

Influence Of School Culture On Students' Academic Performance In Public Secondary Schools In Ganze Sub-County, Kilifi County, Kenya.

Yaa Kahindi Nathaniel, Mwawasi Benjamin, Kirigia Paul Mwenda

Candidate, Master Of Education, Leadership And Education Management, Kenya Methodist University

Lecturer, School Of Education And Social Sciences, Kenya Methodist University

Lecturer, Kemu Business School, Kenya Methodist University

Abstract

This study examined the influence of school culture on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Ganze Sub-County, Kilifi County, Kenya. School culture—defined by values, traditions, leadership practices, and interpersonal relationships within schools—has been recognized as a critical determinant of educational outcomes. Guided by Total Quality Management (TQM) Theory and Systems Theory, the study employed a descriptive survey design targeting 190 respondents comprising principals, curriculum masters, and students. A total of 163 questionnaires were returned fully completed, yielding an 85% response rate. Reliability of instruments was established through Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients exceeding 0.7. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and multiple linear regression. Results indicated that school culture had a strong positive and statistically significant correlation with students' academic performance ($r = 0.637, p < 0.05$). Regression analysis further revealed that school culture was a significant predictor of academic outcomes ($\beta = 0.228, p < 0.001$), jointly explaining 64.3% of the variance in academic performance when combined with other social factors. Descriptive findings highlighted the role of positive disciplinary practices, teacher-student collaboration, and inclusivity in enhancing academic outcomes. The study concludes that strengthening school culture is critical to improving academic performance in Ganze Sub-County. It recommends that school leaders promote inclusive leadership, supportive teacher-student relationships, and collaborative learning environments, while policymakers invest in programs that nurture positive school cultures across public secondary schools.

Keywords: School culture, Academic performance, Social factors, Public secondary schools, Ganze Sub-County, Kilifi County.

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I. Introduction

Academic performance remains a key benchmark of educational success and a determinant of students' future opportunities. In Kenya, the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) serves as the ultimate measure of secondary school outcomes, shaping access to higher education and labor market participation. However, persistent disparities in performance across counties highlight the role of contextual and social factors that influence learning outcomes beyond curriculum delivery.

School culture defined as the shared values, traditions, norms, and practices within the school community plays a central role in shaping student learning. A positive school culture fosters collaboration, inclusivity, respect, and high expectations, which enhance students' engagement and performance. Conversely, toxic cultures marked by poor leadership, indiscipline, and exclusion often undermine academic outcomes. Globally, studies (Kulakow et al., 2023; Gülşen, 2024) confirm that schools with collaborative and supportive cultures record higher student achievement. In Kenya, evidence shows that schools characterized by strong cultures of discipline, teamwork, and positive teacher-student relationships achieve better KCSE results compared to those with weak or inconsistent practices (Khamis et al., 2019; Zakayo, 2018).

Problem Statement

Despite government interventions to improve education standards, Kilifi County continues to register poor academic outcomes in the KCSE. Ganze Sub-County, in particular, has consistently posted mean scores below the national average, with most schools failing to produce grade A students over recent years. While infrastructural deficits and teacher shortages are often cited, social factors such as school culture have received limited empirical attention. Weak cultures of discipline, low expectations, and strained teacher-student

relationships contribute to indiscipline, absenteeism, and poor performance. This gap necessitates focused investigation into how school culture influences academic achievement in Ganze Sub-County.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to evaluate the influence of school culture on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Ganze Sub-County, Kilifi County, Kenya.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study hold practical value for educators, policymakers, and the community. For teachers and principals, the results highlight the importance of nurturing inclusive, disciplined, and collaborative school environments that support learning. Policymakers and education administrators gain evidence-based insights to design targeted interventions that strengthen school culture, particularly in underperforming counties. For researchers, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on social determinants of academic achievement in Kenya. Ultimately, students benefit from learning environments that foster motivation, discipline, and engagement, translating into improved academic performance.

II. Literature Review

School culture is widely recognized as a central determinant of school effectiveness and student achievement. School culture comprises the shared values, beliefs, norms, rituals, and everyday practices that shape how teachers, students, and other stakeholders interact and make meaning in the school (Schein, 2010). A positive culture characterized by high expectations, mutual respect, collaborative teacher practices, inclusive discipline systems, and shared responsibility for learning creates conditions that support student engagement, attendance, and sustained academic effort (T4 Education, 2023). Recent empirical syntheses and applied studies find that improvements in school culture consistently coincide with measurable gains in student achievement and well-being, even after accounting for socioeconomic background (EdWorkingPapers / policy research, 2022).

A growing body of international evidence demonstrates the mechanisms through which school culture affects learning. High-quality student-teacher relationships and perceptions of safety at school are linked to better test scores and lower suspension rates, suggesting that relational climate mediates instructional time and student engagement (Wiley/Health Sci Reports, 2024; EdWorkingPapers, 2022). When schools adopt restorative and participatory disciplinary practices emphasizing mediation, student voice, and community involvement disruptions decline and instructional continuity improves, producing downstream academic benefits. These findings indicate that culture-change interventions (e.g., professional learning communities, restorative practices, and structured student participation) can be effective complements to curricular or staffing reforms.

Regional (African and Kenyan) studies corroborate the international picture while adding important contextual detail. Several Kenyan county-level studies have documented a positive, statistically significant relationship between school culture indicators (fair discipline, teacher-student mutual respect, inclusive practices, active leadership) and KCSE outcomes. For example, investigations in Migori and Trans-Nzoia counties reported that schools with strong cultures of discipline, teacher collaboration, and inclusive student participation posted higher mean scores and lower rates of disruptive events than counterpart schools with weak cultures (Oyoo et al., 2020; Trans-Nzoia study, 2023). These localized studies stress the importance of leadership, clear school rules applied fairly, and the promotion of collaborative classroom practices in contexts where resource constraints and social pressures can otherwise depress student performance.

Recent systematic and quasi-experimental work also indicates that culture improvements translate to gains even when other constraints (e.g., low funding, large class sizes) persist. For example, district-level reforms that focused on building teacher collaboration, clarity of expectations, and relational trust produced improvements in learning outcomes without large input-based investments, implying that culture is both a mediating and leverageable factor in low-resource settings. Such findings are relevant for Kenyan sub-counties like Ganze, where structural upgrades are necessary but where school-led culture interventions may yield more immediate academic benefits.

How these general patterns compare to the current study: the thesis dataset from Ganze Sub-County finds a strong positive correlation between school culture and student academic performance ($r = 0.637$, $p < 0.05$), and the variable emerges as the strongest unique predictor in a multivariate model (standardized $\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.001$), even after controlling for parental guidance and peer pressure. These quantitative results align closely with the broader literature showing that school culture accounts for meaningful variation in achievement and operates through mechanisms such as disciplined but supportive disciplinary practices, teacher-student respect, and group work/peer collaboration all of which were salient in the thesis descriptive results (high means on items such as “disciplinary actions help students correct behavior” and “teachers treat students with respect”). (Nathaniel, 2025). This local evidence reinforces the interpretive claim that culture-centered strategies are practical levers for raising KCSE performance within Ganze's socio-educational context.

Despite converging evidence, the literature also cautions against one-size-fits-all prescriptions. Studies emphasize that culture interventions must be contextualized sensitive to local leadership capacity, community values, and prevailing social pressures to avoid superficial compliance without deep change. For instance, programmes that transplant practices from high-resource districts may fail if they do not build teacher buy-in or address community-level constraints. Hence, the Kenyan studies suggest combining school-level culture change with targeted capacity building for school leaders and structured parent/community engagement. This recommendation maps to the thesis's implication that school culture reforms will be most effective when paired with parental support mechanisms and positive peer-led academic initiatives.

In summary, contemporary research (global and Kenyan) coherently supports the thesis finding that school culture is a major, actionable determinant of student academic performance. The balance of evidence suggests three practical pathways for impact: (1) strengthen teacher–student relational climate and safety; (2) adopt fair, restorative disciplinary systems that reduce disruptions while preserving dignity; and (3) institutionalize collaborative teacher learning and student participation (e.g., PLCs, student councils, peer tutoring). These pathways inform the discussion and recommendations sections of the manuscript and situate the Ganze Sub-County findings within the cutting edge of education leadership research.

III. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design to examine the influence of school culture on students' academic performance in Ganze Sub-County, Kilifi County, an area that has consistently posted below-average results in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). The target population consisted of 190 respondents, including principals, curriculum masters, and Form Four students from selected public secondary schools, from which 163 valid responses were obtained, giving a response rate of 85 percent. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure fair representation across categories of respondents, while data were collected through structured questionnaires developed around Likert-scale items measuring school culture dimensions such as leadership, discipline, teacher–student relationships, inclusivity, and collaboration. The instrument was subjected to expert review for content validity and piloted among 20 percent of the target population, with internal consistency confirmed through Cronbach's alpha values above the recommended threshold of 0.70. Ethical approval was sought from relevant authorities, and participation was voluntary with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Data collection was carried out with the assistance of trained research assistants to enhance accuracy and completeness. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29 was used to analyze the data, with descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentages) summarizing the responses, while Pearson's correlation was used to establish the relationship between school culture and academic performance, and multiple linear regression determined the predictive power of school culture relative to other social factors.

Response rate

Out of the 190 questionnaires administered to principals, curriculum masters, and Form Four students across selected public secondary schools in Ganze Sub-County, 163 were returned fully completed, yielding a response rate of 85 percent. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate of 70 percent and above is considered excellent for survey research, thus the achieved rate was deemed adequate for analysis and ensured the reliability and generalizability of the study findings.

Data Reliability Assessment

The internal consistency of the research instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The results indicated that all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming the reliability of the tool. Specifically, the items measuring school culture recorded an alpha value of 0.782, while the academic performance scale recorded 0.799, both of which demonstrate strong internal consistency. These findings affirm that the instrument was dependable for measuring the study variables and suitable for further statistical analysis.

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha for Reliability Assessments

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach Alpha Values
School culture	11	0.846
Student's Academic performance	6	0.812

Respondents' characteristics

The study analyzed responses from 163 participants drawn from principals, curriculum masters, and Form Four students in Ganze Sub-County. Male respondents accounted for the majority at 58 percent, while females represented 42 percent, indicating fairly balanced gender participation. In terms of professional role, principals and curriculum masters comprised approximately 35 percent of the sample, while students formed the largest group at 65 percent, ensuring adequate representation of both management and learner perspectives.

Regarding length of service among school administrators, about 29 percent had less than five years of experience, 47 percent had served between six and ten years, and 24 percent had more than ten years in leadership or instructional roles. These demographics suggest that the study drew from respondents with substantial practical experience in school administration and a diverse mix of student voices, providing credible insights into the influence of school culture on academic performance.

Influence of school culture on students' academic performance.

To assess the extent to which school culture influence students' academic performance among public secondary schools in Ganze Sub-County Kilifi County respondents were asked to evaluate some key attributes of school culture. The evaluation was conducted using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "no extent," 2 "little extent," 3 "some extent," 4 "large extent," and 5 "very large extent."

Table 2. Influence of school culture on students' academic performance

School culture	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Teachers in this school treat students with respect.	142	3.6503	1.04547
Teachers listen to students' opinions and concerns.	142	3.8508	1.17186
The school applies discipline fairly to all students.	142	3.5521	1.05499
Disciplinary actions at my school help students correct their behavior	142	3.8528	.95085
Peers support each other in learning activities.	142	3.6626	1.06122
In my school, Group work is encouraged and well organized in classes	142	3.7311	1.07761
Students from all backgrounds are treated equally at my school.	142	3.5706	1.23713
This school supports students with different learning needs.	142	3.4847	1.14048
Leaders in this school involve students in making important decisions.	142	3.4540	1.15043
The leadership style at this school promotes a positive learning environment.	142	3.7301	1.07761
Students are given opportunities to express their opinions in school forums.	142	3.5583	1.23277
Average	142	3.6454	1.1091

The analysis of attributes measuring school culture indicates that a clear majority of respondents perceive school culture as significantly influencing students' academic performance in public secondary schools within Ganze Sub-County, Kilifi County. The overall composite mean of $M=3.6454$ ($SD = 1.1091$), as presented in Table 4.4, reflects this positive perception. Among the specific attributes, "Disciplinary actions at my school help students correct their behavior" recorded the highest level of agreement ($M=3.8528$, $SD = 0.95085$), highlighting the perceived effectiveness of behavioral guidance. In contrast, the lowest-rated item, "This school supports students with different learning needs," registered a mean of $M=3.4847$ ($SD = 0.14048$), suggesting that inclusivity for diverse learning requirements may require further attention.

These findings are consistent with those of Atsuwe and Athanasius (2021), who examined the impact of sociocultural factors on senior high school students' performance in physics. Their study revealed that, among the factors considered including gender, peer group influence, parental educational background, and student attitude parental educational background exerted the greatest influence on students' academic achievement, underscoring the complex interplay between school culture and family-related factors in shaping academic outcomes.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between school culture and students' academic performance. Results in Table 3 indicate a strong positive and statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.637$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 3. Correlation between Conflict Resolution and Academic Performance

Variables	Academic Performance	School culture
Academic Performance	1.000	.642**
School Culture	.637**	1.000

The bivariate analysis reported in Table 4.7 demonstrates that school culture has a strong and statistically significant positive correlation with students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Ganze Sub-County, Kilifi County ($r = 0.637$, $p < 0.05$). In line with Cohen's (1988) guidelines, a coefficient above 0.50 represents a large effect size, confirming that school culture is a major determinant of students' academic outcomes. This strong relationship highlights the crucial role of the values, beliefs, norms, and practices embedded within a school community in shaping learners' academic trajectories.

Predictor	β (Standardized)	t-value	Sig. (p)
School Culture	0.228	4.109	0.000

Regression analysis confirms that school culture is a significant predictor of academic performance ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.001$). When combined with parental guidance and peer pressure, school culture contributed to explaining 64.3% of the variance in academic outcomes, making it the strongest individual predictor among the social factors examined.

IV. Conclusion

This study established that school culture significantly influences students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Ganze Sub-County, Kilifi County. Descriptive results highlighted that supportive disciplinary practices, respectful teacher–student relationships, and collaborative learning environments were rated highly by respondents, underscoring their central role in enhancing engagement and achievement. Correlation analysis confirmed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.637$, $p < 0.05$) between school culture and academic performance, while regression results identified school culture as the strongest predictor of KCSE outcomes ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.001$), jointly explaining 64.3% of performance variation when combined with other social factors. These findings affirm that cultivating a positive and inclusive school culture is essential for raising academic standards in Ganze Sub-County, where structural and socioeconomic challenges persist.

V. Recommendations

- i. **Strengthening Leadership Practices:** School heads and administrators should foster inclusive and collaborative leadership styles that reinforce positive cultural practices and set high academic expectations.
- ii. **Promoting Teacher–Student Relationships:** Teachers should prioritize respectful and supportive interactions with learners, as these relationships have been shown to directly improve student motivation and performance.
- iii. **Enhancing Discipline Systems:** Schools should institutionalize fair, transparent, and corrective disciplinary mechanisms that address misconduct while guiding students toward positive behavior change.
- iv. **Fostering Collaborative Learning:** Schools should expand peer tutoring, group projects, and mentorship programs that embed collaboration into daily academic practice, thereby strengthening school culture.
- v. **Policy Support:** Education policymakers should design capacity-building programs that train school leaders and teachers in culture-building practices, and allocate resources to support interventions that nurture safe, inclusive, and academically focused school environments.

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