp subject content at a deeper level. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of mastery based and competency driven instruction over rote memorization (Carpenter & Sanchez, 2025).

Psychosocial issues also emerged prominently. Emotional stress from domestic instability, bereavement, chronic illness, and lack of parental care negatively impacted concentration, attendance, and motivation. Students often exhibited signs of low self-esteem, anxiety, and academic disengagement, affirming current evidence that psychological wellbeing is a critical determinant of learning outcomes (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023)

School based factors such as frequent absenteeism, behavioural indiscipline, and weak learner monitoring mechanisms further complicated the learning environment. Although some schools had disciplinary structures in place, they were often reactive rather than transformative, failing to address the underlying causes of student disengagement. This observation supports studies suggesting that punitive models of discipline can worsen alienation unless coupled with mentorship and counselling support (Ruzibiza & Ndagijimana, 2024)

The home environment also played a central role. Many students came from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds where basic educational needs such as access to books, meals, or a quiet study space were unmet. Some faced challenges including school fee arrears, limited parental support, or exposure to violence and substance abuse. These realities corroborate the argument that poverty remains a structural barrier to equitable education in Kenya (Mukabana, Abuya, Kabiru, & Ajayi, 2024)

Recommendation

Given the complex and interconnected challenges facing today's learners, this study proposes a comprehensive set of multisectoral interventions designed to address academic underperformance holistically. At the heart of this approach is the recognition that underachievement is often not a reflection of students' innate ability but a symptom of broader systemic issues ranging from academic gaps and emotional distress to socioeconomic hardship and inadequate institutional support.

First, there is a critical need for structured academic remediation that is responsive to the unique learning needs of students. Rather than relying on traditional vertical revision strategies, schools should adopt horizontal approaches that link exam content directly to syllabus competencies. This ensures that revision is not only curriculum aligned but also meaningful to learners. Remedial efforts should focus on core subjects like Mathematics,

Chemistry, Biology, and English, using differentiated instruction methods to close foundational gaps and accelerate progress for learners at varying academic levels.

Equally important is the need to strengthen psychosocial and emotional support within schools. Many students grapple with emotional challenges that directly affect their learning capacity, including trauma, low self-worth, grief, and neglect. To address these, schools should implement comprehensive support systems that include both individual and group counselling sessions, facilitated by trained mental health professionals. Awareness campaigns can help destigmatize mental health concerns, while teachers should be trained in emotional literacy and crisis response to provide timely support. Faith-based chaplaincy programs can also play a significant role, offering spiritual and moral guidance, particularly for those in emotional distress. Partnerships with local healthcare providers and religious institutions can further extend the reach and effectiveness of these services. Additionally, parents should be actively involved in supporting their children's emotional wellbeing through school-led outreach initiatives designed to strengthen the home-school connection.

Another key area of focus is the enhancement of discipline and student monitoring frameworks. Rather than punitive enforcement, schools should adopt a compassionate, rehabilitative approach that fosters responsibility and personal growth. Early warning systems can be used to monitor absenteeism and detect behavioural or academic decline early. Integrating behavioural counselling into school routines and establishing mentorship programs where students are paired with teachers or academic prefects can provide consistent encouragement and guidance. Such interventions not only promote positive behaviour but also empower students to take ownership of their learning journey.

Parental engagement must also be prioritized. Schools should establish regular one-on-one meetings with parents or guardians to review student progress and address challenges collaboratively. Educational workshops can help parents support academic work at home while fostering positive attitudes toward education. Effective communication between the school and home environment is essential to building a unified support system for each learner.

Socioeconomic barriers remain a major impediment to academic success for many students. To mitigate these challenges, schools, in partnership with government agencies and

community stakeholders, must ensure that vulnerable learners have access to essential learning materials, uniforms, and nutritious meals. Collaborations with NGOs, alumni associations, and faith-based organizations can help sponsor students from disadvantaged backgrounds and contribute to the improvement of school infrastructure. Addressing these basic needs is fundamental to enabling equitable access to education.

Finally, teacher preparedness is a crucial lever for educational transformation. Teachers must be continually equipped through professional development opportunities, particularly in competency-based education delivery, inclusive teaching strategies, and the provision of psychosocial support. Creating a collaborative teaching culture through shared lesson planning, peer observations and constructive feedback can significantly enhance pedagogical effectiveness and ensure consistent delivery of quality instruction.

In conclusion, this study affirms that academic underperformance stems more from systemic inequities than from student incapacity. Through targeted, empathetic, and well-coordinated interventions across academic, emotional, behavioural, social, and instructional domains, schools can create an environment where all learners, regardless of background or prior achievement, are empowered to reach their full potential.

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