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"I failed, no matter how hard I tried": A mixed-methods study of the role of achievement in primary school dropout in rural Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Initial access to school is nearly universal in Kenya, but many children who enroll drop out before completing primary school. In this mixed-methods study, we use quantitative data from a randomized control trial involving 2666 upper primary-grade students, as well as qualitative data from interviews with 41 schoolchildren, dropouts, and parents, to examine dropout. Poorer baseline performance on literacy and numeracy assessments predicted a higher risk of dropout. Interviews revealed that children are the primary decision-makers rather than parents. Together, these findings suggest that school quality interventions may be an effective means of reducing primary school dropout in this region.
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1. Introduction

By some measures, Kenya has reached its goal of universal primary education. Nearly all children enter first grade (UNESCO, 2011), and the gross primary enrollment rate has been above 100% since the abolition of official school fees in 2003 (World Bank, 2013). However, these access statistics mask the significant challenges that remain to ensuring that all children in Kenya successfully attend school through the end of grade eight, the final year of primary school. A recent national survey conducted by Unesco found that 9% of youth ages six to sixteen were not attending school (Omondi, 2012). One in five is not attending in North Eastern Province and 15% in Coast Province. If children drop out before they have achieved literacy and other basic skills, the massive investments in expanding basic education in Kenya, and other countries in the region, may be for naught.

Many researchers have approached the issue of dropout with specific risk factors in mind—for example, poverty or pregnancy. However, dropout is a consequence of the interactions of numerous context-specific factors (Hoxby, 2000), including gender, poverty, and opportunity costs. In order to design policies that will prevent dropout, we must better understand how these various factors impact children's achievement, how achievement is linked

to dropout, and how families make enrollment decisions using information available on the child's school performance, health, the direct and opportunity costs of attending school, school quality, and cultural and social norms. If policymakers can understand the complex interplay of these factors, it may be possible to retain more children through primary school. In order to address these issues, we use data from a prospective, mixed-methods, longitudinal study. Our approach to understanding dropout in one region of Kenya results in a fuller picture than those provided by much of the existing dropout research, as it incorporates the voices of youth in combination with achievement assessments and rich background data.

2. Background and context

In order to reduce primary-school dropout, it is first necessary to understand who drops out and why they do so. Little rigorous data is available on this in the Kenyan context. Prospective longitudinal studies of dropout among Kenyan youth are rare, and cross-sectional studies may lead to biased findings. For example, a cross-sectional study may identify proximal factors affecting dropout risk—perhaps pregnancy or the need to work for pay (Ball, 2012)—but not the earlier factors that put the child on the trajectory toward dropout. In interviews with parents and teachers, proximal reasons for dropout may become the post-hoc rationale for a child's dropout obscuring the underlying trigger factors. However, these cross-sectional studies have identified two risk factors consistently: student age and grades. Additionally, any

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