PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF ACADEMIC GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING SERVICES ON DROPOUT RISK FACTORS IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MBEERE NORTH, EMBU COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

School completion opens up numerous post-school pathways, while leaving school prematurely can potentially predispose the young generation to varied negative consequences, like unemployability, crime, poor health outcomes, and missed opportunities. Despite the importance of guidance and counselling (G&C) in helping students cope with psychological, social, and emotional difficulties and learning disengagement, the school dropout rate in Mbeere North sub-county is on the rise. This paper explored the perceived effects of academic G&C services on dropout risk factors among students in public secondary schools in Mbeere North. General Strain Theory (GST) and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) provided the theoretical framework. A descriptive survey research design with a mixed methods approach was used. The target population comprised 5,784 students from forms 2 to 4, 47 guidance counsellors, 94 form 4 class teachers, and 47 principals from 47 secondary schools, totalling 5972 individuals. Yamane's formula was used to compute a sample of 375 subjects. Fifteen schools were selected through systematic random sampling, and 15 principals, 15 guidance counsellors, and 30 class teachers through purposive sampling, and 315 students through simple random sampling. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative data, with thematic analysis being used for qualitative data. The results revealed that positive perceptions of academic G&C were associated with low levels of dropout risk factors, with 52.4% of students under the high approval category reporting reduced levels of dropout risk factors. An inverse significant relationship was established between academic G&C services and students' scores on the state of dropout risk factors (r (309) = -.19, P= .001). The education ministry needs to integrate academic

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clinics, mentorship, and psycho-education as mandatory components of the school G&C policy framework.

Keywords: academic guidance and counselling, academic clinics, psychoeducation, learning engagement, school dropout risk factors

1. Introduction

Education links young people with numerous post-school pathways, while dropping out of school has the potential of predisposing the young generation to an array of negative consequences, including lack of employment, increased criminal activities, and missed opportunities, among others. Dropping out of school negatively affects various outcomes in an individual's adult life, with the likelihood of those affected having difficult life trajectories (Ramsdal *et al.*, 2019). The social problem of prematurely leaving school is an issue that has generated debate and attracted immense interest among psychologists and researchers in the educational field. However, there is convergence that the resultant educational limitations attributed to dropping out foment high rates of unemployment, social vices and delinquent behaviours, as well as missed life opportunities (Akpeli, 2019).

Among the most industrialized nations, America leads in terms of dropout among high school and college students (Ressa & Andrews, 2022). Although stable growth has been witnessed in education among European countries, recent statistics indicate that school dropout rates remain significant. Mashhad (2021) stated that the European Union region recorded a 10.2 percent school dropout rate. Among the issues associated with this challenge in the Asian region are social factors, distance from school, lack of parental involvement, economic factors, and health-related issues (United District Information Systems for Education (UDISE), 2023). The problem is also prevalent across the African region, as highlighted by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022), where the out-of-school population has risen in Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years.

Kenya has also been grappling with growing populations of school dropouts, with statistics released by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021) indicating that at least 3 million children who had already attained the schooling age dropped out of school or remained out of school throughout the year 2021. Airo *et al.* (2022) cited family income, orphanhood and poor academic performance as determinants of school dropout incidences in Kisumu County. Evidence from the location of the present study shows that only 79.4 percent of boys who joined form one in the year 2013 completed their secondary education by 2016, compared to 84.5 percent of girls in the same period in Mbeere South (Nderi *et al.*, 2021).

Among the intervention strategies used to manage school dropout are modification of inclusive activities and establishing a friendly learning environment (Ressa & Andrews, 2022). Others include providing support to students as highlighted by Wayman *et al.* (2021), creating positive relationships between learners and staff, and

establishing flexible plans for at-risk students (Crocker, 2019). Based on the work carried out in the area of study, Nderi *et al.* (2021) advocate for modification of education policy and the creation of awareness among parents on the importance of education.

Despite the importance of guidance and counselling in addressing various educational and vocational challenges, none of the highlighted works in the area of study has expressly explored its effectiveness in managing school dropout risk factors. Taken distinctly, the term guidance is distinguished in the context of helping individuals' whole person through preventive and personal development procedures, while counselling involves supportive and remedial procedures (Lai-Yeung, 2014). Generally, G&C entails organized programs and services aimed at helping learners understand their potential to solve social, psychological, and educational challenges towards achieving their learning goals (Lawson, 2022).

Research has shown that academic guidance counselling services can be essential in improving student' perspectives about their studies towards dealing with educational development challenges (Hrisyov & Kostadinov, 2022). This is an essential factor that needs to be assessed, given that research has attributed school-related challenges, including distance from school, dislike of learning environment and peer influence, with dropping out of school (Gagica *et al.*, 2022). Thus, the study sought to establish the perceived effects of academic guidance and counselling services on dropout risk factors in public secondary schools in Mbeere North, Embu County, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

Khan (2019) explains that there are various types of guidance and counselling services, which include educational or academic guidance. This entails the assistance that students need during their school life to help them solve common academic problems and challenges that they face at home and school. A few studies have explored the potency of academic G&C services in encouraging students to remain in school. Pennie *et al.* (2020) underscore the importance of school counsellors in combating school dropout rates in American schools. They opine that students need help to overcome common risk factors that prevent them from completing school, including a lack of English proficiency and grade repetition, among others. Despite pointing to the importance of school counselling, the authors did not focus on G&C services or their role in managing the underlying school dropout risk factors.

Positive implications of academic guidance services are recorded in a study by Crouch (2018) in America's Western Kentucky School District. The study sought to establish factors that influence students to leave or remain in school until completion. Relying on qualitative data through students' interviews and focus group discussions, the study found that identifying at-risk students and providing academic and psychological interventions could help students remain in school. The study, however, relied on a small sample of 27 students and only utilized qualitative data.

Studies from Europe indicate that while dropping out of school is attributed to various factors, including wrong choice of educational programs, and family income, it can be reduced through academic guidance and counselling services (Wulz *et al.*, 2018). These conclusions were, however, based on counselling activities, such as the use of modern technology in counselling among underrepresented students in European countries. More research is therefore necessary, as such outcomes may not necessarily be replicated among students in the locale of interest for this study.

In another study, Mittendorff *et al.* (2017) looked into the effectiveness of matching activities established by institutions as required by the Dutch government as a measure for lowering the school dropout rate. Those sampled were 1711 students and 52 teachers from a higher education institution. It emerged that G&C activities that sought to advise on students' education and career were among the most effective activities in encouraging school completion. Academic guidance was found to have helped students gain realistic expectations, while counselling and guidance made them better informed and satisfied with their educational and career choices, thus increasing the probability of successful completion. The study, however, targeted higher education students at the college level, and further investigation is important to assess the implications of the aforementioned services in lowering dropout rates among learners in secondary schools.

In Norway, Dinesen *et al.* (2023) explored dropout management strategies among students in the country's Sami areas. The study depended on qualitative information obtained from young people and professionals who worked with the youth through focus group discussions. The study identified several strategies for managing school dropout, including providing regular academic guidance and support by counselling personnel and other professionals. This approach was found to have allowed students to be more deliberate in decision-making with regard to future educational objectives. However, the study was primarily focused on two main approaches of managing dropout, that is, tracking students and motivating them to remain in school, and therefore, there was a need for an in-depth interrogation on the effectiveness of the academic guidance and counselling service in addressing this challenge among students in Mbeere North.

Some studies from the African region have looked into the usefulness of academic guidance and counselling in managing school dropout. In Nigeria, Oyinloye (2015) cross-examined various G&C services, hoping to gain knowledge about their importance in lowering truancy tendencies and subsequent desertion among students in Ondo State schools. Aspects of academic guidance and counselling were rated as highly helpful in lowering the rate of school dropout. Among these included reassuring students to be more interested in school activities and gaining self-understanding, regular guidance on goal setting, career choice and encouraging good study habits. Nonetheless, significant limitations were noted in this study as it only relied on teachers as a single source of information, ignoring students and guidance and counselling personnel.

In Kenya, there seems to be a scarcity of research on academic guidance and counselling and school dropout. However, Chebon and Tarus (2017) assessed how G&C was regarded among teachers on managing dropout among learners at the primary school level. One hundred and seventy-eight respondents drawn from Uasin Gishu County participated. Among the sample were teachers and head-teachers. Aspects of academic G&C were reported to help pupils deal with academic difficulties and minimize the rate of delinquent behaviours among the learners, resulting in fewer cases of truancy. This is a testament that positive implications were noted from the aspects of academic guidance and counselling in keeping learners in school. Since the study was done in primary schools, it would be interesting to see whether the same results could be replicated among the group targeted for the present analysis.

3. Materials and Methods

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceived effects of academic G&C services on dropout rate risk factors in public secondary schools in Mbeere North, Embu County. GST and REBT served as the theoretical foundation. A mixed methods approach and descriptive survey design were employed. The population was 5972 individuals, comprising 5,784 forms 2 to 4 students, 47 guidance counsellors, 94 form 4 class teachers, and 47 principals. Systematic random sampling was used to select 15 schools, while 15 principals and 15 guidance counsellors were selected through purposive sampling. A simple random technique was applied to select 315 students. Instrument pretesting took place in the neighbouring Mbeere South sub-county. Forty two individuals comprised of 30 students, 6 class teachers, 3 principals and 3 guidance counsellors were involved.

A Cronbach's alpha test was conducted to establish the instruments' reliability. An alpha value of .72 was achieved for academic G&C services, and .75 for school dropout risk factors scales. Quantitative data were analysed in descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis was used in qualitative data. Semi-structured questionnaires and interview schedules were administered to students and key informants, respectively. Out of the 315 questionnaires administered, 311 were successfully retrieved, achieving a response rate of 98.73 percent. Interviews were administered to all the key informants, with a return rate of 100 percent being achieved.

3.1 Abbreviations and Acronyms
UDISE = United District Information Systems for Education,
G&C = Guidance and Counselling,
REBT = Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy,
GST = General Strain Theory.

4. Results and Discussion

The study sought to establish the perceived effects of academic guidance and counselling services on dropout risk factors. Students were asked to rate how much they agreed with the measures of the effect of guidance and counselling service in curbing school dropout rate through a five-point scale of strongly agree (SA) to strongly disagree (SD). Data for each of the measures was analysed so as to assess the patterns of the responses and reported through frequencies, mean and standard deviation as expressed in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' Ratings on Effects of Academic G & C Services on Dropout Rate

Measure	5 SA	4 A	3 N	2 D	1 SD	*M*	SDV
Academic G&C services offered in school have helped me overcome common difficulties related to my studies	169 54.3%	105 33.8%	11 3.5%	8 2.6%	18 5.8%	4.28	1.06
Being encouraged to participate in school activities has helped me adapt to the school environment	147 47.3%	99 31.8%	36 11.6%	16 5.1%	13 4.2%	4.12	1.07
The academic G&C offered in school has helped me develop realistic expectations about my studies	163 52.4%	99 48.0%	31 10%	8 2.6%	10 3.2%	4.27	.97
The help I receive from the G&C teacher has helped me resolve my academic problems, thus improving my interest in learning	178 57.3%	94 30.2%	20 6.4%	8 2.6%	11 3.5%	4.35	.96
Regular academic G&C services provided by the teacher counsellor have improved my competence in various subjects	129 41.4%	124 39.9%	36 11.6%	15 4.8%	7 2.3%	4.13	.95b
Being encouraged to focus on school activities has improved my school attendance	164 52.7%	88 28.3%	27 8.7%	14 4.5%	18 5.8%	4.17	1.13
The regular academic guidance support has improved my motivation to study and complete my education	177 56.9%	94 30.3%	23 7.4%	11 3.5%	6 1.9%	4.36	.90
Being advised on goal setting has improved my learning abilities	169 54.3%	96 30.9%	24 7.7%	14 4.5%	8 2.6%	4.29	.97

Note: *N* = 311, *M* = Mean, SDV = Standard Deviation.

The data in Table 1 shows that students were largely in agreement about the effectiveness of guidance and counselling in helping them overcome learning difficulties, as demonstrated by a high mean score of 4.28 (*SD* = 1.06). It is also evident that students were mostly in agreement that the encouragement they received from counsellors had been helpful in fostering their adaptation to the school environment, as shown by a mean score of 4.12 (*SD* = 1.07). on whether academic guidance and counselling service offered in school had been helpful in developing realistic expectations about their studies, the students largely agreed, with this measure obtaining a high mean score of 4.27 (*SD* = .97).

The data indicates that for the most part, the students approved the statement that the help given to them by teacher-counsellors was helpful towards resolving academic problems, resulting in improved interest for learning (*M* = 4.35, *SD* = .96). General consensus was observed among the sampled students that regular academic and

guidance counselling they had been receiving had improved their competencies in different subjects as expressed through a strong mean score of 4.13 (*SD* = .95). On whether being encouraged to focus on school activities had resulted in improved school attendance, the students largely assented, as demonstrated by a strong mean of 4.17 (*SD* = 1.13).

A general consensus was established among the participants' responses on whether regular academic guidance support they had been receiving had increased the motivation to study and remain in school to completion (*M* = 4.36, *SD* = .90). Further, the outcomes indicate that the students were largely in harmony in their responses that being advised on goal setting had led to improved learning abilities as expressed through a strong mean score of 4.29 (*SD* = .97). The measure that obtained the highest mean score (*M* = 4.36, *SD* = .90) was that regular academic guidance support had improved students' motivation to study and complete their education. The least mean score (*M* = 4.12, *SD* = 1.07) was associated with the measure that encouragement to participate in school activities had increased adaptation to the school environment.

The reported outcomes indicate that the students harmoniously approved the usefulness of academic guidance and counselling services in addressing various learning difficulties, promoting realistic expectations about schooling, and enthusiasm to study. Such help is likely to enhance learning abilities and nurture various competencies that students struggling with learning difficulties and resultant poor grades need to feel motivated to learn and stay in school. This is consistent with what Pennie *et al.* (2020) emphasize regarding the importance of academic guidance and counselling in addressing learning challenges and grade repetition that are common risk factors for dropping out of school.

The outcomes of the present study demonstrate that academic guidance and counselling services play a significant role in addressing various educational, as well as career developmental needs among secondary school students. Assisting students at risk of dropping out of school to adapt effective study habits and develop realistic expectations about their studies can be important in enhancing self-motivation and learning engagement. Such engaged students are likely to find learning processes enjoyable, develop positive interactions with other students and teachers, and experience academic emotional support, thus reinforcing the desire to remain in school. This concurs with Szabo *et al.* (2024) in research that found student engagement to be vital in fostering a sense of belonging and positive educational outcomes among Hungarian students.

The results are in line with the concepts of REBT by Ellis (1955, 2019), which suggests that helping individuals change their attitudes and adapt to new perspectives about their situations can avert negative beliefs and maladaptive behaviours. Through academic G&C services, students with poor learning habits or difficulties that affect concentration find help, and adapt to new study habits, which is essential for improving learning experience, and lowering dropout risk factors.

The findings lend credence to an earlier study by Kariuki (2022), in which academic G&C services were seen as instrumental in dealing with varied learning challenges attributable to disengagement, poor participation in learning activities and truancy among secondary school learners in Tharaka Nithi county. The findings of the present study, however, do not align with those of Irungu (2019), in a study from Lamu county, Kenya, which found that teacher counsellors rarely involved themselves with family-related issues. This was found to be counterproductive as it negatively affected students' learning abilities. The indifference by the counsellors also led to poor academic performance, a risk factor for truancy and a high dropout rate.

Further analysis was conducted on the measures of academic guidance and counselling services in order to establish the range, mean and standard deviation of the total scores, as well as dispersion of data and symmetrical distribution as reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Descriptive Statistics

	Range	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*	Skew	Kurt
Total Academic G&C Service Scores	26.00	14.00	40.00	34.01	4.72	-1.12	1.84
Valid N (listwise)	311						

Note: *N* = 311, Min = Minimum, Max = Maximum, *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation, Skew = Skewness, Kurt = Kurtosis.

The results from the computation of all the measures of academic guidance and counselling service indicate that the score range was 26, with a minimum value of 14 and a maximum of 40. The scores registered a mean score of 34.01 (*SD* = 4.72), and a negative skewedness of -1.12, suggesting that the participants' self-reporting was high. A positive kurtosis value of 1.84 was established, pointing to a distribution with a flatter peak and less extreme outliers.
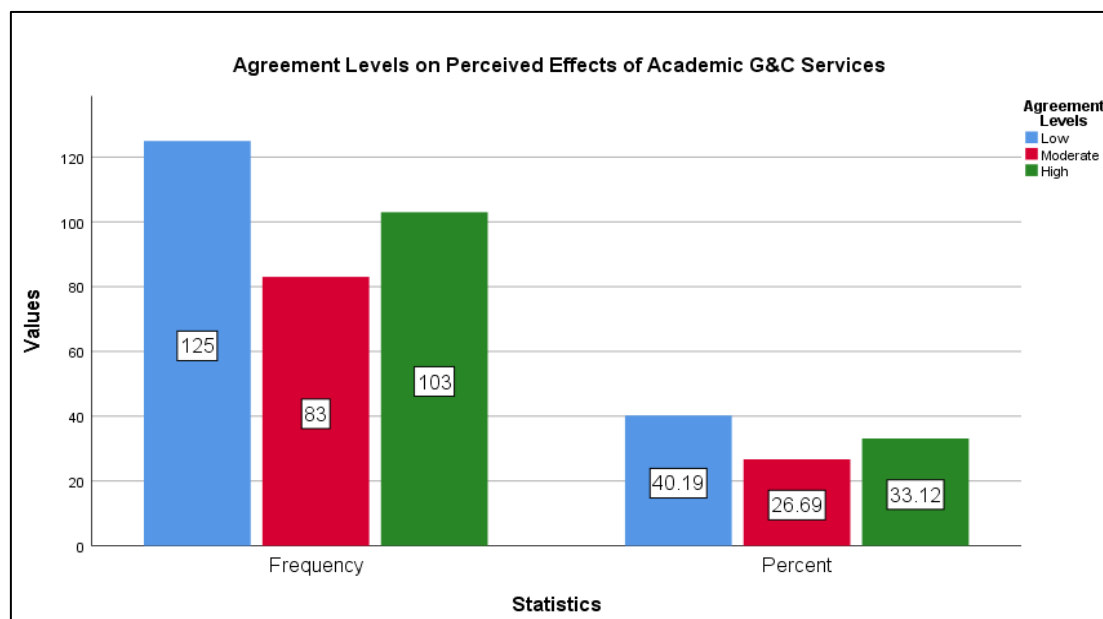

Figure 1: Agreement Levels on Perceived Effects of Academic G&C Services

The results in Figure 2 demonstrate that 125 (40.19%) of the participants reported low agreement levels regarding the effects of academic G&C services in curbing school dropout, followed by 103 (33.12%) who reported high agreement levels, while 83 (26.69%) of the participants reported moderate agreement levels on the rating scale.

While a general consensus was established among the students regarding the positive effects of academic G&C services, grouping the participants based on their agreement levels reveals that a substantial number of them had mixed perceptions. Such divergence may be explained by the participants' overall evaluation the helpfulness of G&C services, such as the ambivalent assessment of the role of encouragement to participate in school activities in fostering adaptation to the learning environment, and the usefulness of the services in developing competence in various subjects.

Consistent with the finding is a research by Kiptala and Kipruto (2021) that some students may underrate the effectiveness of G&C services or have divergent perceptions regarding some of the aspects of such services. In order to compare the association between the perceived effects of academic G&C service and curbing of school dropout, data on students' dropout risk factors were also analysed and reported as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' Ratings on School Dropout Risk Factors

Measure	5 SA	4 A	3 N	2 D	1 SD	M	SDV
The kind of food served at school makes me feel like leaving school	77 24.8%	26 8.4%	39 12.5%	52 16.7%	117 37.6%	2.65	1.62
Not being able to do artistic or cultural activities at school makes me want to stop going to school	28 9.0%	22 7.1%	48 15.4%	71 22.8%	142 45.7%	2.10	1.30
I feel like dropping out of school because classrooms have too many students	19 6.1%	5 1.6%	28 9.0%	51 16.4%	208 66.9%	1.63	1.11
My family members and/or caregivers not attending school when requested makes me lose interest in education	45 14.5%	31 10.0%	40 12.8%	57 18.3%	138 44.4%	2.31	1.47
I have a health problem that makes me feel like dropping out of school	24 7.7%	16 5.1%	35 11.3%	54 17.4%	182 58.5%	1.86	1.25
I have been a victim of violence in school, and this make me feel like dropping out of school	25 8.0%	21 6.8%	45 14.5%	50 16.0%	170 54.7%	1.97	1.29
I've thought about leaving school because it does not respect the religion I practice	38 12.2%	14 4.5%	32 10.3%	50 16.1%	177 56.9%	1.99	1.39
I feel like dropping out of school because my parents lack money for my transport, books, supplies and emergency use	27 8.7%	24 7.7%	39 12.5%	58 18.6%	163 52.5%	2.01	1.32
I've thought about leaving school because it does not deal with complaints presented by students	42 13.5%	24 7.7%	45 14.5%	63 20.2%	137 44.1%	2.26	1.43
I feel sad or depressed, and it makes me think about dropping out of school	33 10.6%	25 8.0%	37 11.9%	63 20.3%	153 49.2%	2.10	1.37
I have learning difficulties that make me feel like dropping out of school	38 12.2%	22 7.1%	42 13.5%	62 19.9%	147 47.3%	2.17	1.40

Pressure from peers to engage in risky behaviours i.e. smoking, or bullying makes me lose interest in education	44 14.1%	23 7.4%	23 7.4%	45 14.5%	176 56.6%	2.08	1.48

Note: *N* = 311, *M* = Mean, SDV = Standard Deviation.

As demonstrated in Table 3, a somewhat divergent perception was established among the students in response to the proposition that the type of food served in school made them feel like dropping out of school, as expressed by a fairly low mean score of 2.65 (*SD* = 1.62). The participants mostly disagreed with the proposition that inability to participate in artistic or cultural activities in school had discouraged them from attending school, as demonstrated by a relatively weak mean score of 2.10 (*SD* = 1.30). With regard to whether classrooms were congested to a point of making them feel like dropping out, the participants generally dissented, as expressed through a remarkably low mean score of 1.63 (*SD* = 1.11).

The results indicate that the students largely disagreed that failure by family members or caregivers to attend school meetings when required to do so had affected their interest in education (*M* = 2.31, *SD* = 1.47). In response to whether any existing health problem had made them want to drop out of school, the students generally disagreed, as evidenced by a low mean score of 1.86 (*SD* = 1.25). The participants, for the most part, disagreed with the proposition that they had been victims of violence in school, resulting in feelings of dropping out (*M* = 1.97, *SD* = 1.29).

There was general dissent among the participants with regard to whether there was a lack of respect for their respective religious beliefs, leading to contemplation to leave school (*M* = 1.99, *SD* = 1.39). The participants were also in general disagreement regarding the statement that they considered leaving school due to parents' financial constraints and inability to meet transport costs, books and related supplies, as well as money for emergency use (*M* = 2.01, *SD* = 1.32). The data further points to general dissention regarding the statement that students had contemplated leaving school due to a lack of proper complaint management procedures (M = 2.26, *SD* = 1.43).

On being asked to rate the proposition as to whether they felt sad or depressed, resulting in contemplation to drop out of school, the participants largely disagreed, as expressed by a weak mean score of 2.10 (*SD* = 1.37). The participants largely dissented that there was a presence of learning difficulties that contributed to the desire to leave school (*M* = 2.17, *SD* = 1.40). Lastly, the participants were largely opposed to the proposition that peer pressure to engage in risky behaviours had made them lose interest in education, as expressed by a weak mean score of 2.08 (SD = 1.48). The findings imply that the participants had largely developed substantial levels of resilience against dropout behaviour. Masten (2021) explains that various factors, including context-dependent experiences of an individual student as well as family background, may shape the level of resilience against dropout risk factors.

A summary of descriptive statistics was performed on all the measures of school dropout risk factors as presented in Table 4, in order to establish the range, minimum, maximum, and mean values of the total scores, as well as data dispersion.

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

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

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

The results in Table 4 indicate that the range of the total scores on the ratings of school dropout risk factors was 48, whereas the minimum value was 12 and the maximum value was 60. The scores had a relatively low mean value of 25.18 (*SD* = 10.18), suggesting that the overall ratings on the measures of school dropout risk factors were low. A positive skewedness value of .82 was established, pointing to a right-skewed distribution with most of the values being concentrated on the lower side of the scale. The dataset had a positive kurtosis value of .56, indicating that the distribution was not too peaked compared to the normal distribution.

Based on the low mean score, it is observed that the participants had, by and large, developed abilities to overcome various challenges associated with dropout tendency. This observation aligns with research by Masten (2021) and Wortsman *et al.* (2024) that various factors, including family background and individual student experiences, can be helpful in developing resilience against dropout risk factors.

Table 5: Levels of School Dropout Risk Factors

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

Note: *N* = 311.

It is observed from the results in Table 5 that 108 (34.7%) of all students taking part in the study reported moderate agreement levels regarding their ratings on school dropout risk factors. The results further indicate that 102, representing 32.8% rated the same factors with low agreement levels, while 101 (32.5%) rated such school dropout risk factors with high agreement levels. This implies that a substantial number of students were in moderate and low categories, suggesting that fewer students reported high levels of school dropout rate risk factors. It can be implied that a large number of students in the study had developed resilience and coping mechanisms against dropout risk factors. These outcomes align with those of Wortsman *et al.* (2024) from Côte d'Ivoire, who found that individual characteristics of a student, together with home-based or school experiences, may influence learners' resilience against dropout.

A cross tabulation for the ratings on the effects of academic guidance and counselling services and school dropout risk factors was conducted based on the participants' agreement levels in order to establish the associations between the two variables. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Effects of Academic G&C Services Versus School Dropout Risk Factors

| | | Levels of Dropout Risk Factors | | | Total |
		Low	Moderate	High	
Academic G&C Service Levels	Low	23	48	54	125
		18.4%	38.4%	43.2%	100.0%
	Moderate	25	32	26	83
		30.1%	38.6%	31.3%	100.0%
	High	54	28	21	103
		52.4%	27.2%	20.4%	100.0%
Total		**102**	**108**	**101**	**311**
		32.8%	**34.7%**	**32.5%**	**100.0%**

Note: N = 311.

The results in Table 6 demonstrate that out of 125 students who rated the effects of academic G&C services with low agreement levels, 54 (43.2%) reported high levels of school dropout risk factors, 48 (38.4%) reported moderate, and 23 (18.4%) reported low levels of dropout risk factors. Out of 103 students rating the effects of academic G&C services with high agreement levels, 54 (52.4%) of them reported low levels, 28 (27.2%) exhibited moderate levels, while 21 (20.4%) of them exhibited high levels of school dropout risk factors.

Out of the 83 participants who rated the effects of academic G&C services with moderate levels, 32 (38.6%) of them reported moderate school dropout risk factors, 26 (31.3%) reported high, while 25 (30.1%) of them exhibited low levels of such risk factors. It is observed from the results that low perceptions about the effects of academic G&C services among the sampled students were associated with high levels of school dropout risk factors and vice versa. The findings support those of Crouch (2018) in an earlier study from Western Kentucky in the United States, which established the importance of academic and psychological interventions in helping students remain in school.

The students who were categorised as having low perceptions about the effects of academic G&C were associated with high school dropout risk factors, while the group with high approval of the same services was associated with low risk factors of dropping out of school. This validates the findings by Pennie *et al.* (2020), in a research carried out in American schools that found academic G&C services to significantly help students with learning challenges and grade retention, factors attributable to the high school dropout rate.

Table 7: Correlation Matrix for Academic G&C Services and Dropout Risk Factors

		Academic G&C Services	Dropout Risk Factors
Academic G&C Services	Pearson Correlation	1	-.19**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	311	311
Dropout Risk Factors	Pearson Correlation	-.19**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	311	311
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

The results in Table 7 demonstrate that an inverse significant relationship was established between academic G&C services and students' scores on the state of dropout risk factors (r (309) = -.19, P= .001). This suggests that an increase in the value of academic G&C services resulted in decreased state of dropout risk factors among the students and vice versa. It can therefore be inferred that the forms of G&C services administered to the students in the sampled schools were effective in fostering resilience and coping mechanisms against common difficulties and challenges related to individuals or the school environment that predispose students to school dropout behavior.

Similarities can be drawn from the findings by Mittendorff *et al.* (2017) that guidance activities on career and educational path helped Dutch students gain realistic expectations, resulting in increased odds of school completion. The findings are also relatable to those of Chebon and Tarus (2017), in which components of academic G&C services were found to be useful for reducing the rate of delinquent behaviors among students experiencing academic difficulties. This implies that administering various forms of G&C services can be effective towards fostering resilience and the ability to cope with learning difficulties, thus contributing to less dropout tendencies and increased school completion.

4.1 Thematic Analysis of Academic G&C Services on School Dropout Rate

Qualitative data that was collected from principals, counsellors, and form four class teachers through interview schedules was also analysed in order to gain a deeper understanding about the issues under investigation. Guidance and counselling services were in this study conceptualised as help availed to students through counsellors or specially trained teachers in collaboration with other professionals, with the aim of assisting such students to develop psychologically and achieve their full academic and vocational potential.

The responses from key research informants generated important perspectives regarding the association between the two variables, that is, academic guidance and counselling services, and school dropout risk factors. The interviewees were prompted to describe the academic challenges faced by the students that they felt would be termed as risk factors for dropping out of school. Their responses were processed and examined for statements and phrases that communicated shared thoughts and common themes. Diverse expressions were identified from the responses, such as: drug and substance

abuse; family socioeconomic status; learner entry behaviour; negative attitude towards some subjects; and poor grades or performance.

It emerged from the highlighted statements that drug and substance abuse was one of the factors affecting students' concentration, academic achievement and performance in class. In one response by a teacher counsellor, GCT015 explained:

"We have an enormous challenge with students abusing drugs, particularly due to the increasing production and use of khat in this region. Undoubtedly, khat, locally known as Muguka is not the only drug being abused, as there have been cases of students smoking marijuana, cigarettes, and taking alcohol among other substances, a behaviour that affects concentration and learning ability. With arising frustrations due to poor grades, the affected students end up missing classes, and if not followed up and helped, this unfortunately escalates to dropping out altogether."

This response was also echoed by one of the principals, PR004, who explained that drug and substance use among some of the students was turning into a serious issue affecting such students' levels of concentration and academic success. These findings indicate that drug and substance abuse was a notable challenge that affected learning abilities, with the affected students having a high likelihood of missing classes or even dropping out. The findings align with those of Ntondwe *et al.* (2024) in a study that found drug and substance use, particularly use of marijuana, alcohol, and khat, has negatively impacted students' concentration and learning abilities, resulting in a high school dropout rate.

Poverty and the associated low socioeconomic status among many families were found to be the leading challenges, with the potential of predisposing students to absenteeism and leaving school prematurely. Such challenges are likely to lead to financial constraints due to low levels of income among families, inability to meet educational costs, including school fees, transport costs and feeding levies, among others. Emphasising the magnitude of this factor in contributing to dropout rate, one of the participating class teachers, CT008, observed:

"Background of the parents, family issues, lack of school fees and lack of adequate resources are some of the aspects related to low socioeconomic status that negatively impact on students' educational success. Apart from the possibility of missing classes due to lack of school fees, these factors also cause strife and additional stress at home, and may lead to poor learning abilities and subsequently influence dropout rate."

The key informants also underscored that poor grades, learner entry behaviour and having negative attitudes towards some subjects like mathematics and sciences, as well as teachers, were among common challenges affecting academic progress among the students. Without practical interventions for helping such vulnerable learners deal with

stressors associated with such challenges, there was a high risk of failing to complete school.

The counsellors were prompted to describe some of the professional services they had been utilising to address the highlighted challenges towards enhancing students' learning abilities and lowering the possibility of dropping out of school. Among the themes that emerged from the responses are: academic guidance and counselling; addressing academic challenges; academic clinics; providing psychoeducation, collaboration with parents and organising speaking forums to promote mentorship and role modelling.

It is clear that the sampled schools had, through their G&C departments, established procedures for addressing various stressors affecting students' learning abilities and academic progress. In one of the responses, a teacher counsellors taking part in the study underscored the importance of providing specialised support to students, noting that guiding them to understand the specific areas of limitation in learning processes is crucial for fostering engagement and academic success. These findings affirm those of Chebon and Tarus (2017), in which similar components of academic G&C services were seen as helpful in addressing academic difficulties, lowering the occurrence of delinquent behaviours and truancy among secondary school students in Uasin Gishu county.

The observation regarding the academic G&C services used for addressing various learning challenges also resonated with that of another teacher counsellor, GCT009, who perceived:

"Helping students with academic challenges by promoting a positive learning environment and offering individualized support is imperative for identifying and addressing specific problems, such as time management or poor study habits. Such interventions are vital for fostering engagement, increasing concentration and learning performance, which are important factors for encouraging students to remain in school."

There was a point of convergence among the participants that addressing such challenges could help the affected students develop a sense of success, have greater interest in education and remain in school to pursue their educational aspirations. The teacher counsellors were emphatic that G&C services that integrated components of psychoeducation played an important role in helping students who were at risk of dropping out of school build coping mechanisms for various stressors and difficulties affecting their education.

On being probed further regarding the importance of psychoeducation in helping students deal with learning difficulties and challenges they face in the learning environment, one guidance counsellor, GCT010, explained:

"Providing this form of counselling, which also calls for collaboration with parents, families, and other professionals, is important for helping students who are struggling with

mental health and other difficulties associated with the school environment. With time, they understand their problems, develop problem-solving skills, among other specific skills, in addition to experiencing a better support system and engaging school environment that they need to stay in school and focus on education."

The counsellors also accentuated the significance of role modelling and mentorship, which was being fostered through the invitation of speakers from different professions, including doctors, psychologists, and spiritual leaders, among others. The speakers were seen as important in motivating and fostering self-esteem among the students. The findings affirm those of Dinesen *et al.* (2023), who found regular academic guidance and collaboration with other professionals to have enhanced decision-making on educational goals among Norwegian students, thus invigorating the need for education and motivation to stay in school. The findings also reinforce those of Oyinloye (2015) that regular academic G&C services for nurturing good study habits, goal setting and career choice guidance, and promoting interest in school activities can be helpful in lowering dropout rate among Nigerian high school students.

Despite the elaborate professional services being utilised by teacher counsellors to address academic challenges among the students, there were mixed reactions among the interviewees regarding their effectiveness in curbing the dropout risk factors. Among the teacher counsellors, some felt that the services had been effective, while others felt that they were effective to some extent or not effective at all. Such sentiments were also observed across the responses by principals and class teachers.

Among the unenthusiastic responses were principal, PR007, who perceived that the services were *"To some extent effective"*, PR010, who said, *"I wouldn't say they are effective so far,"* PR005, who perceived *"no, not effective at all,"* and PR008, who was categorical that they were not effective in reducing school dropout rate. Nonetheless, others felt that the services had been helpful in addressing various academic challenges and keeping the students in school. In such examples, one of the principals, PR009, argued:

"To be honest, I would say they have contributed to improving the learning performance of some students who are at risk of dropping out, thus helping them concentrate on studies and remain in school."

These positive sentiments resonated with those of yet another principal, PR006, who recollected:

"Very effective. Students at risk of dropping out are encouraged to learn and achieve their best in education. A good example is a girl who had dropped out due to a teenage pregnancy. She had utterly given up with her studies, but she later got help, returned to school and ended up scoring a grade C in the national examination."

Divergence of opinions in the evaluation of the effectiveness of academic guidance and counselling services was witnessed in class teachers' interview responses. One of the teachers, CT002A, remarked:

"They have been helpful, like talking to them opens up communication avenues for families with financial constraints to use alternative ways of paying school fees and other school-related levies, such as the use of cereals. At the same time, encouraging students who are at risk of dropping out due to learning difficulties and poor performance has led to improved performance and rekindled passion for education."

Similar sentiments were communicated by yet another class teacher, CT003B, who argued that academic guidance and counselling services were helpful as they helped students who experienced various challenges that affected their learning abilities to embrace or see beyond such limitations. The G&C services, which also included talking to parents, empowered families to do more to provide for the educational needs of their children. Nonetheless, some divergent opinions were also observed among class teachers, some of whom felt that the services had contributed little to reducing the dropout rate risk. Such dissenting voices can be construed as the need for improvement despite efforts that were being put in place by schools through their guidance and counselling departments.

Despite dissenting perceptions regarding the effectiveness of academic G&C services, particularly among class teachers, there was convergence among the groups that the services had fostered learning engagement and lowered the risk of dropout. The services were seen as important for guiding and helping students succeed in their education, as well as setting goals that align with potential career opportunities. Such support strategies are key to helping students overcome learning difficulties, focus on their studies, develop a sense of belonging and feel motivated to remain in school to pursue their educational goals.

The findings affirm those of Dinesen *et al.* (2023), who found regular academic guidance and collaboration with other counselling professionals to have enhanced decision-making on educational goals among Norwegian students, thus invigorating the need for education and motivation to stay in school. The findings reinforce those of Oyinloye (2015) that regular academic G&C services for nurturing good study habits, goal setting and career choice guidance, and promoting interest in school activities were reported as being helpful in lowering dropout rate among Nigerian high school students. The study, however, had only relied on teachers, while the present study goes a step further to include students' perceptions, as well as evaluative insights from teachers, counsellors and principals.

5. Recommendations

Academic guidance and counselling involve supporting students in their educational journey by providing personalised advice, resources, and strategies to enhance academic success, career planning, and personal development. Based on the study findings, the Ministry of Education (MoE) should develop a clear framework for promoting the importance of guidance and counselling services, such that students can see such processes as support systems where they can seek help without feeling stigmatised. The MoE needs to integrate academic clinics, mentorship, and psycho-education as mandatory components of the school G&C policy framework. The Teachers' Service Commission should set minimum qualifications for teacher-counsellors, ensure proper certification, and free them from excessive duties. The study only focused on perceived effects of academic G&C services on dropout risk factors. Future research may explore other forms of interventions that were not considered in this study. Future research may interrogate the role of teacher counsellors' capacity, including areas of proficiency, training, or workload, on dropout rate.

6. Conclusions

The study sought to establish the perceived effects of academic guidance and counselling services on dropout risk factors in public secondary schools in Mbeere North, Embu County, Kenya. The findings indicated that academic G & C services positively impacted dropout tendency by addressing learning difficulties and enhancing engagement through academic clinics, mentorship, and psychoeducation. The inferential findings revealed that a significant inverse relationship existed between academic G & C services and students' scores on the state of dropout risk factors. The study concludes that academic G & C services significantly reduce students' dropout risk factors, indicating that increased support is associated with a lower likelihood of dropping out. This suggests that effective academic G & C can play a critical role in improving student retention and academic success.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors of this publication disclose no conflict of interest

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