

# PARENTAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AND STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MERU COUNTY, KENYA

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## ABSTRACT

*Students' performance has been left in the hands of teachers, and who are solely blamed for learners' poor performance. This study investigated the perceived influence of parents' economic activity on secondary school students' performance. The study used a cross-sectional survey research design. The study employed questionnaires to collect data. The target population was 109,151, consisting of 52,650 students, 3,851 teachers and 52,650 parents. The study used simple random sampling to sample 212 form four students, 212 parents and 121 teachers. Purposive sampling was used to sample 53 principals from 53 randomly selected public secondary schools. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic data analysis. The study concluded that there is no significant relationship between principals', teachers', parents' and students' perception of the influence of parental economic activity on students' academic performance and actual students' academic performance in Meru County, Kenya.*

## INTRODUCTION

Education empowers young people to become useful members of society by strengthening their innate ability through acquiring knowledge, power and experience (Jaysawal & Saha, 2023). Education informally begins at home (Alexander, 2013). Education is a milestone of individuals' empowerment because it enables them to respond to challenges, confront their traditional roles, and change their lives. Secondary education increases individual productivity, as measured by the well-documented link between educational attainment and personal earnings. At the national level, education plays an important role in fostering economic growth. According to Desai (2012), the literacy rate is one of the key indicators of the economic situation in a country, as an increased literacy rate leads to the enhancement of a country's human capital that helps to address unemployment, underemployment, poverty and unequal distribution of wealth. Education is also seen as defining and guiding cultural, economic and political dynamics and generational developmental imperative of societies (Keele et al., 2020).

Secondary education makes important contributions to the intergenerational maintenance and accumulation of human and social capital ((Apfeld, Coman, Gerring & Jesse, 2022). Secondary education also helps build social capital by raising the likelihood that citizens will participate in democratic institutions, join community organisations, and engage in politics (Allan & Catts, 2014; Apfeld et al., 2022 )

A family is a social unit in any society, and it is the source of early stimulation and experience in children where they first begin to learn the norms and values of society (Filipek, 2020). York et al. (2019) argue that academic attainment is important in measuring students' success. However, poor academic performance continues to be recorded in secondary schools in many African countries (Baidoo-Anu, 2018). It has been observed that students exposed to the same lessons by the same teachers perform differently when they are evaluated (Adesehinwa, 2013). This shows that a student's academic performance is influenced not only by school-related factors but also by factors outside the school environment.

Osuafor and Okonkwo (2013) and Bolu-Steve and Sanni (2013) consider family background as the most important factor in determining the student's academic performance. Educational stratification in terms of economic background still exists, especially because of regional and rural-urban differences. A study by Akinsanya, Ajayi & Salomi (2011) and another one by Kyao and Onyango (2024) indicated that parents' occupation is an

important predictor of a child's academic achievement in public secondary schools.

This view is supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014) report, which indicated that students whose parents work in professional occupations generally outperform other students in mathematics, while students whose parents work in elementary occupations tend to underachieve in mathematics compared to their peers.

However, the strength of the relationship between parents' occupations and student performance varies considerably across countries (Muola, 2010). For example, regarding mathematics performance, the children of cleaners in China outperform the children of professionals in the United States, and the children of professionals in Germany outperform the children of professionals in Finland, on average (OECD, 2014). OECD (2014) further indicated that Finland and Japan achieve high levels of performance by ensuring that the children of parents who work in elementary occupations are given the same education opportunities and the same encouragement as the children of professionals. Based on this, it could be asserted that parental occupation's influence on a student's academic performance varies across the globe.

Akinsanya et al. (2011) maintain that most underachievers come from the home environment's lower socioeconomic levels and that psychosocial encouragement contributes little to improving the intellect. Obeta (2014) revealed that the provision

of adequate educational material by parents, the nonchalant attitudes of some parents towards their children's education, and the socioeconomic status of the student's family all affect the student's academic performance. A study by Chowa et al. (2013) found that households with more income perform better in English. The study further reported that parents with better income are likely to enrol their children in public boarding primary schools with facilities compared to disadvantaged pupils with less income in public day schools with inadequate facilities.

Although it is widely accepted that parents' socioeconomic status influences students' academic achievement (Long & Pang, 2016), the direct or indirect effects of parents' socioeconomic status on children's schooling still remain unclear. For example, utilising the PISA dataset, Long and Pang (2016) indicated that the three components of SES (i.e., home educational resources, parental education, and family wealth) had significant indirect effects on both mathematics and problem-solving achievement through parental expectations. Other existing literature, however, presents contrary evidence suggesting that the effects of parental education per se are negligible or very small. Kung (2016) indicated that parents' socioeconomic status indirectly affects children's academic achievement through the mediating effects of parental involvement and directly influences children's academic achievement. A study by Muthoni (2013), on the other hand, indicated that family financial status had a positive relationship with students' academic performance.

Similarly, Juma's (2016) study indicated that parents' income influences students' academic performance. However, the Khaliq et al. (2016) study showed a moderate positive relationship between parental income and students' achievement scores.

Similarly, the results of Gabriel et al. (2016) study showed a moderate positive relationship between parental income and students' achievement scores, parental educational level and students' achievement scores, and parental occupation and students' achievement scores. Nonetheless, Kung (2016) established that parents' socioeconomic status indirectly affected children's academic achievement through the mediating effects of parental involvement, which directly influenced children's academic achievement. If students' academic achievement can genuinely benefit from their socioeconomic status, it must be questioned as to why the conclusions are, thus far, inconsistent.

Since 2011, academic performance among learners in Meru County has been poor in comparison to neighbouring counties. A study by Wambugu (2012) in Igembe, Kenya, attributed poor academic performance to cultural practices such as chewing *miraa* (*khat*), early marriage, circumcision and polygamy and socioeconomic activities such as *miraa* business, farming and pastoralism. On the other hand, a study by Parnwell (2015) in Ruiru Location-Meru County, Kenya, attributed poor academic performance to inadequate school infrastructure. Although these studies have attributed poor academic performance in the region to cultural and societal economic activities, none of

the studies sought to ascertain the effects of parental economic activities on poor academic performance.

Although parental economic activities could predispose to students' academic performance, how they influence academic performance in the study area needs to be known. Moreover, previous studies on the influence of parental economic activities on student performance needed to be more consistent.

Thus, this study sought to investigate the perceived influence of parental economic activities on students' academic performance in public secondary schools.

#### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to examine the school community perception of the influence of parents' economic activity on secondary school students' performance.

##### A. Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional research design to assess the perceived influence of parental economic activity on secondary school students' academic performance. The study was carried out in Meru County. The study targeted a population of 109,502 persons comprising 351 principals, 52,650 parents, 52,650 students and 3,851 teachers in the 351 public secondary schools in Meru County. A total of 598 respondents comprising 212 students, 121 teachers, 53 principals, and 212 parents were sampled using simple random sampling from 53 schools using a formula as proposed by Freedman, Pisani and Purves (2007) to determine the total

sample size of the respondents. Data was collected using four categories of questionnaires, namely questionnaires for parents, teachers, principals and students.

Upon completing the data collection exercise, all completed research instruments were assembled, coded, summarised, and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

##### B. Results and Discussion

The study sought to establish the academic performance of Form Four students' academic performance. This was based on the 2021 MOCK examinations, which were done in the second term of the 2021 academic year. The results are summarised in Table 1.

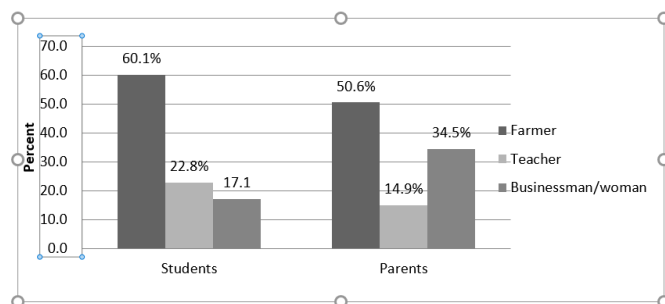
**Table 1: Students' Mean Score in 2021 KCSE MOCK Examinations.**

County	The mean score in the 2021 MOCK examinations	Standard deviation
Meru County	4.893	0.012
Tharaka Nithi County	5.223	NA
Embu County	5.321	NA

The results indicate that the mean score reported by principals averaged  $4.893 \pm 0.012$  (see Table 5). This was lower than that of the neighbouring counties of Tharaka Nithi (5.223) and Embu (5.321). These results imply that Meru County's academic performance is lower than that of other

neighbouring counties. Nonetheless, taken as a whole the results are slightly higher than those reported in the 2014 KCSE examinations (Ministry of Education Science and Technology (2015). However, the two examinations are different and could not be taken as an improvement in academic performance. Nonetheless, the MOCK examinations were used in this study to evaluate the influence of home-based factors on academic performance.

To investigate the relationship between parental economic activities and students' academic performance, study first sought to determine the occupation of the parents and its influence on students' academic performance. The findings are presented in Figure 1.



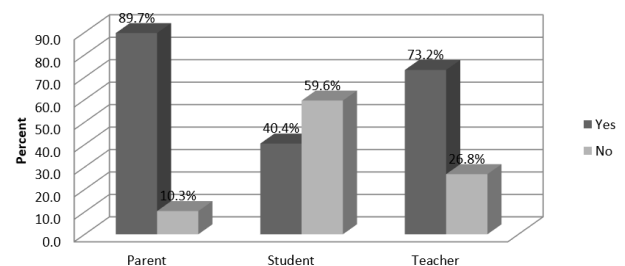
**Figure 1:** Students and Parents response on Parents' Occupation (Students N=193; Parents N=174)

The results show that according to 60.1% of the respondents, the parents were farmers. The results also show that 50.6% of the parent respondents indicated that they were farmers. The results show that 22.8% of the students indicated that their parents were teachers, while 17.1% were business people. The results show that 34.5% of the parent

respondents indicated that they were business people. The findings mean that most of the parents were farmers, which is acceptable, given that Meru County has a large rural setup and, therefore, the major economic activity is farming. It is noted that a number of parents described themselves as business persons, rather than farmers as described by their children.

The study also sought to determine whether the teachers and parents liked their occupations and whether the students liked their parents' or guardians' occupations.

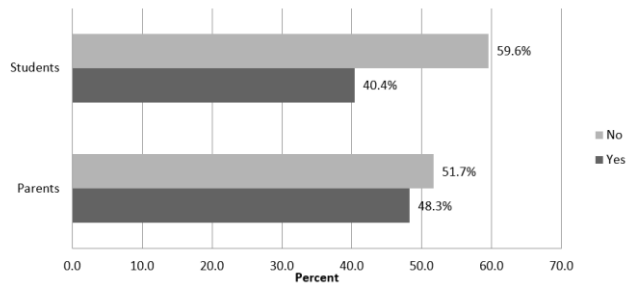
The findings are presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Teachers, Students and Parents' Perception of Parents' Occupation is Liked (Students N=193; Parents N=174; teachers N=112)

The study findings show that most teachers and parents (89.7% and 73.2%, respectively) liked their occupations. The results show that only 26.8% of the teachers disliked their teaching occupation. The findings, however, show that most of the students (59.6%) did not like the occupation of their parents or guardians.

The study further sought to establish whether the students aspired to do the same job as the parents. The findings are presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** Students Aspire Parents' Job (N=193)

The study established that most of the students (59.6%) aspired to do the same jobs as their parents, while 40.4% had no aspiration of becoming what their parents were. The findings also show that 51.7% of the parents indicated that their children aspired to their jobs. However, 48.3% of the children had not aspired to their parents' jobs. The findings mean that even though most students aspired to do the same job as their parents, a good proportion disliked their parents' jobs.

The study also sought to establish the extent to which the respondents agreed with the statements on the relationship between parents' economic activities at home and the student's academic performance. This was on the scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The findings are presented in Table 2 (SA represents Strongly Agree, A represents Agree, D represents Disagree, and SD represents Strongly Disagree).

Statement	Response	Students		Parents		Teachers		Principals	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
When parents buy all things for studies, it positively influences students' academic performance	SA	5	2.6	60	34.	15	14.	7	14
	A	14	75.	52.	80.	3	3	6	72
	D	38	19.	16	9.2	2	1.8	7	14
	SD	5	2.6	4	2.3	4	3.6		0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	10
		<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	6	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	0

Parents paying school fees on time	SA	39	20.2	6	3.4	2	1.8	3	6
positively influence students' academic performance	A	97	50.3	16	91.	9	98	9	43
	D	53	27.4	6	3.4	2	1.8	4	8
	SD	23	11.9	2	1.1	4	3.6		0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	10
	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	6	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	0	
The ability to get all the meals at home positively influences students' academic performance	SA	50	25.9	2	1.1	4	3.6	6	12
	A	13	67.0	13	78.	1	96	1	40
	D	5	2.6	34	19.	5	2	1.8	3
	SD	8	4.1	2	1.3	4	3.6	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	10	
	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	6	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	0	
Going to school on an empty stomach negatively influenced students' academic performance	SA	55	28.5	2	1.1	2	1.8	9	18
	A	9	4.6	6	7	98	9	8	76
	D	12	62.0	1	14	8.0	2	1.8	1
	SD	9	4.7	2	1.1	4	3.6	2	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	10	
	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	6	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	0	
Dependence on well-wishers for bursaries and school fees has negatively influenced students' academic performance	SA	8	4.1	20	5	13	5	5	10
	A	15	7.8	10	5.7	85	4	4	88
	D	14	72.0	14	81.	6	6	5.4	1
	SD	30	15.5	2	1.1	2	1.8		0
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	10	
	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	6	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	0	
Receiving presents from parents/guardians for good performance in school positively influences students' academic performance	SA	41	21.2	16	9.2	19	9	17.	1
	A	13	71.8	14	81.	6	85	3	6
	D	11	5.7	10	5.7	2	1.8	1	2
	SD	3	1.6	6	3.4	0	0		0
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	10	
	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	6	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	0	
Staying at home most of the time due to lack of school fees negatively influences students' academic performance	SA	56	29.0	16	9.2	17	1	16.	1
	A	12	65.7	13	74.	7	87	2	2
	D	9	4.7	18	10.	3	2	1.8	4
	SD	1	0.5	10	5.7	0	0		5
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	10	
	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	6	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	0	
The economic	SA	17	8.8	10	5.7	15	3	14.	4
									8

activities of parents negatively influence students' academic performance	A	13	6.7	10	1.1	1	17.9	1	0	20
	D	13	70.6	15	90.8	90.8	72.9	3	0	60
	SD	27	14.0	4	2.2	0	0	6	1	12
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>0</b>
						6				
Working to earn income to subsidise parents' earnings negatively influences students' academic performance	SA	17	8.8	8	4.6	4	3.6	2	4	
	A	40	20.7	20	11.4	28	26.8	7	14	
	D	10	56.9	14	81.6	74	69.6	4	0	80
	SD	27	14.0	4	2.3	0	0	1	2	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	10	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>0</b>

The study results show that most respondents (75.1% of the students, 52.9% of parents, 80.4% of teachers and 72% of the principals) agreed that buying all the study requirements by the parents positively influences the student's academic performance. According to most respondents, the results mean that purchasing the study necessities is significant. The findings support Chowa, Rainier, Masa, Christopher, Wretman, and David's (2013) study, which found that households with more income perform better academically.

The results revealed that most respondents (50.3% of the students, 91.9% of parents, 92.9% of teachers and 86% of the principals) agreed that timely payment of school fees directly influences the students' academic performance. The findings mean that timely payment of school fees is important to the student's academic performance. The findings also support the argument by Chowa, Rainier, Masa, Christopher, Wretman, and David (2013) that parents with better income are likely to

enrol their children in schools with better facilities as compared with disadvantaged pupils with less income who in most case are enrolled in schools with inadequate facilities where they can afford school fees.

On the perceived influence of all meals, the study findings revealed that the majority (67.3%) of the students, 78.1% of parents, 91.1% of the teachers and 80% of the principals) agreed that the ability to get all the meals at home positively influenced academic performance. The findings mean that providing meals at home directly influences the students' performance. The study findings show that 89.7% of the parents, 92.9% of teachers and 76% of the principals agreed that going to school on an empty stomach negatively influenced the students' academic performance. The results show that most (62.1%) of the students disagreed that going to school on an empty stomach would negatively influence the student's academic performance. This is consistent with the OECD (2014) report, which indicated that students whose parents can provide basic needs, including clothing, food and better housing, generally outperform students from disadvantaged families.

The results show that most (81.6%) of the parents and 72.6% of the students disagreed with the statement that poor academic performance was attributable to dependence on bursaries and well-wishers for school fees. However, most (80.4%) of the teachers and 88% of the principals indicated that the dependence on well-wishers and bursaries for school fees negatively influenced students' academic performance. The findings imply that it

needs to be clarified whether dependence on well-wishers and bursaries influences the students' academic performance.

On the perceived influence of presents given to students for good performance by parents on academic performance, the study findings show that the majority (71.5% of the students, 81.6% of the parents, 80.3% of the teachers and 72% of the principals) agreed that receiving presents from the parents for good performance positively influenced the academic performance of the respondents. The findings therefore mean that appreciation for hard work positively influences students' academic performance.

Concerning the study findings on the influence of staying at home due to lack of school fees on academic performance, the results show that while most of the respondents (65.8% of the students, 74.7% of parents, 82.2% of the teachers and 58% of the principals) agreed that staying at home due to lack of school fees influence academic performance. The study's findings mean that staying at home most of the time due to a lack of school fees negatively influences students' academic performance.

The study also sought to determine whether the parents' economic activities had a direct perceived influence on the student's academic performance. The results show that most of the respondents (70.5% of the students, 90.8% of parents, 67.9% of the teachers and 60% of the principals) disagreed with the statement that the economic activities of the parents and guardians negatively influenced the

students' academic performance. The findings mean that the respondents perceived that the economic activities of the parents did not influence the student's academic performance.

The respondents were asked to state whether working to subsidise parents' earnings negatively influenced academic performance. The results show that most respondents (56.5% of the students, 81.6% of parents, 69.6% of the teachers and 80% of the principals) disagreed that working to subsidise parents' earnings negatively influenced academic performance. The study's findings mean that the respondents perceived that working to subsidise the parents' earnings did not influence students' academic performance.

An interview schedule with the BOM indicated that the parents' economic activity determined whether the student would be provided for in terms of school fees and learning resources by parents. The respondents reported that parental economic activities, which can satisfactorily cater to students' learning resources, positively influence students' academic performance. In addition, the respondents indicated that some students aspire to pursue career options similar to their parents; hence, parents act as role models for their students. In so doing, the students are encouraged to work hard in their academics, which may enhance their performance. Overall, these findings imply that the respondents perceived that the parents' economic activities directly influence the students' academic performance.



The study further sought to ascertain the relationship between the perception of the influence of parental economic status on students' academic performance and actual students' academic performance. This was done through the determination of the correlation between the perceived influences of parental economic activities on students' academic performance and actual students' academic performance through testing the following hypothesis:

***There is no significant dependence of students' academic performance and parental economic activities.***

The results are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3**

Chi-square for Perception on Influence of Parental Economic Activity on Students' Academic Performance and Mean Score in 2021 KCSE MOCK Examinations:

		Students		Parents		Teachers		Principals	
		Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Perceived influence of parental economic activity on students' academic	Pearson Chi-Square	5.879	.112	6.781	.231	3.456	.612	6.944	.093
	Likelihood Ratio	7.488	.179	6.123	.165	2.169	.081	4.913	.144
	Linear-by-Linear	7.322	.231	3.644	.203	1.563	.165	3.100	.092

mic performance	Assoc iation							
	N of Valid Cases	193		174		106		50

The results indicate that the perception of the influence of parental economic activity on students' academic performance is not significantly correlated to the actual students' academic performance ( $\chi^2 = 5.879$  at  $p = 0.112$  for students;  $\chi^2 = 6.781$  at  $p = 0.231$  for parents;  $\chi^2 = 3.456$  at  $p = 0.612$  for teachers and  $\chi^2 = 6.944$  at  $p = 0.093$  for principals). This implies that parental economic activity that teachers, parents, students, and principals perceive to influence academic performance positively does not affect students' actual academic performance. Therefore, the hypothesis can be accepted on the basis of the finding that there is no significant relationship between principals', teachers', parents' and students' perception of parental economic activity on students' academic performance and actual students' academic performance.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of this study, it was concluded that there is no significant relationship between principals', teachers', parents' and students' perceptions of the influence of parental economic activity on students' academic performance and actual students' academic performance. This implies that parents' economic activities might not significantly affect students' performance. This could be attributed to various initiatives by both the government and political class to ensure secondary education is accessible to all, irrespective of their

economic background. Thus, the study recommends that the government and other stakeholders continue ensuring that policies are implemented to enhance affordable access to secondary school education for all children. This will ensure that the economic background of the learners does not hinder or provide undue advantage to achieve their academic potential successfully.

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