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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student Retention and Academic Achievement among Secondary School Students in Kibaha District Tanzania

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Author's Contributions

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between student retention and academic achievement in selected secondary schools in Kibaha District, Tanzania. Guided by a gender socialisation perspective, the study employed a convergent mixed-methods design. The analytical sample comprised 50 participants: 40 students who completed questionnaires, eight teachers, and two heads of school who participated in semi-structured interviews. Documentary review covered records of 794 students in two schools. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. School records indicated that 756 students remained enrolled, yielding a retention rate of 95.2%; the reported mean examination score was 66.6%. Students expressed strong agreement that attendance supports learning, with the highest item mean recorded for the statement that frequent absence lowers academic performance ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.67$). Questionnaire-based retention and achievement scores were positively associated ($r = .671$, $p < .001$; $n = 40$). Interview participants linked regular attendance to continuity of instruction and described learning gaps and disengagement associated with absenteeism. They identified attendance monitoring, counselling, parental engagement, and remedial instruction as relevant support practices. The findings suggest that sustained educational participation and academic outcomes are related, although the design does not establish causation. Schools should coordinate attendance monitoring with learning support and evaluate these practices within their local contexts.

Keywords: student retention; academic achievement; secondary education; school attendance; Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Student retention and academic achievement capture related dimensions of secondary education. Retention concerns whether students remain enrolled over a defined period; attendance concerns their presence at school while enrolled. Academic achievement refers to demonstrated learning, commonly measured through examinations and continuous assessment. Distinguishing these concepts is necessary because a student may remain enrolled while attending irregularly,

and continued enrolment alone does not demonstrate successful learning.

Regular participation gives students opportunities to receive instruction, complete assignments, participate in assessments, and obtain feedback. Interrupted attendance may reduce these opportunities and make subsequent lessons more difficult to follow. The relationship may also operate in the opposite direction: students who struggle academically may become discouraged and disengage from schooling. A meta-

analytic review identified low academic achievement and learning difficulties among important risk domains for dropout, highlighting the need to consider academic progress alongside participation (Gubbels et al., 2019). In Tanzania, improving access and completion has been an explicit objective of secondary education investment. The World Bank (2020) described the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project as supporting safer learning environments and educational pathways for students who leave the formal school system. This policy context makes evidence on continued participation and learning relevant to school management, while national programme objectives do not establish the relationship between retention and achievement in individual districts.

In Kibaha District, the present study examines these relationships through student questionnaires, school records, and accounts from teachers and heads of school. These sources address different aspects of the research problem. Administrative records describe enrolment continuity and examination scores, questionnaires capture students' views and reported constructs, and interviews provide accounts of attendance-related learning difficulties and school responses. They should therefore be interpreted together without treating them as interchangeable measures.

The objective was to examine the association between student retention and academic achievement in the selected secondary schools. The study also explored participants' explanations of how attendance relates to learning and the support practices they considered useful. The analysis presented here concerns the combined student sample; it does not establish separate relationships for female and male students.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on a gender socialisation perspective associated with Oakley's discussion of socially constructed differences between women and men (Oakley, 1972). This perspective directs attention to expectations communicated through families, schools, and communities. Such expectations may shape students' responsibilities, educational aspirations, and opportunities to participate in schooling.

Within this framework, domestic responsibilities or expectations of paid work are possible pathways through which social roles could affect attendance and continued enrolment. These pathways are contextual hypotheses rather than demonstrated gender differences in the present results. Economic hardship, school conditions, and instructional quality may also affect participation and achievement. Because the reported analysis is not disaggregated by gender, the framework serves as an interpretive lens rather than a tested explanation of differences between girls and boys.

Empirical Literature

Research on educational participation needs to distinguish remaining in school from acquiring knowledge and skills. Enrolment, attendance, completion, and learning capture different outcomes; an intervention that improves one may not improve all of them. Gubbels et al. (2019) identified risk factors across student, family, and school domains, including academic difficulties and limited parent-school involvement. This evidence supports an interpretation in which educational participation is shaped by multiple influences rather than a single cause.

Evidence from Tanzania also points to the importance of school conditions. Ingi et al. (2026), studying public secondary schools in Nyamagana District, reported that school feeding programmes were associated with improved attendance, reduced dropout, and classroom participation. Their study provides a locally relevant example of support directed at continued participation. Its setting and intervention differ from the present study, so its conclusions should inform contextual interpretation rather than serve as direct evidence of programme effectiveness in Kibaha.

Psaki et al. (2022) systematically reviewed interventions addressing gender-related barriers to girls' schooling in low- and middle-income countries. They identified effective approaches addressing some financial, food, and academic support barriers, while finding substantial evidence gaps for other barriers. Their review also emphasised that effects depend on context and that programmes with multiple components can make the contribution of any individual component difficult to identify. These findings support careful local evaluation of proposed retention strategies rather than an assumption that every intervention improves learning.

The present study contributes local evidence by examining school records, student responses, and educators' accounts in Kibaha District. It considers both continuity of enrolment and the attendance-related learning processes described by participants. Its purpose is to assess the reported association between retention-related and achievement-related questionnaire scores and to explore how school personnel interpret interrupted participation. This focus complements intervention-oriented research by examining the relationship between participation and learning within the selected schools.

METHODOLOGY

Design and Setting

The study used a convergent mixed-methods design in Kibaha District, Pwani Region, Tanzania. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and brought together during interpretation. This approach enables comparison of numerical findings with participants' accounts of the processes underlying them (Creswell & Plano Clark,

2017). The results reported here include documentary evidence from two secondary schools, identified as School A and School B.

Participants and Sampling

The analytical sample comprised 50 participants: 40 students in the questionnaire component and 10 participants in the interview component, consisting of eight teachers and two heads of school. Questionnaire findings and Pearson correlation are based on the 40 student respondents; the interview themes are based on the 10 educators. Student selection used stratified and simple random sampling, while teachers and heads of school were selected purposively for their experience of attendance, retention, and academic progress. The article reports these component-specific sample sizes rather than treating all participants as respondents to the same instrument.

Documentary review provided a separate source of evidence from two schools. The records covered 794 students enrolled at the beginning of the reviewed academic year. These administrative records constitute the documentary cohort and are not counted as questionnaire respondents or interview participants. The quantitative questionnaire analysis therefore has $n = 40$, the qualitative component has $n = 10$, and the total analytical participant sample is $N = 50$.

Data Collection and Measures

Structured closed-ended questionnaires elicited students' views on attendance, continued enrolment, and academic performance. The five statements in Table 2 used a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The correlation analysis used the questionnaire variables labelled student retention and academic achievement. These questionnaire-based scores were analysed separately from the administrative retention rates and examination means in Table 1.

Documentary review covered enrolment, retention, dropout, and academic records for one academic year in two schools. Retention was calculated as the number of students remaining enrolled divided by enrolment at the beginning of the reviewed year, multiplied by 100. Dropout was described using the corresponding school-record counts. The examination means are presented as recorded in the study's documentary summary; the combined mean is descriptive and is not used to calculate the individual-level correlation.

Semi-structured interviews with two heads of school and eight teachers explored attendance, dropout, academic performance, and school support practices. Pseudonymous role-based identifiers distinguish participants in the presentation of interview extracts. The interview evidence was used to examine participants' explanations of the patterns observed in the quantitative findings.

Instrument Quality and Analysis

Expert review and pilot testing were used to assess the instruments' relevance and clarity. Standardised data-collection procedures supported consistency, and comparison of questionnaires, interviews, and documents supported interpretation across sources. These procedures provided checks on the data-collection process, although no numerical scale reliability coefficient is reported in this article.

Quantitative analysis used frequencies, percentages, means, sample standard deviations, and Pearson correlation. Item means and standard deviations in Table 2 were calculated from the category counts using the stated 1–5 coding. Pearson correlation assessed the association between the two questionnaire-based variables for the 40 students. Statistical significance was reported using a two-tailed threshold of $p < .05$. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, yielding themes concerning attendance and learning, absenteeism and disengagement, and school support practices. The quantitative and qualitative findings were compared during interpretation to identify convergent accounts and differences in the level of evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Retention and Examination Scores in School Records

The two schools enrolled 794 students at the beginning of the reviewed year. Of these, 756 remained enrolled and 38 were recorded as having dropped out, corresponding to retention and dropout proportions of 95.2% and 4.8%, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1. Student Retention and Examination Scores in Two Schools

Indicator	School A	School B	Combined
Students enrolled at the beginning of the year	405	389	794
Students retained	387	369	756
Students dropped out	18	20	38
Retention rate (%)	95.6	94.9	95.2
Mean examination score (%)	67.4	65.8	66.6

Source: Field data (2026). The combined examination mean is presented as reported in the documentary summary.

School A had a higher retention rate (95.6%) than School B (94.9%) and a higher reported examination mean (67.4% versus 65.8%). The differences were 0.7 percentage points in retention and 1.6 percentage points in examination scores. Two school-level observations are insufficient to establish a statistical

relationship or attribute the examination difference to retention. These figures provide descriptive context for the questionnaire and interview findings.

Students' Perceptions of Attendance and Achievement

Students expressed high agreement with all five statements (Table 2). Agreement or strong agreement ranged from 92.5% to 95.0%. The statement that frequent absence lowers academic performance had the highest mean ($M = 4.63$, sample $SD = 0.67$). Across the five item means, the arithmetic average was 4.50; this is not an independently validated composite scale.

Table 2. Student Responses to Attendance And Retention Statements

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SDi s	M	SD
Regular school attendance improves my academic performance.	23 (57.5)	14 (35.0)	2 (5.0)	1 (2.5)	0 (0.0)	4.4 8	0.7 2
Students who remain in school throughout the academic year usually perform better in examinations.	24 (60.0)	13 (32.5)	2 (5.0)	1 (2.5)	0 (0.0)	4.5 0	0.7 2
Missing classes frequently lowers students' academic performance.	28 (70.0)	10 (25.0)	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)	0 (0.0)	4.6 3	0.6 7
Students who attend school regularly complete classroom activities more successfully.	22 (55.0)	15 (37.5)	2 (5.0)	1 (2.5)	0 (0.0)	4.4 5	0.7 1
High student retention contributes to	21 (52.5)	17 (42.5)	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)	0 (0.0)	4.4 5	0.6 8

improved
overall
school
academic
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ce.

Note. $n = 40$. Cells show n (%). SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SDis = strongly disagree; M = mean; SD = sample standard deviation. Responses were coded from 5 to 1.

Source: Field data (2026).

These responses describe students' beliefs about the importance of attendance and continued enrolment. They do not directly measure the effect of either factor on examination performance. High agreement also limits variation in responses and should be considered when interpreting questionnaire-based associations.

Questionnaire Based Association

Pearson correlation showed a positive association between the questionnaire-based student retention and academic achievement scores ($r = .671$, $p < .001$; $n = 40$). Students with higher retention-related scores tended to have higher achievement-related scores. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation for these variables.

Table 3. Questionnaire Correlation and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	M	SD	r	p
Student retention	4.31	0.48	—	—
Academic achievement	4.18	0.53	.671	< .001

Note. $n = 40$. The significance test was two-tailed. The coefficient describes the association between questionnaire-based scores and does not use the school-level figures in Table 1.

Source: Field data (2026).

The coefficient indicates a positive relationship within the student questionnaire component. Its interpretation concerns the reported scores rather than a comparison of individual examination results with administrative retention rates. Because the study is observational, the association does not establish that increasing retention causes achievement to improve.

Interview Findings

The accounts of two heads of school and eight teachers were organised into three themes. These accounts provide participants' interpretations of attendance and learning; they do not constitute an experimental assessment of attendance practices or school interventions.

Attendance and Continuity of Learning

Participants described regular attendance as enabling students to follow sequential lessons, complete assignments, and receive teacher support. They also linked attendance to confidence and engagement. The following extracts illustrate these accounts.

"My experience as a head of school indicates that students who attend school regularly perform better than the ones who remain absent. For instance, regular attendance ensures that students follow every lesson from the beginning to the end of the syllabus. In this way, students participate in class discussions, do assignments and sit for continuous assessments without missing any lesson. On the contrary, irregular attendance leads to poor performance and confidence because students find it difficult to follow subsequent lessons and topics because secondary school lessons and topics are continuous. In other words, absent students miss new lessons because they have not followed previous topics. Thus, even if such students return to school, they find it hard to understand new lessons, and this ultimately affects their examination results." (Head of School 1)

"One of the primary ways of ensuring student achievement is by ensuring high attendance rates. Attendance is one of the first indicators of student achievement that we follow as heads of schools. For instance, students with better attendance records always perform better than those with poor attendance records. In addition, good attendance fosters discipline, increases learning time, and enhances teacher-student interactions. Consequently, teachers can intervene early and offer assistance to students who fall behind." (Head of School 2)

"Students who attend all lessons develop confidence because they understand class discussions and complete assignments on time. During examinations, such students are relatively free because they have followed all the lessons. For instance, it is always the case that the best students are those with good attendance records." (Teacher 1)

"Learning is a continuous process, and hence every lesson depends on previous topics. Therefore, missing several lessons makes it hard for students to understand subsequent topics. In addition, even when these students return to school, they need extra assistance to bridge the gap. This affects their overall performance, including class discussions and examinations." (Teacher 2)

"Regular attendance boosts student motivation because students interact with their peers, receive encouragement from teachers, and participate actively in class discussions. Consequently, student confidence and understanding are enhanced, leading to better examination results." (Teacher 5)

"Some students always assume that missing one or two days of school is not a big deal. However, the reality is that these missed days add up, and hence students begin to miss assignments, practicals, and tests. Consequently, their performance deteriorates even if they are brilliant students." (Teacher 8)

These accounts suggest a pathway through instructional continuity and feedback. The claims that the best-performing students always attend regularly represent participants' perceptions and should not be treated as independently verified universal relationships.

Absenteeism and Disengagement

Participants described missed lessons and assessments as sources of learning difficulties. Some also suggested that poor performance and embarrassment could discourage students from returning. Their accounts imply a possible reinforcing relationship between interrupted attendance and academic disengagement.

"One of the primary challenges that we encounter in schools is absenteeism. Some students start by missing one or two days of school. However, this soon becomes a habit, and hence they miss assignments, class activities and tests. They become weak because the other students have moved ahead with the lessons. Sometimes these students do not want to go back to school because they feel embarrassed about their performance, and hence they drop out of school. In other words, it is rare to find students who decide to drop out of school suddenly; it often begins with poor attendance records." (Head of School 1)

"Attendance records are a useful way of identifying students at risk of dropping out of school. For instance, it is not unusual for us to discover that a student has defaulted on assignments, tests, and practicals because we have noticed his poor attendance records. Poor attendance has several adverse effects, including poor interaction with teachers and peers, which affects learning. If such students do not receive timely intervention from the school and parents, they become frustrated and drop out of school." (Head of School 2)

"Frequent absences affect students' understanding because topics are dependent on each other, especially in mathematics and science. Even when these students return to school, they need extra assistance, including tutoring, to bridge the gap." (Teacher 3)

"Absenteeism often causes emotional stress, and hence some students become despondent because they cannot understand topics like other students. These students become discouraged, especially if they do poorly in tests, and hence they disengage from lessons." (Teacher 4)

"Poor attendance records often lead to incomplete notes and assignments, including inadequate test preparations. As a result, such students perform poorly in examinations, which affects their overall performance." (Teacher 6)

"Students who are absent for several days often come back to school with significant gaps in their studies. Although teachers offer assistance, these students need more help to catch up with missed topics. As such, their overall performance, including class participation and examination results, is compromised." (Teacher 7)

The interviews describe perceived pathways from absence to learning gaps and possible withdrawal. They do not establish how frequently these pathways occurred or whether absence preceded poor performance for each student. The documentary dropout total cannot independently verify the proposed sequence.

School Support Practices

Heads of school and teachers identified attendance monitoring, contact with parents or guardians, counselling, and remedial instruction as responses to interrupted participation. They considered early support important for addressing the reasons for absence and helping returning students catch up.

"Our school has a monitoring system that requires class teachers to report on daily attendance records. In other words, if a student is absent, the class teacher contacts the parent or guardian to determine the reason for absence. This way, we have managed to encourage students to attend school regularly because if their absence continues, we will involve their parents or guardians in addressing the issue. It is always better to prevent dropouts than to deal with the aftermath of a student who is already out of school." (Head of School 1)

"Our school also conducts guidance and counselling sessions to encourage students to attend school regularly. We also advise teachers to note students' performance records, including absences, and involve parents or guardians in addressing the issue. Through these interventions, we have managed to boost student performance, including examination results." (Head of School 2)

"When I discover that a student is frequently absent, I always hold private discussions with the student before notifying the class teacher or parent. In most cases, such students are responsible and hence their absences are due to personal reasons. In other words, if the students have personal responsibilities, I allow them to deal with their obligations before returning to school to continue with their studies." (Teacher 1)

"We also conduct remedial classes for students who are absent due to illness or prolonged absence. The classes help such students to recover the lessons that they have missed and boost their confidence during examinations." (Teacher 2)

"Guidance and counselling have become extremely important in our school because they encourage students to discuss personal and academic challenges with teachers. Through such discussions, students are able to resolve their challenges, thereby boosting attendance and overall performance." (Teacher 5)

"Parental involvement is also crucial because it encourages students to attend school regularly and remain committed to their studies. In other words, parental involvement facilitates better communication between parents and students, which helps to address attendance-related issues amicably and avoid the need for further interventions." (Teacher 8)

These practices were described by participants rather than evaluated through comparison groups or pre- and post-intervention measures. Their effectiveness therefore remains to be tested. Individual accounts of how responsibilities were accommodated should also be interpreted within the school's attendance requirements and the student's circumstances.

Discussion

The three sources of evidence suggest that participants regard continued educational participation as relevant to learning. School records document high retention alongside reported examination means, questionnaire responses show broad agreement about the value of attendance, and interviews describe continuity of

instruction as a possible explanatory pathway. This convergence strengthens the case for investigating attendance and learning together, while leaving the direction and magnitude of any causal relationship unresolved.

The evidence operates at different levels. Table 1 compares school aggregates, Table 2 reports individual perceptions, and Table 3 concerns two incompletely specified questionnaire variables. The interview themes offer interpretations of school practices and student experiences. Because these measures differ, the documentary results cannot validate the questionnaire coefficient directly, and the coefficient cannot explain the difference between the two schools' examination means.

The interview accounts suggest that early identification of absence should be paired with support for missed learning. Monitoring may help identify students needing assistance, while counselling and communication with families may clarify the circumstances of absence. Catch-up instruction could address accumulated learning gaps. These are recommendations arising from participants' accounts, and the study does not demonstrate their effectiveness. The context dependence and evidence gaps identified by Psaki et al. (2022) reinforce the need to evaluate such practices locally.

The gender socialisation framework highlights possible differences in the expectations students encounter at home and in school. However, the combined results do not test these differences. Claims about girls' and boys' retention or achievement would require disaggregated evidence, sufficient subgroup sample sizes, and analysis of the relevant social and economic factors. The present findings support a general discussion of participation rather than conclusions about gender-specific effects.

CONCLUSION

Among the 40 student questionnaire respondents, retention-related and achievement-related scores were positively associated ($r = .671$, $p < .001$). Accounts from eight teachers and two heads of school emphasised the importance of continuity in attendance and instruction. Documentary records showed a retention rate of 95.2% across two schools, but the school aggregates alone do not establish a statistical relationship with examination performance. Together, the findings support attention to continued participation and learning support while recognising the limits of observational and perception-based evidence.

Recommendations

Schools should consider coordinated attendance monitoring, timely communication with parents or guardians, and confidential counselling to identify and address reasons for repeated absence. Returning students should receive targeted support to recover

missed lessons and assessments. Implementation should respond to students' circumstances rather than assume a single cause of absenteeism.

Education authorities and school leaders should evaluate these practices using clearly defined attendance, retention, and learning indicators. Further research should link longitudinal attendance records to individual examination outcomes, account for prior achievement and contextual factors, and examine gender differences where the sample supports such analysis.

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