

EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT PROGRAMMES ON STUDENT'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLING IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MERU COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Effectiveness of the social support programs directly contributes to student's participation in schooling. Social support programs are thus designed to aid and encourage individuals or groups of learners to access educational opportunities. Thus, the study sought to assess the effectiveness of social support program on student's participation in schooling in public secondary schools in the Meru County, Kenya. Specifically, it examined the role of guidance and counseling services, mentorship and motivation programs as well as community outreach programs. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive and correlational designs. A sample of 331 respondents out of 1903 persons comprising Principals of public secondary schools, PA chairpersons, class teachers, student leaders and CDF managers was drawn through purposive and stratified sampling. Data was collected using questionnaires, interview schedules and Focus group discussions. Qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis, while quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of the SPSS version 27.0 computer software. The findings showed average access by students to social support services such as guidance and counseling services, and below average access to motivational talks. Chi-square analysis confirmed a significant influence of social support programs on student participation ($X^2(1) = 9.274$) with 24.4% of the total variance in participation explained by social support programs. It is therefore recommended that schools should invest in better training facilities, employ more counselors, increase the frequency of motivational talks, and integrate community outreach and mentorship programs into the curriculum.

Keywords: Sociological Interventions, Social Support Programs, Students' Participation, Public Secondary School Principals, Meru County.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a cornerstone for sustainable development and social equity, playing a pivotal role in fostering individual growth, economic development, and societal well-being (Florian, 2017). It not only imparts knowledge and skills but also empowers individuals to actively participate in societal processes and pursue better livelihoods. Access to quality education is fundamental to improving life outcomes, providing equal opportunities, and addressing disparities across various socio-economic groups (Audette et al., 2019). However, ensuring that all students fully engage in the education system remains a challenge in many contexts, particularly for marginalized or underserved populations (Seibert et al., 2016). Various factors, such as socio-economic barriers, family dynamics, and inadequate educational infrastructure, often hinder consistent student participation. In response, many education systems have implemented social support programs, such as guidance and counseling services, motivational talks, and community outreach, designed to mitigate these challenges and promote

active participation in schooling (Andrew et al., 2022). These interventions aim to create a supportive environment that fosters student engagement, retention, and success, which are essential for achieving long-term educational and developmental goals.

Sociological interventions are key to improving student participation by establishing a supportive social environment that encourages educational engagement (Van Rens et al., 2018). These interventions help drive active participation, motivation, and a positive outlook toward learning. Implementing effective sociological interventions is crucial for optimizing student involvement and requires addressing various social institutions that influence human wellbeing, such as family, economy, education, health, nutrition, religion, community, and politics. This study emphasized social support programs and their impact student wellbeing and participation in schooling.

Student participation in education involves active engagement in classroom interactions, school attendance, and co-curricular activities, which contribute to student development, self-confidence, and improved learning outcomes (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2020). This involvement positively impacts students' well-being, influencing their educational, behavioral, and career outcomes (Roth et al., 2017). Stakeholders play a vital role in enhancing participation, particularly through targeted interventions that address behavior-related issues and promote student well-being. Failure to participate can lead to missed opportunities for acquiring essential knowledge and skills, ultimately affecting academic performance. Assessing participation includes curriculum engagement, academic achievement, and involvement in co-curricular activities, which are crucial for fostering both academic success and the application of academic concepts (Reyes et al., 2012). Globally and locally, including in Kenya, participation remains a key focus in educational reforms, highlighting ongoing challenges in schooling.

Around the world, governments and educational institutions have increasingly recognized the importance of social support programs in promoting student participation (Lareau, 2018). In countries like the U.S., Australia, and parts of Europe, comprehensive support systems including parental involvement initiatives, mentorship programs, and economic assistance—have been shown to enhance students' motivation, academic outcomes, and overall well-being.

In America, Tolliver et al. (2020) conducted research on the underrepresentation of Black American male parents in their kids' schooling. Based on cultural expectations, the study looked at the success stories of well-educated African American men who attended and finished college. The study highlighted the critical roles that formal education, the church, social interactions, mentors, and personal decisions play in generating opportunities and promoting favorable views toward post-secondary education.

Research highlights the importance of addressing socio-economic barriers and creating an inclusive environment for all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Studies from Switzerland demonstrated that active student participation in school, driven by targeted interventions, not only boosts academic performance but also fosters personal development and social integration (Müller-Kuhn et al., 2021). These global initiatives underscore the need for holistic strategies that involve all stakeholders in supporting students to fully engage in their education, which, in turn, contributes to a more equitable society.

Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) conducted a study on the challenges faced by teachers in rural South African schools, primarily driven by widespread poverty. The study identified several key obstacles, including a lack of parental involvement, inadequate government funding, limited resources, untrained teachers, and the need for multi-grade teaching. Additionally, rural schools often lacked basic amenities such as electricity, sanitation, and water, with classrooms in poor condition. These challenges significantly impacted the effectiveness of education and hindered student participation in rural South African schools.

In Kenya, as in many other developing countries, ensuring sustained student participation in schooling is a significant challenge due to socio-economic disparities, cultural factors, and infrastructural limitations. Despite government initiatives like the Free Primary Education (FPE) and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) programs aimed at increasing enrollment and retention, dropout rates remain high, particularly in rural and underserved areas. According to the Ministry of State for Development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands (2012), in regions like Meru County, specific challenges such as early marriages, child labor, and economic hardships hinder student engagement. Social support programs, including guidance and counseling services, motivational talks, and mentorship initiatives, have been introduced to address these issues (Mbogo, 2020). However, their effectiveness has been limited by factors such as inadequate funding, insufficient trained personnel, and lack of community involvement (Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). Improving the reach and quality of these programs is essential for boosting student participation, reducing dropout rates, and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to complete their education and contribute to societal development.

1.1 Research Question

The study sought to answer the following research question:

- i. How effective are social support programs on student's participation in schooling in public secondary schools in the Meru County, Kenya?

Social support programs were assessed based on effectiveness of guidance & counseling services, mentorship and motivation programs, and community outreach programs on student's participation in schooling in public secondary schools in the Meru County, Kenya

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social support programs refer to initiatives and interventions designed to aid, resources, and encourage individuals or groups within a community. These programs aim to enhance well-being, promote positive social relationships, and address various needs, such as emotional, educational, or health related. Social support programs can take various forms, including counseling services, mentorship programs, community outreach events, educational workshops, and access to resources like food, housing, or healthcare. The primary goal of social support programs is to foster a sense of belonging, resilience, and empowerment among participants, ultimately contributing to their overall quality of life and societal integration.

Comprehensive school counseling programs are vital in improving school climate and student achievement, including individual and small group counseling, guidance on disciplinary actions, and teacher support for effective classroom management (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey,

2018). These interventions collectively enhance student well-being and academic success. Mentorship on the other hand serves the purpose of providing guidance in all aspects of life to the mentees. These areas may range from career advice, subject choice, entrepreneurial, and other facets of life. It is important to make the distinction that for mentorship to take place, the mentee must view the mentor as a role model, which is not the case in guidance and counselling. Inviting distinguished alumni as guest speakers or honorees during graduation ceremonies is common in many universities across the United States. By showcasing successful alumni who have excelled in their respective fields, universities aim to inspire and motivate graduating students as they embark on their professional journeys. Recognizing alumni who have become entrepreneurs and have made significant contributions to the developmental landscape further emphasizes the importance of entrepreneurship and innovation in higher education. These practices honor alumni's achievements and serve as powerful examples for current students, encouraging them to pursue their passions and make meaningful contributions to society.

Kerwood et al. (2019) illustrates community-driven initiatives in Oregon, USA, complementing government efforts by bridging funding gaps through financial contributions, professional services, and active participation in school events. These initiatives, including mentorship programs and addressing mental health needs, tap into societal values and expertise to aid students in overcoming learning challenges, thereby contributing to overall school development. Additionally, Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) highlight technological advancements and the recognition of intersectionality in social support programs, emphasizing global collaboration, data-driven approaches, and efforts to address mental health factors for positive social transformation and improved student welfare.

The educational landscape in Europe as everywhere across the world is continually evolving, witnessing trends that mold student well-being and academic success through innovative social support programs. Initiatives such as online platforms, virtual communities, and digital resources play a significant role in enhancing social connections and support networks (Czaja et al., 2018). An emerging trend emphasizes the recognition and consideration of intersectionality in social support programs (Lewis, 2018). This entails understanding the interconnectedness of social categories like gender, race, and socioeconomic status, tailoring support interventions to accommodate diverse and intersecting needs. There is a noticeable shift towards collaborative efforts on a global scale in social support programs. Researchers, educators, and communities engage in the exchange of insights and best practices, contributing to the development of comprehensive and universally applicable support structures as noted by Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) from Texas.

In the United States, universities often engage their distinguished alumni as guest speakers or honorees during graduation ceremonies to inspire and motivate graduating students. Alumni who have become successful entrepreneurs are also recognized for their contributions to the university and society. This practice showcases alumni achievements and highlights their role as role models for current students. Moreover, alumni engagement extends beyond graduation ceremonies, with alumni often contributing to various aspects of university development, including curricular development, enhancing employability through networking and mentorship programs, and supporting continuous quality improvement efforts. Alumni involvement in university

development reflects a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to their alma mater, contributing to the overall success and reputation of the institution.

Research carried out by Alsubaie et al. (2019) in the UK, Li et al. (2018), and Ma et al. (2020) in China highlights the growing global apprehension regarding mental health problems among university students. Alsubaie et al. (2019) discovered a noteworthy occurrence of depressive symptoms among university students in the UK. This was attributed to many causes such as academic demands, financial strain, and social difficulties, all of which contribute to mental health issues. In China, Li et al. (2018) found that self-esteem is essential in reducing the negative impact of social pressures on students' academic performance and emotional well-being. Further, Ma et al. (2020) emphasized the influence of the COVID-19 epidemic on the mental well-being of Chinese students. They stressed the necessity of providing psychological assistance and mental health services to tackle the heightened levels of worry, stress, and despair. These findings emphasize the significance of giving high priority to mental health support for university students worldwide, tackling sources of stress, and implementing interventions to enhance students' well-being.

To determine how instructors in Zimbabwean secondary schools felt about peer counseling, Mtemeri (2020) carried out a study on the subject. The findings showed that few peer counselors were chosen for their good character attributes, and most schools did not have any. In addition to problem-solving and managing group pressure, peer counselors addressed topics like drug misuse, unexpected pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, and sexual abuse. Instructors expressed a wish for peer counselors to be trained in study techniques, active listening, depression management, ethical issues, and student dispute resolution. Shukia (2019) noted that communities in Tanzania frequently intervene to support schools when they see gaps in government action. Acknowledging the constraints of government resource distribution, communities assume accountability for building, funding, and operating schools as well as acquiring supplies. Alumni can help schools by using their influence to organize financial aid for students in need, offer professional services, encourage current students by attending school events, and get involved in a variety of support programs like career days, teacher appreciation, mentoring student leaders, anti-bullying campaigns, and mental health services.

In Nigeria, research indicates that societal members play a role in the development of public schools (Sarkin-Kebbi, 2018). However, Sharma (Silvia et al., 2019) emphasize that the extent of community contribution depends on the relationship between the community and schools; communities with positive relationships tend to contribute more than those with poor relationships. Similarly, Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (2021) highlight the benefits of mutual respect and value between community members and school staff, increasing staff participation and satisfaction and enhancing academic development. Conversely, in Tanzania, Lyimo, Too, and Kipng'etich (2017) suggest that community contributions to schools have been influenced by political factors, mainly since the government implemented fee-free primary education. This policy change may impact schools positively or negatively, as community involvement in school projects was prevalent before the policy implementation.

In Kenya, Mulwa (2020) highlighted the significance of peer support among students, while the current study emphasizes the role of peer counselors in fostering discipline among secondary school students. Through careful selection and training, peer counselors enhance the likelihood of accessing appropriate assistance from others, employing various intervention strategies. The results encompass a school atmosphere that is both more favorable and secure, as well as children and staff who are healthier with diminished levels of stress. Additionally, there is improved use of resources from both the school and the community. According to Cheruse (2021), different schools have different specialized areas of need when it comes to education. These categories include human growth and development, personal hygiene, human sexuality, adolescence, substance addiction, HIV/AIDS, relationships, study skills, goal setting, job development, and media literacy.

2.1 Guidance and Counselling Services

Guidance and counseling encompass a variety of approaches tailored to the client's preferences and the specific issues they are confronting. Guidance involves the counselor or therapist identifying a problem the client is facing and helping, direction, advice, or education to navigate the situation toward desired goals. It involves a personal, face-to-face relationship between the client and counselor or therapist, where the latter utilizes their expertise and the therapeutic relationship to create a learning environment for the client to understand themselves and their current and potential future situations, empowering them to make informed choices. Ultimately, the guidance and counseling process aids individuals in addressing frustrations and obstacles that impede their daily lives.

In their study, Yuen et al. (2019) performed research in Hong Kong specifically examining career education and vocational training, with a particular emphasis on its connection to school-based career counseling. The study offers a comprehensive analysis of the past and present patterns in career advice, education, and vocational training in Hong Kong. It includes an evaluation of the development of career education policies over time and their influence on secondary school practices. The study examines several factors including student attrition rates, mentoring initiatives, teacher professional development, comparisons between vocational and higher education, and family engagement. The inclusion of representative case studies serves to exemplify effective programs and provides insights for the future advancement of career education and vocational training in Hong Kong, specifically in relation to practices in school-based career counseling.

Arfasa and Weldmeskel (2020) conducted a study in southwest Ethiopia to examine the current state of guidance and counseling services in secondary schools. The objective was to identify the obstacles faced and propose strategies to enhance student support. The findings indicated a scarcity of visits from secondary school students to guidance and counseling services. This was mostly attributable to challenges stemming from a shortage of sufficiently skilled counselors and necessary resources. The study emphasized the substantial influence of guidance and counseling services on students' academic achievement and overall welfare.

In Senegal, Kiweewa et al. (2018) addressed the mounting psychological and social challenges encountered by school-age children, advocating for the integration of counseling and guidance

through a holistic, whole-school approach. They proposed the adoption of a comprehensive guidance and counseling model embedded in school curricula to address these issues effectively. Similarly, in Zambia, Mulenga and Mukaba (2018) aimed to evaluate the role of school guidance and counseling in reducing teenage pregnancies among reentered girls. Despite efforts by school managements and guidance departments to implement policies, challenges such as girls avoiding counseling sessions and insufficient sensitization on safer sex and abstinence were identified. Moreover, the absence of specific programs for reentered girls, coupled with a lack of guidance and counseling curriculum and qualified teachers, contributed to inadequate support for these girls, leading to discontinuation of education for some.

In Kenya, Mulwa (2020) highlighted the role of peer support among students, while the current study emphasized the importance of peer counselors in promoting discipline among secondary school students. Through careful selection and training, peer counselors facilitate access to appropriate assistance from others, employing various intervention strategies to foster a positive and safer school climate, reduce stress levels among students and staff, and optimize school and community resources. Cheruse (2021) identified areas of specific need in schools, encompassing human growth and development, personality, grooming (hygiene), human sexuality, adolescence and early pregnancy, and drug and substance abuse. Shukia (2019) noted that communities in Kenya undertake significant responsibilities in creating, financing, and procuring school materials, with alumni providing financial contributions and professional services. Mentoring relationships also contributes positively to skill development and active participation in schooling, reflecting the collaborative efforts between communities and educational institutions in addressing diverse student needs.

In their study, Onyango et al. (2018) investigated the efficacy of guidance and counseling in addressing student behavior management in public secondary schools in Kenya. Despite earlier attempts to address behavioral issues, only marginal advancements have been observed. The study revealed a correlation coefficient of $r=0.503$, demonstrating a significant link between guidance and counseling and student behavior management. These findings are important for the Ministry of Education in developing policies related to behavior management in secondary schools.

2.3 Mentorship and Motivation

Mentorship and motivation are vital components of the secondary school experience, profoundly shaping students' academic performance, personal development, and future aspirations. Mentorship, characterized by supportive relationships between experienced mentors and mentees, holds particular significance in secondary education. Mentors, whether teachers, counselors, or older peers, offer academic guidance, inspiration, and emotional support to their mentees, nurturing their growth beyond the classroom. Motivation plays a crucial role in students' engagement and success, driving them to pursue learning with focus, persistence, and enthusiasm. In secondary schools, mentorship involves fostering supportive relationships that guide students academically and personally, while motivation provides the impetus for purposeful learning. The integration of mentorship and motivation fosters a conducive educational environment, empowering students to excel academically and pursue their goals with determination and passion. Effective mentorship enhances student motivation by creating a positive learning environment, setting achievable goals, and helping students identify their strengths and career aspirations.

In Canada, Hamilton et al. (2019) examined the impact of mentorship on university students' psychological sense of community and job search self-efficacy. Their mixed-methods study revealed that mentees reported increased job search self-efficacy, attributed to practical career support and valuable psychosocial guidance from mentors. The findings highlighted the positive influence of mentorship programs, especially those connecting undergraduates with industry mentors, on students' professional development and readiness for the workforce transition.

In the UK, Busse et al. (2018) developed a typology for mentoring programs in secondary schools, categorizing them into 'personal and developmental' and 'academic and employability' mentoring. Within these categories, 12 specific mentoring models were identified, shedding light on the diversity of mentoring initiatives and facilitating understanding of their objectives and delivery methods. In Singapore, Hairon et al. (2020) focused on effective mentoring principles, particularly in mentoring beginning teachers. Survey results indicated that the four delivery modes and six content components of the mentoring package were positively perceived by beginning teachers, especially in enhancing their classroom management practices.

In Zambia, Hakwendenda and Njobvu (2019) conducted a study to assess the qualifications and experience of mentors responsible for guiding student-teachers in schools and their ability to effectively fulfill their mentoring duties. Data collected from mentors and student-teachers revealed a lack of training and experience among mentors, with only 10% having received formal mentoring training. Despite positive mentoring relationships, the study concluded that these lacked adequate support due to insufficient mentor training and experience, compounded by the absence of mentor guides. Key challenges included the absence of mentor guides and inadequate training. Recommendations included college-based training for mentors and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs for student-teachers. Asuo-Baffour et al. (2019) investigated mentorship in teacher education in Ghana, aiming to identify challenges and support mechanisms, recommending mentor training to improve their understanding of their roles and reduce conflicts with mentees.

Mubuuke et al. (2020) conducted an exploratory interpretivist study in Uganda, focusing on faculty perceptions and practices regarding mentorship at Makerere University College of Health Sciences. Utilizing semi-structured questionnaires administered through interviews, the study employed thematic analysis to identify key themes: Knowledge of mentorship, Attitude towards mentorship, Practice of mentorship, and improving the mentorship process. Despite variations in knowledge levels, faculty members exhibited a positive attitude toward participating in mentoring, recognizing the importance of continuous faculty development and peer mentorship. The findings underscore the importance of ongoing efforts to enhance faculty knowledge and engagement in mentorship activities, emphasizing continuous faculty development and peer mentorship as crucial components for sustaining effective mentorship programs.

Ochola (2020) did a study in Kenya to examine the influence of peer mentorship on the academic achievement of secondary school students. The study specifically concentrated on the Macheo mentoring program in Kibra. The study identified multiple factors that affect the impact of peer mentorship on academic attainment. The efficacy of mentoring programs is influenced by several

factors, including the duration of the mentoring, the integration of academic and personal development, the amount of involvement between the mentor and mentee, and the clear articulation of expectations for the mentoring sessions. The study demonstrated that the Macheo program, which integrates peer mentorship, has a beneficial impact on students' academic performance. The report recommends the continuation and provision of assistance for mentorship initiatives, especially those that use university students as mentors.

2.4 Community Outreach Programmes

Zimmerman et al. (2018) examined how effective the Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) program was in the United States, employing empowerment theory in an after-school program targeted at middle schoolers. Using a modified randomized control group setup, they sought to gauge how the curriculum influenced youth empowerment, positive development, and problematic behaviours. The results showed that greater engagement with the curriculum led to increased psychological empowerment and positive social behaviours while also decreasing antisocial conduct. These results affirm the effectiveness of both empowerment theory and the YES program in fostering positive youth development.

A study in Japan by Murayama et al. (2020) investigated the impact of school students' greeting behavior on their community attachment and willingness to help others. The study examined the "greeting campaign" implemented by local governments and schools to promote communication among residents, cultivate public spirit, and enhance students' sociability. Results indicated a positive association between greeting exchanges and students' sense of community attachment, highlighting how spontaneous greetings contributed to their inclination to assist others. Moreover, the correlation between receiving greetings and students' voluntary greeting behavior underscored the role of adults in shaping students' social interactions and fostering a sense of community responsibility.

In Sweden, Ferm et al. (2018) conducted research on vocational students' learning strategies and their impact on the development of vocational identity within work communities. The study identified various strategies utilized by students, including taking personal responsibility for learning, seeking deeper vocational knowledge, identifying role models, positioning themselves as resources, and employing humor to foster connections. The research underscored the dynamic interplay between students' agency and habitus, illustrating their active involvement in shaping vocational identities while navigating and perpetuating social structures within work environments. These findings were collaborated in a similar study carried out by Turner (2020) in Australia to investigate the perceived influence of the community on rural Australian students' decisions regarding higher education, particularly focusing on understanding rural subjectivities.

Akinsola and Adeyinka (2020) researched Nigeria to explore the association between students' preferences for Yoruba film genres, Traditional and Modern, and their proficiency in Yoruba cultural concepts. The results revealed a moderate positive correlation between students' achievement in Yoruba cultural concepts and their inclination towards traditional Yoruba film genres. In contrast, a low positive correlation was observed with modern Yoruba film genres. Multiple regression analysis further demonstrated that the preference for traditional Yoruba film genres significantly contributed to students' proficiency in Yoruba cultural concepts. The study

highlighted the importance of raising parental awareness regarding the educational implications of watching specific traditional Yoruba films.

In Tanzania, Sephania et al. (2017) highlighted the impact of politics on community contributions to schools following the government's announcement of fee-free basic education. This policy shift may have both positive and negative effects on schools, as it alters the level of community involvement in school projects. To address this challenge, a solution-oriented approach involving alumni and other social groups can introduce innovative ways to support schools financially and otherwise. By fostering a culture of giving back to educational institutions at the alumni level, more students can benefit from such support, not only financially but also through inspiration drawn from the success of former students, thereby enhancing their overall participation in schooling.

In South Africa, Makhauhelo (2018) investigated the factors contributing to the decline of Sesotho cultural day in three high schools within the Maseru district. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study aimed to shift perceptions among teachers and students, promoting a positive attitude towards cultural day celebrations. Findings revealed prevailing attitudes influenced by factors such as inadequate government support, student attitudes, lack of backing from administration and colleagues, limited parental involvement, and Western influences. The study recommended adopting appropriate teaching strategies for Sesotho culture, considering the predominance of the lecture method among teachers, thus providing valuable insights for enhancing cultural day celebrations in schools.

Njoka and Githui conducted a study in 2023 to investigate the contribution of public secondary schools in Embu and Nairobi Counties, Kenya, to the enhancement of social cohesion within society. The study aimed to assess the role of schools in promoting this cohesion in Kenya. The study's findings indicated that schools, functioning as agents of socialization, had a vital role in promoting national cohesion. It was determined that schools in Kenya are strategically situated to achieve this goal. The study proposes enhancing the integration of national values across all subjects in the curriculum to foster a feeling of national identity and patriotism, hence fostering a unified and cohesive society within the nation.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive and correlational approaches to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The study targeted 390 Principals of public secondary schools, 390 PA chairpersons, 551 class teachers, 563 student leaders and 9 CDF managers in Meru County, Kenya. The study adopted the Yamane method to determine the sample size of the respondents to participate in the study. To ensure there was fair sampling of respondents in the study, Principals, PA chairpersons, and CDF managers were selected using purposive sampling while class teachers and students' leaders were selected using stratified sampling. The total sample for the study was 331. The study used questionnaires to collect quantitative data, and interview schedules and Focus group discussions to collect qualitative data from the study respondents. A pilot study was conducted in the neighboring Tharaka Nithi county of Kenya and involved 67. Reliability and validity were measured. Qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis, while quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of the SPSS

computer software. The study variables were described using descriptive statistics, which included frequency and percentages while inferential analysis was based on Chi-square test. The findings were presented using tables, figures and explanations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The extent to which aspects of social support contribute to students’ participation in schooling was assessed using five Likert scaled statements for class teachers and student leaders. The Cronbach Alpha for Social support programs for class teachers were 0.923 while that of Student Leaders was 0.906 making both relatively high. Table 3 presents a summary of data obtained from class teachers.

Table 31: Social Support Programs (Class Teachers)

Our school adequately provides:	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Guidance and counselling services	12.2	35.4	6.1	38.1	8.2	100.0
Motivational talks.	14.3	36.1	7.5	32.0	10.1	100.0
Mentorship programs.	24.5	34.7	12.2	22.4	6.2	100.0
Community Outreach Programs	28.6	42.9	7.5	15.0	6.0	100.0
Career talks.	24.5	37.4	8.2	26.5	3.4	100.0

SD-Strongly Disagree; D-Disagree; N-Neutral; A-Agree; SA-Strongly Agree

Information in Table 3 show that less than half of the sampled teachers (46.3%) indicated that their schools adequately provide guidance and counselling services, motivational talks (42.1%), more than a quarter had mentorship programs (28.6%) and career talks (29.9%) while slightly less than this proportion have benefitted from community outreach programs (21.0%).The above findings show that about a third of the sampled class teachers (33.58%) confirmed that their schools have adequate social support programs for enhance student participation in schooling.

Information obtained from students’ leaders show that more than half of the sample of the student leaders (55.3%) indicated that their schools adequately provide guidance and counselling services, more than a third had experienced motivational talks (35.7%), and about a quarter had community outreach programs (25.3%) while less than a quarter had mentorship programs (24.2%) and career talks (24.2%). Information was also sought from student leaders. Results obtained are presented in table 4.

Table 4: Social Support Programs (Student Leaders)

Our school adequately provide:	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Guidance and counselling services	12.6	26.4	5.7	33.5	21.8	100.0
Motivational talks.	17.2	39.1	8.0	21.8	13.9	100.0
Mentorship programs.	21.8	48.3	5.7	18.5	5.7	100.0
Community Outreach Programs	29.9	37.9	6.9	14.9	10.4	100.0
Career talks.	23.0	47.1	5.7	19.5	4.7	100.0

SD-Strongly Disagree; D-Disagree; N-Neutral; A-Agree; SA-Strongly Agree

Findings in table 4 show that about a third of the sampled student leaders (32.94%) confirmed that their schools’ benefit from social support programs. About 56.3% strongly disagreed or disagreed that that they benefit from motivational talks. Majority (70.1%) of student leaders disagreed and strongly disagreed that they get mentorship in their schools with the rest noting that the programmes were there only once or twice in a year. A small number of respondents 14.9% and 19.5% also agreed that they benefited from community outreach and career talks respectively. The above findings compare favorably with findings from class teachers. Descriptive findings therefore indicate below average extent of access to social support programs by students in public secondary schools in Meru County.

The study thus proceeded to assess the effectiveness of the social support programs on student participation in schooling. Data obtained on social support programs was cross tabulated against data on students’ participation in schooling. Results obtained were as presented in Table 5 and 6.

Table 5: Social Support Programs and Students’ Participation (Cross-tabulation)

			Social support program		
			Low	High	Total
Student participation	Low	f	65	18	83
		%	44.2%	12.2%	56.5%
	High	f	35	29	64
		%	23.8%	19.7%	43.5%
	Total	f	100	47	147
		%	68.0%	32.0%	100.0%

Results from cross tabulation showed that fewer teachers (43.5%) reported high student participation in schooling, a greater proportion (19.7%) indicating high social support compared to those who reported low level of support (23.8%). With regard to social support programs, fewer teachers (32.0%) indicated high level of support compared to those who reported low support (68.0%). Table 6 presents an inferential interpretation of this observation.

Table 6: Social Support Programs and Students’ Participation (Chi-Square)

	Value	df	Ass Sig.	Exact Sig,	CC
Pearson Chi-Square	9.274 ^a	1	0.002		0.244
Continuity Correction ^b	8.219	1	0.004		
Likelihood Ratio	9.276	1	0.002		
Fisher's Exact Test				0.004	
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.211	1	0.002		
N of Valid Cases	147				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 20.52.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Chi square results $X^2(1) = 9.274$, $p=0.004$ showed that social support programs significantly influence students' participation in schooling. Contingency Coefficient measure of Association (CC) illustrated that 24.4% of the total variance in student participation could be attributed to social support programs. Findings therefore mean that social support programs are effective in facilitating student participation in schooling.

The study sought to establish the effectiveness of social support programs on student participation in schooling collecting information from school principals, parents' representative and student leaders. In response, the interviewees observed that:

Interviewee P1: *"The school has an active Guidance and Counseling programme run by teachers and peer counselors. Community members not actively involved."*

Interviewee P2: *"The school has two Guidance and Counseling programs. One, a Pastoral program run by a chaplain counsellor once a week and a Guidance and Counseling sessions ran by the Guidance and Counseling teacher. The Guidance and Counseling sessions for individual students are mainly on drugs, peer pressure, family issues."*

Interviewee P5: *"Few community counsellors available. School benefits from internal counselors who are not professionally trained. Counselling not as effective as expected since some cases require professional counsellors."*

Interviewee PAC4: *"The school has a fairly good program. The programs are sometimes run by invited experts, volunteers in the community, and BOM members."*

Interviewee PAC10: *"Some community members offer to do some counselling. However, some classes require professional counselling psychologists."*

Interviewee FGD9: *"The school has a G&C department that is manned once per week. The school also has a Reverend from the sponsoring church who avails himself once a week. The Interviewee s felt the services were not adequate to serve their needs."*

Interviewee FGD33: *"Guidance and counselling Services are available to all students. The school has invited external counsellors from Ministry of health. The school has a G&C office. The department is not very active as expected with students not seeking out G&C services unless as part of a disciplinary action."*

Interviewee FGD39: *"A Guidance and Counselling department exists but there is no professional counselling psychologist or a psychiatrist for extreme cases. Students with extreme cases are sent home to seek further assistance from specialists."*

Interviewee FGD43: *"G&C department exists but is not effective. Students fear opening and sharing with the G&C teacher. There is no clear definitive difference between their roles as a guidance counselor and as a teacher within the school."*

The study's findings highlighted the vital role that guidance and counseling (G&C) services played in schools, offering essential support for students facing personal, social, and academic challenges. Data obtained indicated that although many schools had established G&C departments, challenges persisted, especially regarding the qualifications and availability of staff. Information from principals pointed out that while their school had an active program involving teachers and peer counselors, there was little involvement from the wider community, indicating a gap in support that could enhance the program's effectiveness (Interviewee P1). The study also revealed that many schools struggled with their G&C services due to staffing limitations. Interviewee P5 and Interviewee FGD39 highlighted the lack of professional training among internal counselors,

which often led to inadequate support for students dealing with complex issues. This gap forced schools to refer students with severe problems to external specialists, which was not always feasible due to logistical or financial constraints. Interviewee FGD9 observed that although efforts were made by the sponsor to supplement the G&C department, it remains insufficient to meet students' needs. The study also indicated that current G&C programs may not fully engage students due to several barriers. Interviewee FGD33 noted that students often avoided G&C services unless required as a remedy for disciplinary action, suggesting a stigma or lack of awareness about the benefits of these services. Similarly, Interviewee FGD43 observed students' reluctance to open up to G&C teachers, possibly because there was no clear difference between their roles as teachers and counselors. Majority of the respondents highlighted the need for schools to create a more welcoming and trusting environment where students felt comfortable seeking help.

The study also sought to understand the extent to which students in schools are exposed to motivational talks and its contribution to student participation in schooling. Interviewees observed that:

Interviewee P3: "The school highly benefits from external motivators who are normally paid. A few motivators from the community are also involved, e.g., BOM members."

Interviewee P4 & 5: "Externally sourced speakers are expensive and highly paid to offer their services. Few volunteers, especially in key areas like drug abuse and teenage pregnancies."

Interviewee PAC8: "Most speakers attend on a payment basis."

Interviewee FGD 9: "Motivational speakers happen though not frequently."

Interviewee FGD 21: "Happens twice per year".

Interviewee FGD 34: "Rarely happens unless done by the teachers."

Interviewee FGD 42: "Happens often. Provided by various individuals including parents, alumni, sponsors, church leaders, and organizations."

Data obtained from interviewees revealed that schools derived some benefits from external motivators(P3), who were paid for their services, and highlighted the involvement of some community members, such as school Board of Management (BOM) Interviewees P4, P5 and PAC8 observed that hiring external speakers was costly as they demanded high fees for their services which most schools could not afford. They also noted that only a few volunteers addressed crucial topics like drug abuse and teenage pregnancies.

Study findings also revealed that the frequency and sources of motivational talks differed across various schools with some student leaders (Interviewee FGD9), noting that motivational speakers visited their school, but their appearances were infrequent while Interviewee FGD34 agreed that the talks were rare unless when organized by teachers. In contrast, Interviewee FGD21 noted that they had motivational talks twice a year, while Interviewee FGD42 also observed that motivational sessions occurred often and involved a variety of contributors, including parents, alumni, sponsors, church leaders, and organizations. The study findings highlighted diverse approaches to motivational programs, influenced by factors such as financial resources, community involvement, and individual school priorities which either facilitates or inhibits students' participation in schooling in public secondary schools in Meru County.

The study further sought to establish the extent to which mentorship programs were being implemented and its contribution to students' participation in schooling. It was observed that:

Interviewee P1-6: *"No mentorship from community or school."*

Interviewee P10: *"The school has few mentorships' programs that are mostly facilitated by the Alumni, or through corporate sponsorships."*

Interviewee PAC8: *"None. The school does not have any mentorship programs in place."*

Interviewee PAC10: *"The school through the Alumni runs some sessions once or twice per year."*

Interviewee FGD1-6: *"The school has no mentorship programs in place. However, this sounds like a good programme that needs more investment by the school."*

Interviewee FGD 43: *"Mentorship programs in the school happen though on a pro bono basis. Done by the Alumni, parents, and other stakeholders."*

Information obtained from principals indicated a significant gap in availability and implementation of mentorship programmes in majority of the schools. Interviewees P1 and P6 for example reported that their schools lacked mentorship programs, indicating a deficit in structured support for students' participation. Similarly, Interviewees FGD1 through FGD6 acknowledged the absence of mentorship programs in their schools but recognized their significance in enhancing their participation in schooling, suggesting that these initiatives would require more investment to become a reality. Information obtained from parents' representatives concurred with that of the principals with some noting that there were no such programmes while others observed that mentorship sessions facilitated by alumni occurred about once or twice a year, with Interviewee PAC10 also noting that the few existing programs were supported by alumni or corporate sponsorships. Interviewee FGD43 described these programs as run on a volunteer basis, involving alumni, parents, and other stakeholders. The above data suggested that mentorship programs offered students with vital guidance, support, and role modeling assisting them in navigating their educational and personal lives. Findings also revealed that mentorship was more common in national and extra-county schools, where parents and alumni actively engaged in providing and financing these opportunities while the same was uncommon in county and sub county schools thus enhancing and inhibiting students' participation in schooling respectively.

The study also sought to establish the extent to which community outreach programs were being implemented and their contribution to student participation in schooling. Interviewees noted that:

Interviewee P1: *The school has no community outreach programs of its own. However, it takes part in tree planting activities sponsored by the government.*

Interviewee P2: *"Few programs exist in the school through student groups, e.g., YCS Scouts, e.g., tree planting and Hospice contributions, blood donations."*

Interviewee P3-5: *"No programs exist."*

Interviewee PAC8: *"The school has no community outreach programs."*

Interviewee FGD 12: *"Community outreach programs are very rare. I can only recount one event where form 3 students visited a children's home when I was in form one."*

Interviewee FGD 14: *“Community outreach programs rarely happen. I have only seen the contributions to the Meru hospice.”*

Interviewee FGD 43: *“Community outreach programs are limited to tree planting events once in a while in line with national government directives.”*

Information obtained from principals revealed that these initiatives are largely limited or absent, with activities often driven by government-sponsored projects. Interviewee P1 noted that while the school do not have its own outreach programs, it participated in government-sponsored tree planting activities. Similarly, Interviewee P2 mentioned a few initiatives through student groups like Young Christian Students (YCS) and Scouts, which engaged in tree planting, hospice contributions, and blood donations. However, Interviewees P3 through P5 and PAC8 reported no community outreach programs in their schools, indicating a lack of structured initiatives that engaged students with the broader community. The findings indicated that outreach efforts that exist tended to be sporadic and event-specific rather than part of a continuous commitment. Data obtained from student leaders concurred with that of the principals with majority indicating that they were rarely involved in such programmes. For example, Interviewee FGD12 recalled a single event where Form 3 students visited a children's home, while Interviewee FGD14 mentioned infrequent contributions to the Meru Hospice. Interviewee FGD43 highlighted that outreach activities were mainly limited to tree planting events aligned with national government directives.

Lastly, the study sought to assess the extent to which career talks as social support programs were being adopted by the schools and their contribution in supporting student participation. In response, interviewees observed that.

Interviewee P1: *There are few career volunteers, especially from church organizations and the BOM members on career choices and talent development.*

Interviewee P3: *“Career talks within the school happen only once a year. They are mostly done during subject selection by form” twos.*

Interviewee P10: *“Career talks within the school happen at least twice per year and are sponsored by universities, and some of the parents.”*

Interviewee PAC5: *“The cost is prohibitive. Very few volunteers offer to give career talks with Professionals being paid up to 2000 per hour.”*

Interviewee FGD 13: *“Career talks are done by teachers only for form twos during subject selection.”*

Interviewee FGD34: *“There are No career talks. Only talks given by parents while at home.”*

Interviewee FGD56: *“Career talks are given frequently by teachers and external experts at least once per term. Some universities offer the service as part of their marketing and community services. Some of the Alumni also offer career talks and facilitate professionals from different fields like doctors, lawyers, engineers, and disciplined forces to come and lead the talks.”*

Information obtained showed a varied landscape regarding how these sessions were implemented and perceived. According to Interviewee P1, career volunteers, mainly from church organizations and Board of Management (BOM) members, were few but engaged students in discussions about career choices and talent development. According to Interviewee P3, career talks generally

occurred once a year, typically during the subject selection process for Form Two students. In contrast, Interviewee P10 reported that career talks took place at least twice a year, sponsored by universities and some parents, indicating a more structured approach in some schools.

The availability and effectiveness of career talks was highly affected by their frequency, cost, and sources. According to PAC5 the cost of organizing career talks with professionals was prohibitive with some charging up to ksh 2,000 per hour. Interviewee FGD13 mentioned that teachers conducted career talks only for Form Two students during subject selection. Meanwhile, Interviewee FGD34 reported no formal career talks, except for discussions initiated by parents at home. On the other hand, Interviewee FGD56 described a more comprehensive approach, with career talks held frequently by teachers and external experts at least once per term, with universities and alumni participating as part of their marketing and community service efforts. Some of these schools also brought in professionals from various fields, including medicine, law, engineering, and the military, to lead these talks. While the data indicated there was value in career talks in guiding students toward informed career choices, their provision and impact of the sessions were minimal, particularly done in national schools. There were also concerns raised regarding the qualifications of those providing the talks and the frequency of these sessions.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study sought to assess effectiveness of social support programmes on student's participation in schooling in public secondary schools in the Meru County, Kenya. Social support programs, including guidance and counseling, motivational talks, and other welfare initiatives, play a significant role in enhancing students' participation in schooling. With regard to guidance and counselling, less than half of the sampled class teachers (46.3%) indicated that their schools adequately provide guidance and counselling services. This was confirmed by more than half of the sampled student leaders (55.3%) implying an average extent of access to guidance and counselling services to schools. Qualitative data sought from interviewees illustrated that guidance and counselling services are critical components in the educational framework, providing students with the necessary support to handle personal, social, and academic challenges. Most respondents noted that their schools had an active guidance and counseling department but that there were challenges associated with qualifications of the guidance and counselling teachers and their availability. The respondents also noted that in some instances, school had to refer cases to external counsellors as they needed more expertise that was lacking in the department. Findings on relatively low extent of access to guidance and counselling services as an aspect of social support program is similar to observation by Uzoekwe, (2020) who in a study on the extent of utilization of educational and vocational guidance and counselling programmes for secondary school students' participation in sustainable national development in Delta State observed low extent of use of the program. The study attributed the low use of guidance and counselling to poor funding of guidance and counselling programmes, inadequate materials resources including lack of ICT facilities, lack of time, and insufficient utilization of professional counsellors in most schools especially in the remote areas, among others. Similarly, Ndanu, Mukadi and Tarus (2022) in a study on effectiveness of guidance and counseling programme in enhancing students' retention in public day secondary schools in Nyahururu sub-county, Kenya also found that the effectiveness of guidance and counseling programme enhanced students' retention by helping students deal with challenges affecting personal and social life as well as academic achievement.

With regard to motivational talks and its contribution to student participation in schooling, descriptive data illustrated that less than half (42.1%) of the sampled class teachers indicated that students in their schools were readily provided with motivational talks. This was corroborated by more than a third (35.7%) of the sampled student leaders implying minimal provision of this aspect of social support program. Qualitative data showed that motivational talks are designed to inspire and encourage students, providing them with the drive and determination to achieve their academic and personal goals. On the question of how frequently schools organized motivational talks, the responses ranged from low involvement to external and internal hiring of speakers. Many of the principals felt that whilst the benefits of the talks were clear, there was a challenge in the costs associated with hiring the motivational speakers. The qualitative findings therefore collaborated with quantitative findings illustrating challenges associated with motivational talks and their adverse effect in enhancing learner participation in schooling. The findings are in line with a study by Haddad, Ogbureke, Price, Tribble and Koeppen (2015) who in a similar study found that though motivation talks had challenges in institutions, they encouraged students to develop decision making skill. Similarly, Khan and Iftikhar (2021) in a study on the role of motivational speech in influencing learning attitude of Pakistani students concluded that motivational talks positively impact student learning attitude and ultimately participation.

Information obtained from the study in regards community outreach programs illustrated that less than a quarter of sampled class teachers (21.0%) indicated that there are adequate community outreach programs in their schools. This was confirmed by about a quarter (25.3%) of the sampled student leaders illustrating minimal access to community outreach programs. Data obtained through interviews from principals, parents' representatives and student leaders show that community outreach programs engage students in activities that benefit the wider community, fostering a sense of social responsibility and civic engagement. Responses indicated that these programmes were mostly nonexistent unless for spurred by the government. These included the normal tree planting activities, and community cleanups, blood donations and a few contributions to hospitals within the neighborhood of the schools. Most respondents seemingly did not see the benefits of the programs which were seen as time and resource wasting activities. These findings were contrary to a study by Kerwood et al. (2019) in Oregon USA that illustrated community-driven initiatives, complement government efforts by bridging funding gaps through financial contributions, professional services, and active participation in school events. These initiatives address mental health needs, tapping into societal values and expertise to aid students in overcoming learning challenges, thereby enhancing their participation in schooling.

On mentorship programs, data obtained show that more than a quarter of the sampled class teachers (28.6%) indicated that in their schools, there are adequate mentorship programs for students. This was confirmed by about a quarter (24.2%) of the sampled student leaders with majority of both the class teachers and student leaders observing that there were no scheduled mentorship programmes in their schools. Qualitative data obtained from principals and parents representatives show that mentorship programs provide students with guidance, support, and role modeling that can inspire and help them navigate their educational and personal lives. There was a general observation that mentorship was nonexistent in many schools in Meru County. Few respondents who had experienced mentorship mentioned that it was done on pro bono basis and mainly in

national and extra county schools. Findings revealed that parents in this category of schools sacrificed their time and resources to ensure that their students were provided with proper mentorship facilities. The findings of this study collaborated with a similar study by Asuo-Baffour et al. (2019) that investigated mentorship in teacher education in Ghana, aiming to identify challenges and support mechanisms the study recommending mentor training to improve their understanding of their roles and reduce conflicts with mentees. Similarly, in Egypt, Alexan (2022) also explored factors influencing students' choice of major at a private higher education institution in Cairo, finding financial motivations as the primary determinant, followed by mentor influences, intrinsic motivations, and motivations related to social good, providing insights beyond engineering disciplines.

With regard to career talks, data obtained show that more than a quarter of the sampled class teachers (29.9%) indicated that in their schools, students are adequately provided with career talk. This was confirmed by about a quarter (24.2%) of the sampled student leaders. Majority of the respondents indicated that there were either few or none at all. Information obtained from interviews show that career talks were nonexistent in most county and sub county schools. Additionally, the impact of career talks in schools was noted to be minimal with the only active cases happening in national schools. Some of the respondents revealed that they had never heard of career talks but thought they would be beneficial to them and thus requested that the researcher either provides the service or sensitizes the school's administration to provide the same. The findings compare favorably with Kashefpakdel and Percy (2017) who found that participating in career talks in high school is associated with an earning premium at age 26 (after controlling for students' socio-demographic background and learning attainment) and that additional career talks lead to larger premiums, presumably because each speaker conveys different insights. Additionally, Percy and Mann (2014) found that students with multiple employer contacts during their school year achieved higher salaries at age 19-24 than did their peers who did not engage with employers during their school years.

Findings therefore showed that only about a third of the sampled class teachers (33.58%) confirmed that their schools have adequate social support programs that enhance student participation in schooling. This was confirmed by about a third of the sampled student leaders (32.94%) who confirmed that their schools' benefit from social support programs that enhance student participation in schooling which compares favorably with findings from class teachers. Descriptive findings therefore indicate below average extent of access to social support programs by public secondary schools in Meru County. Inferential analysis through Chi square results $\chi^2(1) = 9.274$, $p = 0.004$ showed that social support programs significantly influence students' participation in schooling. Contingency Coefficient measure of Association (CC) illustrated that 24.4% of the total variance in student participation could be attributed to social support programs. Findings therefore reveal that though social support programs are significant in facilitating student participation in schooling, their level of effectiveness was minimal especially in Meru County secondary schools. Findings of this study is similar to that of Mulyadi and Saraswati (2020) who in a study on social support and students' academic engagement established that various forms and sources of social support programs are significantly correlated to students' academic engagement. Similarly, Baria and Gomez (2022) in a study on influence of social support to student learning and development also observed a high positive significant relationship between social support and

student learning and development. At the higher education level, Dupont, Galand and Nils (2015) in a study on the impact of different sources of social support on academic performance observed that institutional and supervisor support were associated with motivation, which in turn predicted greater behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement.

6. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to assess the impact of social support programs on student participation in public secondary schools in Meru County, Kenya. Programs such as guidance and counseling, motivational talks, mentorship, and community outreach activities were evaluated. Descriptive data from class teachers and student leaders indicated limited access to most of these programs, with guidance and counseling being the only exception. Overall, only about one-third of the participants confirmed that their schools had sufficient social support programs to enhance student participation. Quantitative findings showed moderate access to guidance and counseling services and lower availability of motivational talks. Qualitative data highlighted minimal community involvement and a lack of trust between students and counselors, which negatively affected the programs' effectiveness. Chi-square analysis demonstrated a significant relationship between social support programs and student participation, with a portion of the variance in participation explained by these programs.

7. RECOMMENDATION OF THE STUDY

The study findings demonstrated that sociological interventions are crucial in promoting student participation in schooling. However, both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that schools have limited access to these interventions, suggesting the need for increased efforts to improve their availability in public secondary schools to boost student participation. It is particularly recommended that focused initiatives be implemented to ensure that schools Boards of Management in collaboration with other stakeholders should put in place strategies to improve social support programmes for schools. Specifically, there is need to strengthen guidance and counseling services by hiring professionally trained counselors and providing continuous professional development for existing staff. Additionally, there is need to develop sustainable structured mentorship programs by collaborating with alumni, local businesses, and community leaders to provide role models and support for students.

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