
SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS FOR STUDENTS' DROPOUT IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MBARALI DISTRICT, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

Student dropout remains a persistent challenge affecting educational participation and completion in many developing countries, particularly in rural communities where household socioeconomic conditions influence students' ability to remain in school. This study explored the influence of socioeconomic status on students' dropout in public secondary schools in Mbarali District, Tanzania. The study employed a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation and documentary review and were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that socioeconomic status significantly influenced students dropout through household poverty, low parental education, parental occupation, child labour, inability to meet indirect educational costs and excessive family responsibilities. The study further found that low household income reduced parents' capacity to provide school requirements, monitor students' academic progress and protect them from engaging in income-generating activities that interfered with schooling. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. The study concludes that students' dropout cannot be understood as an individual student problem because it is shaped by interactions between family economic conditions, parental characteristics, school experiences and the wider community environment. The study recommends strengthening targeted educational assistance, household economic empowerment, parental engagement, school-based early identification mechanisms and community interventions to reduce socioeconomic barriers to secondary education.

KEYWORDS: Socioeconomic status; school dropout; household income; parental education; parental occupation; public secondary schools; Tanzania.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as an important instrument for individual development, social transformation and economic advancement. Completion of secondary education provides learners with knowledge, skills and opportunities necessary for further education, employment and participation in social and economic activities. Despite considerable progress in expanding access to secondary education, student dropout remains a major challenge in many developing countries, particularly among learners from economically disadvantaged households (UNESCO, 2022). Students who leave school before completing their education are more likely to experience limited employment opportunities, reduced lifetime earnings and continued socioeconomic disadvantage. Consequently, understanding the factors that influence school dropout remains important for improving educational participation and completion.

Socioeconomic status is among the important factors shaping students' educational experiences and outcomes. It encompasses household income, parental education, parental occupation, availability of material resources and the broader social and economic conditions in which children grow and study. Students from households with adequate economic resources are generally more likely to access learning materials, receive parental support and participate consistently in school activities. In contrast, students from poor households may experience financial difficulties, inadequate learning resources, household responsibilities and pressure to participate in economic activities, which may interfere with regular school attendance and academic engagement (Creswell, 2022). Recent evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds remain disproportionately vulnerable to educational exclusion and dropout.

The relationship between household economic conditions and school dropout is particularly important in rural communities. Rural households frequently depend on agriculture, livestock keeping, petty trade and other informal economic activities that may generate unstable and seasonal income (World Bank, 2022). During periods of economic hardship, families may prioritise food, shelter and other immediate household necessities over educational requirements. Consequently, a case in South Africa students may lack uniforms, learning materials, transport resources and other necessities required for regular participation in school leading them to drop from schooling (Sayed, 2022). In some circumstances, students may also be required to participate in farming, livestock keeping, petty trade or household activities to supplement family income. These responsibilities can reduce the time available for schooling and contribute to absenteeism and eventual dropout.

Empirical evidence from different African contexts supports the relationship between household economic conditions and school dropout. In Kenya, Maina, Motungo and Nzengya (2021) found that household income had an important bearing on secondary school dropout, particularly among students from economically disadvantaged families (Mnjokava, 2022). Their findings indicated that poverty increased students' vulnerability to educational discontinuity because parents experienced difficulties meeting educational and related household needs. Similarly, research in Kenya has continued to demonstrate that household income, parental education and family characteristics influence students' likelihood of dropping out of secondary education.

The Tanzanian context also demonstrates the persistence of socioeconomic barriers to school participation. Although the government has implemented fee-free basic education policies to improve access to education, students may continue to experience indirect educational costs and household-level challenges (Mbwette & Ishengoma, 2022). Recent Tanzanian evidence has identified poverty, inadequate parental support, child labour and household responsibilities among factors associated with school dropout. A recent study done by Mkumbo (2019), identified low family economic status as a leading cause of secondary school dropout, particularly because some parents were unable to meet educational expenses and adequately support their children's education.

Evidence from other Tanzanian settings further demonstrates that socioeconomic and family-related factors remain important in explaining dropout. A study conducted in Zanzibar found that parents' low socioeconomic status affected their ability to finance children's educational needs and contributed to dropout, alongside parental neglect and family difficulties (tebe & Raphael, 2020). Similarly, research among girls in Tanzania identified household activities and low parental education as factors contributing to school dropout (Mushi, 2021). These findings indicate that socioeconomic status does not influence dropout through a single pathway but through several interconnected mechanisms operating within households, schools and communities (Kassimu & Mnyanyi, 2022).

Mbarali District provides an important context for examining this problem. The district is predominantly rural and households depend substantially on agriculture, livestock keeping and other local economic activities. Students may therefore experience socioeconomic pressures associated with seasonal household income, family responsibilities and participation in agricultural or livestock activities. Although education policies have increased formal access to schooling, the ability of families to support students throughout their secondary education may vary considerably. Consequently, examining socioeconomic

conditions provides an opportunity to understand why some students remain in school while others discontinue their education. The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that human development and behaviour are influenced by interactions between individuals and multiple environmental systems.

Although previous studies have examined poverty, household income and other socioeconomic factors associated with dropout, limited empirical attention has been given to how these factors operate together within rural public secondary schools in Mbarali District. Existing evidence from other Tanzanian districts provides useful insights, but local socioeconomic conditions may influence the intensity and form of dropout-related challenges. This study therefore sought to provide context-specific evidence by exploring the influence of socioeconomic status on students' dropout in public secondary schools in Mbarali District, Tanzania.

2.1 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Socioeconomic Factors for Students' Dropout in Public Secondary Schools.

Socioeconomic status is an important determinant of educational participation because it influences the resources available to households and students. Household income, parental education and occupation affect the ability of families to provide educational materials, meet indirect school costs and create supportive learning environments. When families experience persistent economic hardship, students may be exposed to conditions that increase the likelihood of absenteeism, weak academic engagement and eventual dropout.

A study by Maina, Motungo and Nzengya (2021) examined the influence of household income on secondary school dropout in Kenya and found that household income had a significant relationship with dropout. The study established that students from low-income households were more vulnerable because their parents struggled to meet educational requirements. The researchers recommended increased support for vulnerable students and greater involvement of community organisations in addressing poverty-related barriers.

Similarly, recent research among secondary school girls in Kenya found that household income, parental education and family structure were important socioeconomic determinants of dropout. The study demonstrated that students from disadvantaged families experienced greater vulnerability to educational discontinuity that is for parents who possessed low education attainment were significantly more likely to experience poor academic support, weak parental supervision and early school dropout than students whose parents are educated

(Mugo, Waweru and Kimani, 2022). These findings suggest that socioeconomic status operates through several dimensions rather than household income alone.

In Tanzania, socioeconomic conditions have also been identified as important contributors to school dropout. Rugimbana and Mwila (2023) found that family low income, poverty and family problems contributed to dropout among girls in community secondary schools in Temeke Municipality. The study further identified the need for stronger family-school engagement and interventions targeting students at risk of leaving school.

A study conducted in Ifakara Town Council by Kalamba and Mpiza (2024) reported that low family economic status was a leading cause of secondary school dropout. Parents' inability to meet school expenses and support children's education created conditions that contributed to students leaving school. The study also found that household responsibilities and low parental education contributed to the problem.

Recent evidence from Tanzania also indicates that vulnerable living conditions are associated with increased likelihood of early school leaving, particularly in rural schools facing socioeconomic disadvantages. Alemu and Tadesse (2025) found that students living in vulnerable environments were more likely to drop out, with the problem becoming more pronounced in rural settings.

Despite these findings, there remains a need for qualitative evidence that explains how socioeconomic conditions are experienced by students within specific rural communities. Therefore, the present study explored socioeconomic status as a multidimensional phenomenon involving household poverty, parental education, parental occupation, child labour, educational expenses and family responsibilities.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' experiences and perceptions regarding how socioeconomic conditions influence students' dropout. The approach enabled the researcher to obtain detailed explanations of the socioeconomic challenges experienced by students and families.

3.2 Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to explore the influence of socioeconomic status on students dropout. The design was appropriate because the study focused on a specific geographical and educational context, namely public secondary schools in Mbarali District. It enabled the researcher to obtain in-depth information concerning the experiences of students, teachers and education stakeholders regarding the influence of socioeconomic status on students dropout.

3.3 Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Mbarali District, Mbeya Region, Tanzania. The study involved five public secondary schools: Imalilo Songwe, Ubaruku, Mwakaganga, Mbarali and Mawindi secondary schools. The area was selected because of the rural socioeconomic characteristics of many communities and the importance of agriculture and livestock activities to household livelihoods. These conditions provided an appropriate context for examining the relationship between household socioeconomic circumstances and students' school participation, where by most of societies participated in agriculture and livestock put less emphasis on education matters.

3.4 Population of the Study

The study population comprised students, teachers, head of school and education officers who had relevant knowledge and experience concerning household socioeconomic status and students dropout in public secondary schools in Mbarali District. These participants were considered appropriate because they could provide information about household economic conditions, students' educational experiences and relationship of these factors in contributing to students dropout.

3.5 Sampling Techniques

The study employed purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers, school administrators and education officers who possessed relevant knowledge and information about socioeconomic challenges and student dropout . Simple random sampling was used to select students so that eligible students had an opportunity to participate in the study.

3.6 Sample Size

The study involved forty participants. The sample consisted of students, teachers, head of school and education officers from the selected public secondary schools. The sample was considered appropriate for a qualitative case study both purposive and simple random sampling used to select participants for semi structured interview, focus group discussion and

observation because it provided participants with relevant experiences while allowing the researcher to obtain detailed information in order to suit the need of the research objectives.

3.7 Data Collection Methods

3.7.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to obtain detailed information regarding socioeconomic conditions and students' dropout. The interviews allowed the researcher to use predetermined guiding questions while providing opportunities for probing and clarification. Semi-structured interviews are effective in qualitative research because they encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide rich, detailed data Bryman (2016). This method is particularly relevant for understanding learners' lived experiences and students dropout challenges.

3.7.2 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted with selected students to obtain collective perspectives regarding influencing of socioeconomic factors on students dropout. The discussions enabled participants to share experiences and respond to each other's views, thereby generating detailed information about household poverty, parental education level, family responsibilities and participation in economic activities.

3.7.3 Observation

Observation was used to obtain additional information concerning the socioeconomic status in educational circumstances surrounding students leading to dropout. The researcher observed issues such as students' school attendance, availability of learning materials and other visible conditions relevant to the study.

3.7.4 Documentary Review

Relevant school documents were reviewed to complement information obtained from interviews, FGDs and observations. Documents included school attendance records, teacher on duty records and available records relating to students who had discontinued schooling.

3.8 Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data through semi structured interview, focus group discussion and observation were analysed thematically. The researcher first familiarised himself with the collected data by repeatedly reading interview and FGD responses. Content analysis allowed the researcher to systematically examine textual data to identify patterns, meanings and themes related to socioeconomic status and students dropout. The process involved several steps as follows, as provided by (Krippendorff, 2023). Familiarisation, reading and reviewing all data from interviews, FGDs and documents multiple times to understand the content;

Coding, highlighting key words, phrases and statements related to curriculum content, teaching methods, learner support services, assessment practices and implementation challenges, Categorisation and theming grouping similar codes into categories and developing themes that reflect learners' shared experiences and perceptions. The major themes emerging from the analysis included household poverty, low parental education, parental occupation, child labour, inability to meet educational expenses and family responsibilities.

3.9 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness of this study on influence of socioeconomic status on students dropout in public secondary school was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln 1985). This ensured that the findings accurately reflect influence of socioeconomic status on students dropout as credibility was enhanced through triangulation checking of information obtained from interviews, FGDs, observations and documentary review. Transferability was addressed by providing a clear description of the study setting, participants and procedures enabling other researchers or stakeholders to determine the applicability of the findings to similar public secondary school settings in Tanzania or other rural districts. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of all research procedures, including data collection, coding and analysis, to ensure that the study process was consistent and examined or replicated in future studies. Confirmability was enhanced by ensuring that interpretations were grounded in participants' responses and documentary evidence rather than the researcher's personal assumptions.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were carefully considered throughout the research process to ensure compliance with accepted research principles and the research guidelines of the University of Iringa. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the University of Iringa Research Committee, which reviewed and approved the research protocol before data collection. The approval was granted through the university's established research approval procedures; however, the committee did not issue a separate ethical clearance reference number. Additionally, an official permission letter was obtained from the University of Iringa and presented to relevant authorities in Mbarali District and selected secondary schools to obtain authorization for data collection (Kerlinger, 2023; Creswell, 2024).

Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, procedures involved, expected benefits, possible risks and their rights as research participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and participation was entirely voluntary.

Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences (Kothari, 2004; Bryman, 2020).

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study by ensuring that participants' names and personal identifiers were not included in any research documents or reports. Instead, participant codes were used to protect their privacy (Creswell & Poth, 2022). The researcher ensured that participants were not exposed to physical, psychological, or emotional harm by using respectful data collection approaches and allowing participants to avoid responding to any questions they considered uncomfortable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2022). All collected data were securely managed. Hard-copy documents were stored in locked facilities, while electronic files were protected using password security measures. Access to the collected information was restricted to the researcher and supervisor to maintain confidentiality, data integrity and ethical compliance throughout the research process (Creswell, 2023).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Socioeconomic Factors for Students' Dropout in Public Secondary Schools.

4.1.1 Household Poverty

The findings revealed that household poverty was one of the most significant socioeconomic factors influencing students' dropout in public secondary schools in Mbarali District. Participants explained that students from economically disadvantaged households frequently experienced difficulties obtaining school uniforms, exercise books, learning materials and other requirements necessary for effective participation in schooling. Although fee-free education has reduced some direct educational costs, families continue to face indirect costs associated with schooling.

One participant explained:

"Some students come from families that cannot afford even basic school requirements. When they lack uniforms or learning materials, they sometimes stop attending school because they feel ashamed or their parents cannot provide what is required."

Another participant stated:

"Poverty affects students in many ways. Some students miss school because their parents cannot provide what they need and others leave school to help their families earn money."

The findings indicate that poverty creates a cumulative disadvantage in which students experience several barriers simultaneously. A student may initially miss school because of

inadequate materials, subsequently fall behind academically, lose motivation and eventually discontinue education.

These findings are consistent with Maina et al. (2021), who found that low household income influenced secondary school dropout by limiting families' ability to meet educational requirements. They also correspond with evidence from Ifakara, Tanzania, where low family economic status was identified as a leading cause of dropout because parents struggled to meet school expenses.

From the perspective of Ecological Systems Theory, household poverty represents an important condition within the student's immediate and broader environment. Economic hardship influences the family microsystem by reducing parents' ability to provide educational support. It also interacts with the exosystem because local employment opportunities and household economic conditions determine the resources available to families. Thus, dropout should not be interpreted simply as a student's unwillingness to attend school.

4.2 Low Parental Education

The study further revealed that low parental education influenced students' dropout. Participants reported that some parents had limited educational backgrounds and therefore experienced difficulties assisting their children academically or understanding the long-term value of secondary education. In some households, immediate economic activities were perceived as more important than prolonged investment in formal education.

One teacher explained:

"Some parents did not study for a long time themselves, so they do not closely follow their children's academic progress. They may be more concerned about farming and other family activities than school attendance."

Another participant reported

"When parents have little education, some of them do not understand how serious it is when a child starts missing school. They may allow the child to stay at home and help with family activities."

These findings suggest that parental education affects dropout through parental expectations, supervision, educational aspirations and understanding of schooling. Parents with higher educational backgrounds may have greater awareness of the benefits of education and may be more likely to monitor academic progress.

The findings are consistent with recent evidence from Tanzania showing that low parental education can contribute to dropout by reducing parental capacity to support children's education. The findings also correspond with evidence from Kenya showing that parental education forms part of the socioeconomic conditions associated with dropout among secondary school learners.

In terms of Ecological Systems Theory, parental education forms part of the student's microsystem because parents directly influence educational decisions, supervision and encouragement. At the mesosystem level, parental educational background may also influence the quality of interaction between families and schools. Therefore, strengthening parental engagement is important for reducing dropout among students from disadvantaged households.

4.3 Parental Occupation

The findings also showed that parental occupation influenced students' school participation and dropout. Most households depend on agriculture, livestock keeping, petty trade and other informal activities. Participants explained that unstable and seasonal household income made it difficult for some parents to provide consistent educational support.

One participant stated:

"Most parents depend on farming. When there is no good harvest or when they have financial problems, students are affected because the family cannot provide all school needs."

Another participant explained:

"During agricultural activities, some students are required to help their parents in the farms. This sometimes makes them miss school, especially when the family depends on their labour."

These findings demonstrate that parental occupation influences dropout not only through income but also through the demand for household labour. Agricultural and livestock activities may require family members to participate during particular seasons, thereby reducing students' school attendance.

The findings are supported by recent Tanzanian evidence showing that domestic work, child labour, agricultural activities and pastoralist practices can interfere with students' academic engagement and contribute to dropout. Evidence from Tanzania also indicates that boys in some rural areas may leave school to participate in agricultural and livestock activities.

Ecological Systems Theory helps explain this relationship by showing how the family's economic environment interacts with students' schooling. Parental occupation is part of the broader socioeconomic environment that shapes household decisions and students' daily

responsibilities. Therefore, interventions should consider the economic realities of rural households rather than focusing only on school-level factors.

4.4 Child Labour

The findings revealed that child labour was another important socioeconomic factor contributing to dropout. Participants explained that some students engaged in farming, livestock keeping, petty trading and other income-generating activities to support their families. Although such activities were often motivated by household economic hardship, they interfered with students' schooling.

One participant reported:

"Some students are involved in farming and other activities after school and sometimes during school hours. When the family needs labour, the child may be required to stay at home instead of attending school."

Another participant explained:

"A student who works for many hours becomes tired. Even when he comes to school, concentration becomes difficult and eventually attendance starts decreasing."

The findings indicate that child labour affects education through several pathways. Students involved in economic activities have less time for studying, experience fatigue and may miss classes. Continued absenteeism can result in poor academic performance, reduced motivation and eventual withdrawal.

The findings are consistent with recent evidence from Tanzania indicating that child labour and socioeconomic practices contribute to school dropout. They also correspond with evidence from Kenya where poverty-related barriers and child labour were identified as important concerns in addressing secondary school dropout.

According to Ecological Systems Theory, child labour reflects interaction between the student and the family microsystem as well as broader economic conditions. Therefore, reducing dropout requires interventions that address the economic pressures compelling households to depend on children's labour.

However, the current study provide additional insight by demonstrating that child labour are particular severe in rural setting. Despite other studies were based on factors for girls dropout without considering that child labour, students in Mbarali district faced with the problem leading them to leave the school due to the economic status of their parents is weak. Therefore this suggest that rural students need active supervision and support both financially to finance the education cost to ensure they attend school regularly.

4.5 Inability to Meet Indirect Educational Costs

The study found that inability to meet indirect educational costs significantly affected students' ability to remain in school. Participants identified costs associated with uniforms, exercise books, learning materials, transport and other school requirements as important barriers facing poor households.

One participant stated:

“Education may be free, but there are still things that students need. Poor families struggle to buy uniforms, books and other requirements and this affects attendance.”

The finding demonstrates that removing tuition fees does not necessarily eliminate all financial barriers to education. Families continue to incur costs associated with students' participation in schooling. When these costs become difficult to meet, students may experience absenteeism and eventually dropout.

This finding is consistent with evidence from Tanzania showing that family low income and inability to meet school expenses contribute to dropout. It is also consistent with Kenyan evidence demonstrating the importance of household income in determining whether students remain in secondary education.

The finding has important implications for educational policy. While fee-free education is important for increasing access, additional mechanisms may be required to support students from extremely poor households. Targeted assistance with essential school requirements may therefore complement existing educational policies.

In the context of Mbarali district, most of the parents economically are poor to support their children in education matters become difficult. Therefore provision of scholarship and NGOs support may lead to solve the problem of learners requirement and indirect cost

4.6 Family Responsibilities

The study further established that excessive family responsibilities contributed to students' dropout. Participants reported that some students were required to take care of younger siblings, perform domestic work, assist parents in farming and undertake other household responsibilities. These activities reduced time available for attending school and completing academic tasks.

One participant explained:

“Some students are responsible for looking after younger children when their parents are working. This makes them miss school or arrive late.”

Another participant stated:

“Students who have many responsibilities at home become tired and sometimes lose interest in school because they cannot balance school and family duties.”

The findings suggest that family responsibilities can gradually weaken students’ engagement with schooling. Frequent absenteeism may lead to academic difficulties, while continued pressure to fulfil household responsibilities can make education appear less attainable.

The findings correspond with recent Tanzanian studies that have identified household responsibilities and domestic work among factors associated with school dropout. Similar evidence from Zanzibar also identified family-related difficulties as contributors to dropout.

Ecological Systems Theory explains that students’ educational behaviour is shaped by the demands of the family microsystem. Where household responsibilities become excessive, they compete directly with schooling. The findings therefore demonstrate the importance of considering students’ home circumstances when identifying and supporting those at risk of dropout.

4.7 Interrelationship among Socioeconomic Factors and Students’ Dropout

An important finding of the study was that socioeconomic factors did not operate independently. Instead, household poverty, parental education, parental occupation, child labour, educational expenses and family responsibilities interacted to increase students’ vulnerability to dropout.

For example, low household income could force students to engage in farming or petty trade, while parental occupation could create demand for students’ labour. At the same time, low parental education could reduce parental awareness of the long-term consequences of dropout. These factors could combine with inability to meet educational costs and excessive family responsibilities, creating a cycle of educational disadvantage.

One participant summarized the situation as:

“It is difficult to identify only one reason because poverty causes many other problems. When parents have no money, children work, school requirements are missed and attendance decreases.”

The finding is consistent with the ecological perspective because students’ educational experiences are shaped by interactions across multiple environmental systems. Recent Tanzanian evidence similarly demonstrates that socioeconomic practices, vulnerable living conditions and family circumstances can interact to influence dropout.

The study therefore demonstrates that socioeconomic status should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon. Interventions targeting only one factor may have limited effects if other related socioeconomic barriers remain unresolved.

5. CONCLUSION

The study explored the influence of socioeconomic status on students' dropout in public secondary schools in Mbarali District, Tanzania. The findings revealed that socioeconomic status substantially influences students' ability to remain in school. Household poverty emerged as a major factor because it reduced families' ability to meet indirect educational costs and provide necessary learning materials. The study further established that low parental education, parental occupation, child labour and excessive family responsibilities contributed to students' dropout. Students from households dependent on agriculture, livestock keeping and other unstable economic activities were particularly vulnerable when family economic demands competed with schooling. The findings demonstrate that socioeconomic factors operate through interconnected pathways rather than independently. Poverty may lead to child labour, inability to purchase school requirements and increased household responsibilities, while low parental education may reduce educational support and supervision. Therefore, student dropout in Mbarali District should be understood as a product of interactions between family, school, community and wider socioeconomic environments. Finally the study concludes that reducing dropout requires interventions that address both immediate household conditions and broader socioeconomic factors. Improving school access alone is insufficient when students continue to face poverty, household labour demands and inadequate parental support.

6. LIMITATIONS

The study was limited to five public secondary schools in Mbarali District, namely Imalilo Songwe, Ubaruku, Mwakaganga, Mbarali and Mawindi secondary schools. Therefore, the findings reflect the experiences of participants within the selected schools and should not automatically be generalised to all secondary schools in Tanzania. The qualitative design provided detailed information about participants' experiences but did not generate statistical estimates of the magnitude of the relationship between socioeconomic status and dropout. In addition, some information concerning household economic circumstances was based on participants' self-reports and may therefore have been influenced by personal perceptions.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The government and local government authorities should strengthen targeted educational support for students from economically disadvantaged households. Such support should

include assistance with essential school requirements, particularly for students identified as being at high risk of dropout.

Schools should establish early identification mechanisms for students experiencing persistent absenteeism, child labour, excessive household responsibilities or inability to obtain basic learning materials. Teachers and school administrators should work with parents and education officers to identify such students before they permanently leave school.

Parents and guardians should be sensitised about the long-term importance of secondary education and encouraged to reduce students' involvement in economic and domestic activities that interfere with schooling. Community sensitisation should particularly target households that depend heavily on child labour in agriculture, livestock keeping and other economic activities.

Local government authorities and development partners should strengthen household economic empowerment programmes in communities where poverty directly affects students' educational participation. Supporting families to improve economic resilience may reduce the pressure to rely on students' labour and enable parents to meet educational requirements.

Finally, education stakeholders should strengthen collaboration among schools, parents, community leaders, NGOs and education officers. Such collaboration can help identify vulnerable students, mobilise educational support and address socioeconomic conditions contributing to dropout.

8. Declaration of AI Use

This manuscript was prepared through the combined contributions of the author(s), including contributions to the study design, data collection, data interpretation, content development and scholarly judgement. The author(s) acknowledge the use of ChatGPT and Grammarly to assist with language refinement, grammar checking, organisation of the manuscript and reference formatting. AI-assisted tools did not replace the author(s)' intellectual contribution, interpretation of research findings or scholarly judgement. All AI-assisted outputs should be reviewed, verified and approved by the author(s), who remain fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity and final content of the manuscript.

9. Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no known financial, non-financial or personal interests that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

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