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Principal-led interventions for addressing students' sociocultural challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract

Sociocultural challenges undermine students' participation, retention, and educational experiences, yet evidence on principals' interventions in Kenyan public secondary schools remains limited. Guided by transformative leadership theory, this study examined principal-led interventions addressing sociocultural challenges in Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya. A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data were obtained through questionnaires completed by 287 Form Four students from a Yamane-derived sample of 360, drawn from a population of 3,587. Qualitative data were collected through interviews with 39 principals from 49 targeted public secondary schools. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis. Students rated principals' social interventions, including counselling, mentorship, parental engagement, and peer support, positively ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.58$). Boarding school students reported significantly more favourable perceptions than day school students, $t(86.42) = -3.04$, $p = .003$. Cultural interventions promoting inclusion and discouraging harmful practices were also positively perceived ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.56$), with no significant differences by school type ($p > .05$). Interviews confirmed the use of counselling, parental engagement, inclusive practices, and community outreach, but identified resource constraints, inconsistent parental involvement, and entrenched cultural norms as barriers. The study concludes that principal-led interventions provide valuable responses to sociocultural challenges, although contextual conditions constrain their implementation. It recommends prioritizing day schools, institutionalising counselling services, and strengthening

school–community partnerships to support equitable student participation and retention.

Key terms: Transformative Leadership; Sociocultural Challenges; Principal Leadership

1.0 Introduction

Quality education is essential for socioeconomic development and for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all). However, simply having access to school does not always lead to fair educational experiences or outcomes. Across the world, students encounter challenges that hinder their participation retention and success in education (Zickafoose et al., 2024). Among these are social background challenges, which arise from students' family and social environments, including limited parental involvement, low parental education, family instability, inadequate psychosocial support, and negative peer influences (Ikhlas et al., 2022). Students may also experience cultural background challenges, which are rooted in community norms, beliefs, values, and practices such as gender stereotypes, traditional expectations, early marriage, and cultural attitudes towards education (Akiru & Kanyiri, 2023).

Globally, school leaders have increasingly been recognized as key actors in addressing these challenges. Studies conducted in the United States have shown that principals contribute to students' academic success and well-being by fostering strong relationships with families, implementing culturally responsive leadership practices, and creating supportive school environments that respond to diverse learner needs (Wolfe & Steiner, 2023). Similarly, Cummins and Patel (2025) found that school leaders enhance educational equity through family-school-community partnerships, effective communication with parents, and collaboration with local stakeholders. Research on culturally responsive school leadership further demonstrates that principals who promote inclusivity, belonging, and respect for diversity create school environments that better support students from varied social and cultural backgrounds (Vedder et al., 2026).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, expanded access to secondary education has not always been accompanied by equivalent improvements in educational equity (Gruijters et al., 2024). Many learners continue to encounter social challenges such as low parental involvement, limited adult literacy, unstable family structures, and inadequate psychosocial support. Cultural factors, including gender norms, initiation practices, early marriages, and traditional expectations concerning the roles of boys and girls, may also conflict with continued school participation. As a result, educational institutions are increasingly expected to address not only academic concerns but also the social and cultural barriers that influence learners' educational experiences.

In Kenya, the government has made efforts to expand access to education through policies such as Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019, the National Education Sector Strategic Plan (NESSP) 2023-2027, and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE). Although these initiatives have increased enrolment and expanded educational opportunities, disparities in participation, retention, engagement, and achievement remain evident among learners from different sociocultural backgrounds.

Empirical studies indicate that school principals can address the effects of students' sociocultural challenges, such as weak parental support, family-related instability, inadequate psychosocial guidance, negative peer influences, gender-based expectations, early marriage, and other community practices that may interfere with educational participation and achievement. For example, Kuteli et al. (2025) found that effective principal-parent communication strengthens parental engagement in students' education, while Kay et al. (2019) and Wambua et al. (2024) reported that school leadership support for guidance and counselling contributes to improved discipline, psychosocial well-being, and academic engagement. Similarly, studies have shown that inclusive school environments and community-based

interventions can help address challenges associated with gender inequality and harmful cultural practices (Ireri et al., 2020; Waigwa et al., 2018).

Studies conducted in Rongai Sub-County have identified persistent home-based and school-related challenges affecting learners' educational participation and retention. Sigei (2013) established that poverty, inadequate parental support, family instability, early marriages, and teenage pregnancies contributed to student dropout in public day secondary schools. Other studies have examined challenges relating to access to education and school discipline (Awour et al., 2018; Lagat et al., 2023). Although these studies provide evidence of challenges affecting learners, they leave a gap in understanding how school principals respond to such challenges through targeted interventions. Limited empirical evidence exists on the interventions adopted by principals, students' perceptions of these interventions, and the constraints affecting their implementation in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County. This study therefore examined principal-led interventions for addressing students' social and cultural background challenges.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Despite global, regional, and national calls to improve equity in accessing quality education, many students still face sociocultural challenges that contribute to poor academic performance and dropouts (Charo, 2024). In Kenya, policy efforts have focused on improving access to secondary education. However, discrepancies still exist between student participation rates, retention, engagement, and academic success. In Rongai Sub-County, previous studies have identified challenges such as poverty, inadequate parental support, family instability, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and other home- and community-based factors that negatively affect learners' educational experiences, while other studies have highlighted concerns relating to educational access, quality, and student discipline in public secondary schools (Awour et al., 2018; Lagat et al., 2023; Sigei, 2013). Although these studies provide evidence on the nature of the challenges facing learners, they offer limited insight into how school principals respond to students' social and cultural background challenges through school-based interventions. Consequently, there remains limited empirical evidence on principal-led interventions for addressing students' sociocultural challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County. Therefore, this study sought to examine the interventions implemented by principals to address these challenges, differences in students' perceptions of these interventions across day and boarding schools, and the constraints reported by principals in implementing these interventions.

1.2 Objectives

The purpose of this study was to investigate the principal-led interventions implemented to address students' social and cultural challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-county, Nakuru County, Kenya. The specific objectives were:

i. To examine principal-led interventions implemented to address student social background challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County.

ii. To examine principal-led interventions implemented to address student cultural background challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County.

iii. To compare students' perceptions of these interventions between day and boarding schools in Rongai Sub-County.

1.3 Research Questions

The study responded to the following questions;

i. What are the principal-led interventions implemented to address student social background challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County?

ii. What are the principal-led interventions implemented to address student cultural background challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County?

iii. How do students' perceptions of these principal-led interventions compare between day and boarding schools in Rongai Sub-County?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Transformative Leadership Theory

This study is guided by transformative leadership theory, first introduced by Burns (1978) and later developed by Bass and Bass Bernard (1985). In educational settings, transformative leadership positions the school principal as an agent of change who works to improve institutional practices while responding to the diverse needs of learners. Bass and Bass Bernard (1985) identified four key dimensions of transformative leadership: individualized consideration, idealized influence, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation.

The dimension of individualized consideration is reflected in interventions such as counselling, mentorship programmes, peer-support initiatives, and school-based psychosocial support systems. Through individualized consideration, principals recognize the unique circumstances and needs of students experiencing social or cultural challenges and provide targeted support intended to enhance their educational participation and well-being.

Idealized influence is reflected in principals' efforts to create inclusive and supportive school environments. By modelling ethical leadership, fairness, and respect for diversity, principals establish school cultures that discourage discrimination, promote social cohesion, and support learners from different social and cultural backgrounds. This dimension is particularly relevant to interventions aimed at promoting inclusivity and addressing cultural biases or harmful practices within the school environment.

Inspirational motivation is demonstrated through initiatives that encourage students, parents, and community members to value education and work toward shared educational goals. Interventions such as parental engagement programmes, community sensitization meetings, and campaigns against early marriage and other harmful cultural practices exemplify how principals motivate stakeholders to support learners and strengthen educational participation.

Intellectual stimulation is evident when principals challenge beliefs, practices, or norms that hinder learners' educational opportunities and encourage stakeholders to explore alternative solutions. This dimension underpins interventions aimed at addressing retrogressive cultural practices, promoting gender equity, and developing innovative school-community partnerships to respond to emerging sociocultural challenges.

While Transformative Leadership Theory provides the primary theoretical lens for the study, insights from inclusive and adaptive leadership strengthen its explanatory power. Inclusive leadership complements transformative leadership by emphasizing equitable participation, respect for diversity, and the creation of school environments where all learners feel valued regardless of their social or cultural background. This perspective is reflected in interventions promoting inclusivity, anti-discrimination practices, and diverse co-curricular activities. Adaptive leadership complements transformative leadership by highlighting leaders' capacity to respond flexibly to complex and evolving challenges. This perspective helps explain how principals tailor counselling, parental engagement, community outreach, and cultural

sensitization initiatives to the specific sociocultural realities of their schools. Together, transformative, inclusive, and adaptive leadership perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how principals design and implement interventions to address students' social and cultural background challenges. Together, these perspectives help explain how transformative principals may respond to deep-rooted social and cultural challenges while working within the institutional and community constraints of public secondary schools.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

In this study, the independent variables are the social and cultural challenges. The dependent variables consist of the principal-led interventions that address the social and cultural challenges. These interventions include social support mechanisms (such as school counselling programs, student mentorship initiatives, and parental engagement) and cultural support mechanisms (including the creation of an inclusive school climate, campaigns against harmful practices, and the encouragement of diverse extracurricular activities). This relationship is hypothesized to be moderated by the moderating variable, which is the school type (day schools versus boarding schools). While principals across both types of schools attempt to deploy similar support systems, the practical resources and settings differ significantly. Therefore, the school type acts as a moderating factor, shaping how students experience and benefit from these principal-led interventions.

2.3 Empirical Studies

2.3.1 Principals' Role in Addressing Social Background Challenges

Social background factors such as unstable family structures, limited parental education, weak home-school communication, and inadequate emotional support can affect students' participation in education and their ability to stay in school. Principals can respond to these challenges by strengthening relationships between schools and families, providing guidance and counselling services, and creating supportive environments that meet students' social and emotional needs.

Parental engagement is an important part of school-level intervention to social background challenges. Ogg and Anthony (2020) and Tan et al. (2020) found that effective communication and ongoing engagement between schools and families are linked to better student attendance and behaviour. Similarly, Ali et al. (2021) showed that sustained collaboration between parents and school principals provides academic and behavioral support for students. While these studies provide evidence of the potential value of parental involvement, most were conducted outside the Kenyan context and within educational systems characterized by different socioeconomic conditions, levels of parental literacy, and institutional support. Moreover, many relied on correlational designs, limiting the extent to which the relationships can be established.

However, the implementation of parental engagement is influenced by school context. Koivuhovi et al. (2025), in a longitudinal study conducted in Finland, reported positive associations between parental involvement and students' academic outcomes across socioeconomic groups. However, the Finnish educational context differs from that of Kenya in terms of educational financing, adult literacy, and institutional support. Such contextual differences highlight the need for evidence from settings where schools operate within more resource-constrained and socially diverse communities.

In Kenya, Kuteli et al. (2025) examined principals' communication strategies and parental involvement in public schools in Nairobi and found that the timing, clarity, and mode of communication influenced parental engagement. Although these studies converge on the importance of psychosocial support, they differ in their outcome measures, with some emphasizing academic and behavioral outcomes while

others focus on emotional well-being. Consequently, their findings highlight complementary rather than identical dimensions of student support.

Guidance and counselling constitute another important school-level intervention to social challenges affecting students. Adolescents may experience family-related, emotional, and psychosocial difficulties that interfere with their educational participation. Steen et al. (2021), in a meta-analysis of school-based counselling interventions, reported positive effects on student psychosocial well-being. In Kenya, Kay et al. (2019) found that school leadership support for guidance and counselling services was associated with improved student discipline and academic outcomes, while Wambua et al. (2024) highlighted the contribution of psychosocial support to students' self-esteem and academic motivation. However, the reviewed studies differ in their target populations, implementation models, and measures of effectiveness. Some focus on academic achievement, while others emphasize emotional or behavioral outcomes. Consequently, the transferability of findings to public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County requires careful consideration.

Taken together, the literature indicates that parental engagement and guidance and counselling provide important school-level interventions to social challenges. However, less is known about the social-support interventions implemented by principals in public-school contexts, how students perceive these interventions across different school settings, and the experiences and constraints principals encounter during implementation. This study addresses this gap by examining principal-led interventions for addressing students' social background challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County, using both students' perceptions and principals' accounts of the interventions and implementation challenges.

2.3.2 Principals' Role in Addressing Cultural Background Challenges

Cultural background can shape students' educational experiences through community expectations, gender norms, traditional practices, and beliefs about the roles of boys and girls. While cultural values can strengthen identity, social cohesion, and community belonging, some practices or expectations may conflict with continued schooling. In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, concerns such as early marriage, gender-based expectations, traditional initiation practices, and unequal domestic responsibilities have been identified as potential barriers to students' educational participation, particularly among girls.

School principals can respond to such challenges by promoting inclusive and culturally responsive school environments. Gooden et al. (2023), in examining culturally responsive leadership across diverse educational settings, found that principals who recognize students' cultural identities and incorporate cultural responsiveness into school leadership strengthen students' sense of belonging. These differences indicate that cultural challenges are multidimensional and may require different leadership responses depending on the nature of the challenge and the community context. However, the available studies largely address particular cultural barriers rather than examining the range of interventions implemented by principals within public secondary schools.

Gender-responsive school leadership also contributes to creating environments that support students who face gender-related barriers to education. Malloy et al. (2024) reported that gender-responsive leadership structures support the retention and educational progression of female students. Such approaches may include clear institutional expectations against discrimination, strengthened counselling and support systems, and engagement with parents and community stakeholders. Rizqi et al. (2025) similarly highlighted the potential role of principals in addressing child marriage through school-based awareness and community engagement initiatives.

In Kenya, schools have also been identified as important settings for addressing harmful cultural practices

through education and community engagement. Waigwa et al. (2018) found that school-based health education and awareness initiatives can contribute to changing knowledge and attitudes concerning harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM). In this context, principals organize awareness activities, support teachers in implementing relevant programs, and build links with parents, community leaders, and other stakeholders.

Leadership-supported school-based extracurricular activities can also promote social interaction and inclusion among students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Otieno (2026) reported that activities such as sports, music, and student clubs can support social integration and reduce divisions among students. These activities can therefore complement formal leadership interventions by creating spaces where students interact across social and cultural differences.

Overall, the literature indicates that inclusive leadership, gender-responsive practices, community sensitization, and extracurricular activities provide complementary approaches to addressing cultural background challenges. However, the existing studies provide limited evidence on how these interventions are combined and implemented by principals in public secondary schools, particularly in resource-constrained local settings. There is also limited evidence on how students perceive the availability and implementation of the interventions in day and boarding schools, as well as on the experiences and constraints principals face when dealing with culturally embedded challenges. This study addresses this gap by examining principal-led interventions for addressing students' cultural background challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design Creswell and Plano Clark (2023), in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to provide complementary perspectives on principal-led interventions addressing students' sociocultural challenges. The quantitative strand captured students' perceptions of interventions implemented by school principals, while the qualitative strand explored principals' accounts of the initiatives they had implemented and the challenges encountered during implementation. Findings from the two strands were triangulated during interpretation.

3.2 Target Population and Sample Size

The study was conducted in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-county, Nakuru County, Kenya. The Sub-county has schools with students of diverse sociocultural backgrounds, making it a suitable setting for examining school-level response to sociocultural challenges. The target population comprised 49 public secondary school principals and 3,587 Form Four students drawn from 49 public secondary schools. Principals were selected because of their responsibility for initiating and implementing school-level interventions, while Form Four students were considered appropriate respondents because they had spent sufficient time in their respective schools to experience or observe the interventions implemented by school principals. A census approach was used to include all the 49 school principals in public secondary schools within Rongai sub-county, while Form Four students were selected through proportionate and simple random sampling. The Yamane (1973) formula was used to determine the required student sample at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error:

Total population (N) = 3587 students (Total form four students in the 49 schools) Degree of accuracy (e) = 0.05 (5%)

n =

n = = 360 Students

The required student sample was therefore 360. Proportionate allocation was used to distribute the sample across the 49 public secondary schools according to their respective Form Four enrolments. The sample from each school was calculated using the formula:

$n_i = {}_i/N * n$

where n_i = sample size for school i; N_i = form four population in school i; N = total form four population in all selected schools; and n = total student sample size.

Within each school, students were chosen through simple random sampling using class registers as the sampling frame. This gave every eligible student an equal chance of being selected and ensured that representation matched the size of the Form Four population in each school. During data collection, 39 principals participated in interviews (79.6%), while 287 students completed the questionnaires (79.7%).

3.3 Research Instruments

Two instruments were used: a structured questionnaire for Form Four students and a semi-structured interview guide for school principals. The questionnaire collected quantitative data on students' perceptions of principal-led interventions aimed at addressing sociocultural background challenges, while the interviews provided qualitative data into the initiatives principals had implemented, as well as the experiences and constraints involved in implementation.

A structured questionnaire was administered to Form Four students. The items examined students' perceptions of principal-led initiatives for addressing sociocultural challenges, including counselling and mentorship, parental engagement, peer-support activities, inclusive school environments, responses to discrimination, and efforts to discourage retrogressive cultural practices. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The structured format made it possible to collect data consistently and compare students' perceptions across day and boarding schools. The questionnaires were self-administered under the supervision of the researcher.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the school principals. The interview guide included open-ended questions about the social and cultural challenges students faced, the interventions introduced by the principal, and the challenges principals encountered when implementing the interventions. This semi-structured approach allowed the researcher to ask follow-up and probing questions when needed, giving principals the opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words.

The validity of the data collection instruments was assessed through face and content validation (Elangovan & Sundaravel, 2021). Four experts participated in the validation process: two university lecturers with expertise in educational leadership and two practicing principals from public secondary schools in Nakuru County who were not included in the main study. The experts assessed the questionnaire and interview guide for clarity, relevance, organization, and alignment with the study objectives. Their feedback was incorporated into the instruments before the pilot study and data collection.

The reliability of the structured questionnaire was assessed through pilot testing. A pilot study was conducted in five public secondary schools in Mogotio Sub-county that were not included in the main study but had characteristics comparable to those of the study setting. Thirty-five Form Four students took part in the questionnaire pilot, while five school principals participated in piloting the interview

guide. The pilot study was conducted to check the clarity, relevance, comprehensiveness, and consistency of the instruments. Participants' feedback was then used to improve ambiguous items and to refine the wording and organization of the tools. Quantitative pilot data were analysed using Microsoft Excel to establish the internal consistency of the student questionnaire through Cronbach's alpha. The questionnaire yielded an overall reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.83$, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and indicating acceptable internal consistency. Any items that were unclear were reviewed before the final questionnaire was administered.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection began after obtaining ethical clearance from ISERC and NACOSTI, followed by permission from the Rongai Sub-county director of education. Informed consent was obtained from principals while student assent and institutional permission were obtained for participating students after an explanation of the study and participation requirements. Participation was entirely voluntary, whereby students and principals were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Principals' interviews were scheduled in advance and conducted face to face at the respective schools, lasting about 45 minutes each. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and supported by notes. Questionnaires were administered and students completed them independently under the researcher's supervision. To protect confidentiality, no personal identifying information was collected on the questionnaires or interview transcripts, and responses were coded using identification numbers rather than names. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked against the field notes to ensure completeness and accuracy. All data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher.

3.5 Data Processing and Analysis

Quantitative data were checked for completeness, coded, and entered into Microsoft Excel for cleaning and organization. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize students' perceptions of principal-led interventions. Inferential analysis was conducted using GraphPad Prism version 8.4. Welch's independent samples t-test was used to compare the mean perception scores of students in day and boarding schools. Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine associations between school type and selected principal-led sociocultural interventions. Statistical significance was assessed at $p < 0.05$. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately and integrated at the interpretation stage using a convergent mixed-methods approach. Quantitative findings from the student questionnaires were compared with qualitative themes derived from principal interviews through triangulation to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence. The integrated interpretation enabled the qualitative findings to explain and contextualize the quantitative results, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of principal-led interventions for addressing students' sociocultural challenges in public secondary schools.

4.0 Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Principal's role in Addressing social background challenges faced by students

This section assesses the role of school principals in addressing student social background challenges within public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County. Quantitative data from student questionnaires and qualitative insights from principal interviews are integrated below. Descriptive statistics summarizing student perceptions of these social interventions are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. *Student perceptions of the principal's role in addressing student social background challenges*

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
The principal invites my parents to school and involves them in my academics	60 (20.9%)	77 (26.8%)	58 (20.2%)	45 (15.7%)	47 (16.4%)
My parents/guardians are regularly informed about school matters (e.g., meetings).	94 (32.8%)	99 (34.5%)	49 (17.1%)	22 (7.7%)	23 (8.0%)
The principal has implemented a functional counselling and support system.	83 (28.9%)	79 (27.5%)	57 (19.9%)	32 (11.1%)	36 (12.5%)
The principal encourages students to seek help from teachers/counsellors.	111 (38.7%)	77 (26.8%)	48 (16.7%)	26 (9.1%)	25 (8.7%)
Students receive mentorship from NGOs/community groups through the school.	65 (22.6%)	89 (31.0%)	56 (19.5%)	35 (12.2%)	42 (14.6%)
The principal promotes peer support networks for students.	92 (32.1%)	84 (29.3%)	56 (19.5%)	37 (12.9%)	18 (6.3%)

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

The quantitative findings show that parental involvement is one of the most visible interventions employed by principals. Specifically, 47.7% of surveyed students (n = 137) agreed or strongly agreed that the principal often invites their parents to school and involves them in academics, and 67.3% (n = 193) reported that their parents or guardians are regularly informed about school meetings and other matters. In contrast, 32.1% and 15.7% of students, respectively, disagreed or strongly disagreed with these statements, while 20.2% and 17.1% were neutral. These results suggest that principals promote home-school collaboration to address student social difficulties, supporting the view of Zhang and Wu (2025) that proactive school leadership improves parental support. However, the implementation of parental engagement varies across schools.

Supporting these results, interview data showed that principals boosted parental involvement through occasional parent meetings, some home visits, and SMS communication. Principal 29 explained: "*We engage with the community to raise awareness about the importance of education and organize meetings that involve parents and community leaders*." However, not all principals experienced the same levels of parental cooperation. Principal 1 observed: "*There is lack of parental involvement in their children's learning which demotivates the students and diminishes their perception on the importance of education.*" Similarly, Principal 6 noted that parental involvement was much stronger in his boarding school because most parents were educated and actively participated in their children's education.

Taken together, both datasets show that principals promote home-school collaboration as a strategy for addressing students' social challenges. While the quantitative findings show that these efforts were visible to most students, the interview findings help explain why implementation remained inconsistent, with principals noting that parents' socioeconomic status, education levels, and willingness to participate contributed to differences in students' experiences across schools.

The findings also show that students viewed counselling and psychosocial support positively. The survey data revealed that 56.4% of students (n = 162) agreed or strongly agreed that the principal has implemented a functional counselling system, while 65.5% (n = 188) agreed that the principal encourages students to seek help from teachers or counsellors. Additionally, 53.6% (n = 154) indicated that students receive mentorship through community organizations or NGOs, 61.4% (n = 176) agreed that peer support is promoted, and 59.0% (n = 169) reported that counselling has improved their ability

to focus on academics.

Principals corroborated these findings by explaining that counselling programs were implemented through teacher mentors, peer-support groups, motivational talks, career guidance sessions and school foster-parent systems. Such approaches are consistent with literature emphasizing the role of psychosocial support in enhancing students' emotional resilience and academic engagement (Choirunissa et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2024). In some schools, teachers acted as school foster parents, while peer-support groups enabled students to assist one another both academically and socially. For instance, Principal 32 stated: "*We came up with student-led support groups where peers assist each other academically*." These findings indicate that principals provide multiple forms of social support. This aligns with Amaechi et al. (2026), who found that structured counselling, mentorship, and peer support, when supported by school leadership, is an important strategy for addressing students' social challenges and improving academic engagement. Principals also provide support by allocating resources and spaces, and integrating counselling sessions into the official school timetable (Ololo et al., 2024). However, principals also acknowledged implementation challenges. Principal 11 admitted: "*The biggest challenge is limited capitation to employ a school counsellor. We wish to have a school counsellor, but our budget is limited.*"

Triangulating both datasets indicates that counselling is an important intervention to address student social background challenges. However, while learners recognized these services, interview data revealed that resource-driven variations in counselling availability triggered neutral perceptions. These findings are consistent with Khamala et al. (2025) who reported that inadequate funding and shortages of trained personnel constrain effective guidance and counselling programs in Kenyan secondary schools.

To determine whether students from day and boarding schools differed significantly in their perceptions of principals' social background interventions, an independent-samples Welch's t-test was conducted (**Table 2**).

Table 2. *Independent-samples t-test comparing student perceptions of social interventions across school types*

Day School (Mean)	Boarding School (Mean)	t	df	p	η^2	Interpretation
3.596 ± 0.60	3.794 ± 0.34	-3.04	86.42	0.003	0.097	Medium effect

Day school (n = 247); Boarding school (n = 40); t is the test statistic; df is degrees of freedom; p is p-value; η^2 is Eta-squared.

The t-test results indicate a statistically significant difference between student groups, t(86.42) = -3.04, p = .003, with a medium effect size (η^2 = .097), as illustrated in **Table 2**. Boarding school students maintained significantly more favourable perceptions (M = 3.79, SD = 0.34) than day school students (M = 3.60, SD = 0.60).

Similarly, Chi-square tests of independence (**Table 3**) showed that students' perceptions regarding parental involvement in academic activities ($\chi^2(4, N = 287) = 10.73$, p = .030) and the existence of functional counselling systems ($\chi^2(4, N = 287) = 12.68$, p = .013) were significantly associated with school type, although the relationships were relatively weak (Cramer's V = 0.193 and 0.209, respectively).

Table 3. *Chi-square tests of independence between school type and selected principal initiatives*

Statement	χ^2	df	p	Cramer's V	Effect Size
Parents involved in academics	10.73	4	0.030	0.193	Small

Functional counselling and support systems	12.68	4	0.013	0.209	Small

χ^2 is the chi-square statistic; df is degrees of freedom; p is p-value; Cramer's V measures the strength of the association.

Although principals implement comparable social support initiatives, boarding school students perceive them more favourably than day school students. Interview data attributes this divergence to stronger parental support, stable environments, and higher institutional capacity in boarding schools, contrasted with the financial limits and weaker parental participation plaguing day schools.

Taken together, the survey results, t-test comparisons, and interview accounts show that principals play a role in addressing students' social challenges. While students perceived these interventions positively (M = 3.62, SD = 0.58), significant differences between school types indicate that implementation and visibility are inconsistent. The qualitative interviews explain these differences, highlighting barriers such as limited funding, a lack of trained counsellors, and varying levels of parental participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that principals employ counselling, parental engagement, mentorship, and peer-support initiatives as mechanisms for addressing students' social background challenges. From a transformative leadership perspective, these interventions reflect individualized consideration and inspirational motivation, as principals seek to respond to learners' needs while mobilizing parents and communities to support educational participation. The findings generally converge with previous studies on parental engagement and psychosocial support, although the implementation challenges reported by principals highlight contextual constraints that are less evident in the broader literature.

4.2 Principal's role in Addressing cultural background challenges faced by students

The second objective examined the role of school principals in addressing student cultural background challenges within Rongai Sub-County. Quantitative findings from the student survey are integrated below with qualitative insights from principals. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for student perceptions.

Table 4. *Student perceptions of the principal's role in addressing student cultural background challenges*

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
The principal promotes inclusivity and respects student diversity.	99 (34.5%)	82 (28.6%)	60 (20.9%)	30 (10.5%)	16 (5.6%)
My school is safe and supportive regardless of gender or culture.	94 (32.8%)	88 (30.7%)	55 (19.2%)	24 (8.4%)	26 (9.1%)
The principal addresses issues of discrimination or bullying.	90 (31.4%)	79 (27.5%)	57 (19.9%)	29 (10.1%)	32 (11.1%)

The school has programs that empower students and prevent early marriages.	109 (38.0%)	87 (30.3%)	48 (16.7%)	25 (8.7%)	18 (6.3%)
The principal campaigns against retrogressive practices like early marriage/FGM.	72 (25.1%)	70 (24.4%)	57 (19.9%)	43 (15.0%)	45 (15.7%)
The principal encourages co-curricular activities promoting diversity.	120 (41.8%)	77 (26.8%)	53 (18.5%)	20 (7.0%)	17 (5.9%)

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

The overall mean perception score (M = 3.75, SD = 0.56) indicates that students agree that school principals address cultural background challenges. Specifically, 63.1% of students (n = 181) agreed or strongly agreed that the principal promotes inclusivity and respects learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Similarly, 63.4% (n = 182) agreed that their school is safe and supportive for all students regardless of gender or culture, and 58.9% (n = 169) reported that the principal addresses issues of discrimination or bullying appropriately. These findings indicate that students perceive principals as effective in establishing inclusive environments.

These findings were supported by interviews with principals, who described their role as creating school environments where all learners were respected regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Most principals explained that they promoted tolerance, respect, and peaceful coexistence among students through school rules, assemblies, counselling, and conflict resolution. They added that maintaining an inclusive school climate helped reduce discrimination and strengthened students' belonging. These findings align with Mbire-Chigumba et al. (2024) and Zusho and Prieto (2020), who argue that culturally responsive leadership strengthen student belonging and academic performance.

Students also recognized interventions aimed at addressing retrogressive cultural practices. While 68.3% of students (n = 196) agreed or strongly agreed that the school has programs that empower students to remain in school and prevent early marriages, a comparatively smaller proportion of 49.5% (n = 142) agreed or strongly agreed that the principals campaign against retrogressive cultural practices such as early marriage and FGM, indicating relatively weaker perceptions regarding direct advocacy against harmful traditions.

Interview findings explained these responses by highlighting distinct cultural barriers. Principal 7 noted that traditional ceremonies and funerals disrupt attendance and behavior. Similarly, Principal 5 highlighted gendered expectations, stating, "*Traditional gender roles dictate that girls are primarily responsible for household chores. In some instances, they prioritize traditional roles over formal education.*" This resonates with a study by Malloy et al. (2024) who found that entrenched community beliefs undermine girls' schooling in Kenya. To counter this, schools implemented counselling, sensitization, and inclusive policies such as supporting expectant girls, aligning with Ireri et al. (2020), who linked inclusive environments to lower dropout rates. Furthermore, schools collaborated with community elders and parents to balance formal schooling with cultural traditions, reinforcing Omariba et al. (2025), who emphasized on community engagement for educational continuity.

While survey and interview results show that principals work to counter retrogressive cultural practices, interview data reveals that deeply rooted community beliefs still limit their success. This friction explains why students reported lower levels of agreement regarding the impact of direct anti-retrogressive campaigns. These results mirror a study by Kisilu (2025), which concluded that cultural norms persist as major obstacles to girls' schooling regardless of institutional interventions.

Students further noted that principals leveraged extracurricular programs to bolster both cultural

integration and academic engagement. Specifically, quantitative data indicates that these activities promote diversity within the schools, with 68.6% of students (n = 197) agreeing or strongly agreeing that leadership encourages such participation. Qualitative interviews mirrored this sentiment; principals explained that activities like sports, drama, music festivals, and cultural events offer spaces for students from diverse backgrounds to interact, exchange experiences, and build mutual respect. This aligns with findings by Shoaib et al. (2025), who demonstrated that extracurricular programs enhance intercultural understanding and create inclusive school environments where students feel valued regardless of their cultures.

An independent-samples Welch's t-test evaluated whether students' perceptions of principals' cultural background initiatives varied significantly by school type (**Table 5**).

Table 5. *Independent-samples t-test comparing student perceptions of cultural initiatives across school types*

Day School (Mean)	Boarding School (Mean)	t	df	p	η^2	Interpretation
3.730 ± 0.58	3.856 ± 0.41	-1.68	67.21	0.097	0.040	Small effect

Day school (n = 247); Boarding school (n = 40); t is the test statistic; df is degrees of freedom; p is p-value; η^2 is Eta-squared.

As shown in **Table 5**, the analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between day and boarding school respondents, t(67.21) = -1.68, p = .097. While boarding school students reported slightly higher perception scores (M = 3.86, SD = 0.41) than their day school peers (M = 3.73, SD = 0.58), this difference was negligible. The calculated effect size confirmed that school type had a minimal impact on student perceptions (η^2 = .040).

Chi-square tests of independence (**Table 6**) further confirmed no statistically significant association between school type and student perceptions of principals' promotion of inclusivity (χ^2 = 2.64, p = .621) or campaigns against retrogressive cultural practices (χ^2 = 5.16, p = .271).

Table 6. *Chi-square tests of independence between school type and selected cultural initiatives*

Statement	χ^2	df	p	Cramer's V	Effect Size
Inclusivity and respect for cultural diversity	2.64	4	0.621	0.096	Negligible
Campaigns against retrogressive cultural practices	5.16	4	0.271	0.134	Small

χ^2 is the chi-square statistic; df is degrees of freedom; p is p-value; Cramer's V measures the strength of the association.

These statistical patterns suggest that cultural interventions were deployed with relative consistency across both day and boarding institutions. This quantitative consistency was mirrored in the qualitative data, which showed that principals across school categories utilize comparable strategies, including counselling, cultural sensitization, inclusive leadership, and community outreach, irrespective of their school type. However, principal accounts caution that deep-seated community norms, gendered expectations, and traditional practices continue to restrict the efficacy of school-level interventions.

The findings indicate that principals promote inclusive school climates, cultural sensitization, community engagement, and co-curricular participation to address cultural background challenges. These interventions reflect idealized influence and intellectual stimulation by encouraging inclusive values and challenging norms that may hinder educational participation. While the results support previous research on culturally responsive leadership and gender-responsive practices, they also demonstrate that deeply

rooted community beliefs continue to limit the effectiveness of school-based interventions.

5.0 Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Summary

This study investigated principal-led interventions designed to address student sociocultural challenges in public secondary schools within Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya. Adopting a convergent mixed-methods design, the study analyzed structured survey feedback from 287 Form Four students and qualitative interview insights from 39 school principals.

Regarding the first objective, students reported favorable perceptions of principal-led interventions targeting social background challenges, with counselling, mentorship, and parental engagement being valued. An independent-samples t-test demonstrated a significant difference in perceptions between day and boarding schools, with boarding school students reporting higher satisfaction. This difference is linked to more consistent school resources and steadier parental support in boarding school contexts compared to day school settings.

For the second objective, student perceptions of principal-led interventions addressing cultural background challenges were also favorable, with students appreciating inclusive school climates and co-curricular programs. Unlike the social initiatives, there was no statistically significant difference in perceptions of cultural initiatives between day and boarding schools, indicating a relatively consistent deployment across school types. However, principals explained in interviews that deeply rooted traditional practices, gender roles, and community norms remain key hurdles that limit the ultimate success of school-based campaigns.

5.2 Conclusion

The empirical evidence demonstrates that public secondary school principals in Rongai Sub-county play a vital role in executing interventions to support students experiencing sociocultural difficulties. First, the school setting shapes the practical reach of the social support initiatives. The findings indicate that students in boarding schools reported more favorable perceptions of principal-led social interventions than students in day schools. However, these differences reflect students' perceptions of the interventions rather than direct evidence of their effectiveness. The results suggest that contextual factors such as parental involvement, school resources, and learning environments may influence how students experience and perceive principal-led support initiatives. Consequently, social mitigation cannot operate under a uniform, homogenous framework; its efficacy remains contingent upon external dynamics, notably active parental involvement and sustainable institutional funding.

Second, the findings suggest that school leadership, operating in isolation, cannot entirely dismantle deeply rooted cultural barriers. Principals can maintain inclusive and supportive school environments across both day and boarding schools. However, because traditional practices originate outside the school environment, these school-based interventions will have limited impact unless they are connected to collaborative partnerships involving parents, local elders, and administrative authorities.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Schools should establish structured partnerships with parents, community leaders, and local administrative authorities to support efforts aimed at addressing sociocultural challenges, particularly those associated with deeply rooted cultural beliefs and practices that schools are unable to address

independently.

ii. Principals should enhance the use of digital communication platforms, including text messaging and other school-parent communication systems, to address the inconsistent parental participation reported by principals and reflected in students' perceptions of parental engagement initiatives.

iii. The Ministry of Education should establish a policy framework to support the deployment of full-time, professional counselling staff in public secondary schools to ease the academic and counselling burden on regular teachers.(Awour et al., 2018)

5.4 Area for Further Research

A longitudinal study to track the long-term impacts of principal-led sociocultural interventions on student retention and academic performance over time.

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