



Sociocultural Practices and Senior School Transition: Pastoralist Community Perceptions in Turkana County, Kenya

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Abstract: *Pastoralist communities in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs), particularly in the Turkana County, have extremely low transition rates between junior and senior secondary schools despite significant national initiatives of expanding access to education in Kenya. This research attempted to explore the sociocultural activities that act as impediments to senior school transition in Turkana County. A phenomenological research design was used in the study. This study concentrated on the experiences of parents, elders, teachers, and students based on the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner. A total of 35 participants were purposely selected to take part in semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection, and the collected data were analyzed using the inductive reflexive thematic analysis. Among the main results, gender norms create certain exclusion channels early marriage and household duties in girls, and labour needs in boys. Nomadic migration disconnects school enrolment and encourages families to place greater emphasis on livestock herding than on school. Students and teachers were very critical of the applicability of senior secondary education, considering it to be urban-based and therefore not relevant to pastoralist life and indigenous knowledge. The research determines that the low transition rates are mainly because of the mismatch of culture and structure between mainstream schooling system and pastoralist lifestyle. It advocates culturally responsive policies such as flexible school year or mobile, community-based senior secondary models, interventions that are gender sensitive, integration of pastoralist knowledge within the curriculum as well as increases school-community relationships to foster trust and progress.*

Keywords: *Senior Secondary Transition; Sociocultural Practices, Pastoralist Communities, Nomadic Mobility, Gender Norms, Curriculum Relevance*

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1. Introduction

Education has continued to be a critical catalyst to personal empowerment and societal progress as it defines the economic prospects, civic participation as well as social

mobility in the world. The enrolment in primary school Kenya has increased drastically due to legislative policies such as the Free Primary Education policy and targeted county-based policies. Nevertheless, this great national growth has not spread equally across the nation, particularly within the pastoralist society that resides in the

Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) of Kenya (Assefa et al., 2025). New studies argue that the transition to senior (secondary) school is significantly lower among children in pastoralist families in such locations as Turkana County, and current disparities in enrolment, retention, and school completion are threatening more general developmental goals (Ekeno et al., 2024; Turkana County Government, 2015). To build balanced systems of education systems, one must be knowledgeable of the sociocultural forces behind these tendencies.

The rural to urban education system is hard to come by in Turkana County and other dry counties in Kenya. Sociocultural research on the pastoralist education in Kenya indicates that social norms interplay with remoteness, mobility, and ineffective infrastructure to limit the long-term use of schooling, particularly higher education (Ngugi, 2025). Such barriers strengthen the cycles of educational marginalization and manifest themselves as low completion rates, high school attendance, and limited promotion to senior secondary levels. Financial constraints and organizational challenges have made its uptake and effectiveness uneven, despite Kenya having put in place measures such as mobile schooling to curb the disparity between access.

The sociocultural practices have been at the heart of influencing the perceptions of education by pastoralist communities. The cultural values in the form of herding of livestock, divided labor along gender lines, and rites of passage are sometimes in rivalry with formal schooling and, thus, families tend to choose a short-term economic and cultural orientation rather than a long-term school experience (Assefa et al., 2025). In pastoralist settings, children labor is part and parcel of the household lives and they have often had to weigh the opportunity cost of attending school against the requirement she has to herd and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, the decision to transition to senior school has cultural and economic baggage.

In addition, Assefa et al. (2025) claim that conventional educational paradigms are inclined towards the representation of sedentary lifestyle and western pedagogical standards, which most pastoralists consider to be culturally alien to their traditional body of knowledge. The study on pastoral regions shows that formal education commonly ignores the practice of local knowing and living as well as creating a sense of alienation to pastoral teacher children and a lack of trust towards parents in the importance of further education. This cultural dissonance causes a lack of support of the community in senior school transition as it demonstrates education as something imposed on them instead of a pathway to culture inclusion.

Similar dynamics have been demonstrated in comparative research in East Africa, outside of Kenya. As an example, the Maasai pastoralists in Tanzania report an extreme cultural conflict between the formal education requirements and the traditional economic activities; labour requirements in the form of herding and domestic activities are in direct competition with the school education and involvement, making it challenging to transition into the more advanced stage of education (Pesambili & Novelli, 2021). According to these studies there is no specific sociocultural impact on educational participation of Kenyan pastoralists but rather a universal tendency of systemic mismatch between formal schooling and pastoralists lifestyles in the area.

In the world, the problem of educational exclusion in Indigenous and marginalized populations is tackled with a particular focus on culturally responsive pedagogy and communal-based learning paradigms. The study of culturally sustaining education methods in the Aboriginal schooling in Australia highlights the role of the introduction of local knowledge and culturally responsive educational programs in enhancing participation and retention, which may lead to advancement into higher schooling (Akram et al., 2024). Although these contexts vary, these types of comparative evidence highlight the possible advantages of redefining schooling to acknowledge the identity of learners and the values of their communities.

Nevertheless, it is based on these learnings that the existing policies in Kenya still promote standardized, inactive, models of schooling that fail to support the mobility, livelihoods and cultural inclination of pastoralist communities. The effectiveness of interventions such as feeder schools or mobile classrooms is constrained by this policy mismatch and it does not adequately address sociocultural perceptions which discourage long-term educational attendance and transition into senior schools. The current gaps in equity will probably remain unless the system is redesigned to incorporate cultural relevance and responsiveness in educational delivery. Considering this interwoven dynamic between the structural and sociocultural dynamics, this paper predicts the perceptions of pastoralist communities towards high school graduation in Turkana County. These insights can be used to guide policies and practices that do not just support access but meaningful progression through the educational system in culturally relevant ways that are relevant to the context.

Based on these issues, the study aimed at further elaborating on the impact of sociocultural practices on educational routes in pastoralist communities in the Turkana County. Precisely, the study tried to understand the perceptions of pastoralist people concerning the impact of sociocultural practices on the attainment of senior

secondary along with the schooling by the learners, anticipating the lived experience as well as communal significances that schools convey. It also attempted to investigate the effect of specific practices (nomadic mobility, gender norms, and early marriage) on family choices to remain in senior secondary school or pull out of the schooling process among learners.

1.2 Theoretical Underpinning

This analysis is based on the Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner according to which it is assumed that the development and life outcomes of a child are determined by multiple and interacting environments, starting with immediate environments, such as the family, and expanding to more distant cultural and policy environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). The latter theory identifies five interconnected systems, which are the microsystem (family, peers, and school), mesosystem (relations between microsystems), exosystem (indirect factors through community institutions), macrosystem (cultural values, norms, and beliefs), and chronosystem (temporal changes). Decision-making in education pastoralists is not made in a vacuum; instead, this is a product of these overlapping systems where children, families, and communities exist.

In this context, the sociocultural practices of pastoralist societies focus mainly on the macrosystem and exosystem level and, thus, determine what families consider as proper male and female roles in those societies, the importance of schooling and expectations regarding marriages, livestock herding, and mobility. Early marriage, gendered division of labor, and nomadic mobility are a few of the practices that are part of the strong cultural script in influencing the way families are putting value on schooling as compared to pastoral livelihoods. These beliefs are then converted into concrete decisions at microsystem level (like withdrawing learners to school to herd livestock or getting girls married) and they directly affect the likelihood of learners to acquire senior secondary education (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Therefore, the ecological perspective can be used to understand the way cultural norms are transformed to everyday activities that determine the schooling trajectory.

The theory also describes how the school systems interact with the sociocultural realities, which is the focus of this study. The mesosystem focuses on how school, family and community are related: the less school expectations are connected with the pastoralist life rhythms (seasonal migration or community service), the fewer chances of continuing participation and successful transition succeed. On the exosystem level, government policies include making of curriculum, boarding school systems and schemes to offer scholarships to people to affect household

decisions, which at times do not accommodate pastoralist ways of life fully.

2. Literature Review

In many parts of the world, it is well known that secondary school transition is an important exit point that defines future social and economic successes in life. A positive transition between lower and upper secondary schools has been closely linked with increased earnings and health conditions and social involvement in the lifetime (UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, the transition rates are very disproportional in regions and social classes. Systemic exclusion and social inequities mean that children in rural, conflict-affected and nomadic environments have most barriers to attending and completing secondary school (UNICEF, 2019). Such inequalities are especially notable in the pastoralist societies of Africa where sociocultural and livelihood forces come to play with structural impediments to disrupt the ease of transition.

Policies of expanding education in Kenya have contributed significantly to the increase in the enrollment in primary education, but the transition to senior secondary education is still highly skewed. According to the national statistics, the arid and semi-arid counties still experience low retention and transition rates in comparison with other regions, especially in the pastoralist communities (UNESCO, 2021). Researchers explain these trends by poverty, schools distance, and inadequate infrastructure, but researchers are more and more convinced that only structural explanations fail without knowledge of sociocultural contexts (Wario, 2019). This change is an indication that there is a need to conduct research on cultural norms, beliefs, and practices that influence the making of educational decisions in a given community like Turkana.

The sociocultural practices constitute an effective prism of school transition among pastoralists. Childhood in many pastoralist families becomes part of the livelihood, and children are expected to make a direct contribution to herding, household duties and livestock protection (Carr-Hill, 2016). Such labour need conflicts with school attendance and is highly limiting at adolescence, which is when senior secondary transition takes place. This culminates in the fact that choices regarding the continuation of children to greater levels of school-going do not reside on an automatic path and, in fact, they are one among a plethora of choices within household strategies of survival.

Gender roles play a great role in influencing the way pastoralist families value senior secondary education. It is reported that in a number of studies in East Africa, girls are

disproportionately dropped out of school at puberty as a result of domestic expectations, early marriage and sexuality and family honour concerns (UNICEF, 2021). Marriage payments and bridewealth systems among the nomadic people of Turkana and other regions also constitute an extra incentive of early marriage, and continued schooling of the girls seems costly and socially redundant (Wangui, 2018). Such gendered expectations literally put down girls in their transitional form to senior schooling despite the availability of schooling in a formal manner.

Boys in pastoralist societies are under other but just as strong pressure. They might not be so influenced by early marriage; however, in some areas, they are required to tend to herd livestock, take part in cattle raids, or seasonal grazing discontinues their education (Krätli, 2018). Adolescence is the time when boys are deemed fit to effectively serve the herd, and schooling is in many ways seen to be counterproductive to this duty. In turn, the failure in transition by boys is often associated with labour substitution as opposed to marriages practices which once again point to the role of livelihood organization in determining educational outcomes.

Moveability is among the most characteristics of pastoralist life and a major obstacle to long-term school education. The migration of pasture and water seasonally leads to frequent school disruptions, disengagement, or absenteeism (Carr-Hill, 2016). Although mobile schools and boarding schools have been implemented in various pastoral areas to alleviate this problem, it has been shown that the outcomes are mixed; the models fail to match the expectations of the culture or the preferences of the family (UNESCO, 2020). Mobility, hence, moves not just as a geographic barrier, but also a cultural practice that is firmly rooted in both identity and economic survival.

The dynamics are very similar, as shown by comparative research in Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Uganda. Cultural commitments concerning livestock and initiation procedures interfere with school attendance among Maasai groups in Tanzania, whereas communities tend to hold the view that formal education makes youths lose touch with cultural principles (Pesambili & Novelli, 2021). In the Afar and Somali regions of Ethiopia, pastoralist parents often dismiss schooling as of no use to pastoral lives, and especially senior secondary courses that focus on white collar jobs (Carr-Hill, 2016). These parallels on a regional scale support the view that low levels of transition among Kenyan pastoralists reflect general contradictions between formal education systems and pastoralist livelihoods.

A second stream of research emphasizes the cultural applicability of schooling as a transition predictor. Children lose interest or parents refuse to support them when the

curricula, language of instruction, and school culture seem to be adversarial to the pastoralist culture (Krätli, 2018). Conversely, programs integrating indigenous knowledge, flexible calendars, and local participation report improved retention and aspiration toward higher education levels (UNESCO, 2021). These findings suggest that transition failure is not inherent to pastoralist culture but to the incompatibility between mainstream schooling models and pastoralist realities.

3. Methodology

The research design of this qualitative study was phenomenological and aimed to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of the pastoralist community members concerning the sociocultural impacts on the transition to senior secondary school in Turkana County, Kenya. The target population included pastoralist parents, community elders, teachers, and learners in some selected sub-counties of Turkana with a particular interest on pastoral and semi-pastoral households directly involved in educational decision-making. Purposive sampling method was used to identify the respondents who have enough deep information about cultural practices and schooling routes.

The sample was composed of 35 individuals, 15 of whom were parents/guardians, 10 were community elders, 6 local school teachers and 4 former/current learners, which was diverse in terms of gender, age, and livelihoods. The semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data, which was recorded and transcribed word-to-word. Inductive reflexive thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly in order to get familiarity and initial open coding with NVivo software. The codes were reviewed severally and put together into categories, which resulted in the creation of a theme and sub-themes. The last themes were narrowed down to provide internal consistency and specify them with the study objectives and theoretical framework.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Nomadic Mobility and Transition to Senior Secondary School

The results of this research indicated that pastoralist sociocultural aspects play a dominant role in determining the transition of learners into senior secondary school in the

Turkana County. The respondents of all types noted that the choices of education are highly entrenched in pastoralist livelihood practices especially in nomadic mobility and herding of livestock. Such practices were constantly explained as the key to the survival of a household, and in many cases, further education gave way to it.

According to the parents and guardians, seasonal migration interferes with continuity of schooling particularly at the vital stage of transitioning to senior secondary education. One parent noted that

“Kiangazi ikifika, lazima tusonge na mifugo..”

This translates to;

“When the dry season comes, we must move with our animals...”

Another Parent noted;

“Mtoto akienda shule ya senior, haezi kusonga na sisi. Wanyama ndio maisha yetu, kwa hivyo lazima shule ingoje kidogo..”

This translates to;

“If a child goes to senior school, they cannot move with us. Livestock is our life, so sometimes education must wait...”

This depicts that mobility is not a choice but a survival necessity, and it is challenging to maintain school attendance. This was repeated by community elders who stressed that pastoralist life need flexibility that formal schooling could not offer. An elder explained that:

“Our culture teaches responsibility early. A boy who is in senior school cannot follow the animals or attend community duties...”

Teachers and headteachers confirmed that nomadic mobility frequently results in absenteeism and dropout at the point of transition. A teacher observed that:

“Learners disappear during migration seasons, and many never return when it is time to join senior secondary school...”

Similarly, a headteacher stated that:

“Mobility is the biggest challenge to transition. Even bright learners miss admission opportunities because families have moved.”

Learners themselves described the academic consequences of mobility, with one former learner explaining that;

“I missed school many times when we moved with the animals. When I came back, I had fallen behind, and it was hard to continue.”

Although the literature on nomadic mobility and livestock herding as impediments to schooling in pastoralist communities is widespread (Carr-Hill, 2016; Krätli, 2018; Ekeno et al., 2024), most studies assume a structural or policy-oriented approach (with a focus on access, infrastructure, and service provision). The current paper builds on this body of knowledge by predicting the community meanings and domestic rationalities that form the foundation of the educational decision-making. The stories of the participants show that mobility is not only a logistical challenge, but also a culturally entrenched survival mechanism that influences the costs and benefits of senior secondary education by the families.

4.2 Gender Norms on Learners' Transition to Senior Secondary School

The study revealed that gender norms significantly shape transition outcomes, producing distinct experiences for boys and girls. Participants consistently described gendered expectations that intensify during adolescence, influencing whether learners are supported to proceed to senior secondary school.

Parents and elders reported that girls are particularly affected by early marriage practices and domestic expectations. One parent explained that:

“Wasichana wakiwa wakubwa kidogo, watu wanaanza kusema aoleke.. Shule haina maana kwake tena

This translates to:

“For girls, once they reach puberty, people start talking about marriage. School becomes less important to her...”

An elder reinforced this perception, stating that,

“After initiation, a girl is seen as a woman. Sending her to school after that brings shame to the family.”

These narratives highlight how cultural definitions of adulthood reduce the social legitimacy of continued schooling for girls.

Teachers corroborated these accounts, noting that early marriage is a leading cause of dropout among female learners at the transition stage. A teacher remarked that:

“Most girls who do not transition to senior school leave because of early marriage, not because they failed academically.”

Female learners themselves described how gender expectations limited their educational opportunities. One learner shared that:

“My parents said senior school was not necessary because I would get married.”

For boys, the study found that transition challenges were more closely linked to labor demands rather than marriage. Parents emphasized that adolescent boys are expected to take on increased herding responsibilities. As one parent explained,

“Mvulana wa hiyo umri anapaswa kuchungu wanyama wetu. Kupeleka yeye shuleni inamaanisha kukosa usaidizi nyumbani..”

This translates to:

“A boy of that age is needed to protect livestock. Keeping him in senior school means losing help at home.”

Teachers similarly observed that:

“Boys leave school mainly to herd animals, especially during drought periods.”

These results prove that the formation of gender norms leads to parallel and different exclusionary avenues: girls are excluded in early marriage and domestic expectations, and boys in labor through herding responsibilities. In past research, the issue of gender inequality in education among pastoralist communities and, specifically, the adverse effect of early marriage on the education of girls has always been emphasized (Wangui, 2018; UNICEF, 2021). Nevertheless, literature focuses a lot on gender norms as fixed cultural barriers, with little discussion of the way in which gendered expectations work differently in the context of senior secondary transition in both boys and girls.

4.3 Perceived Senior Secondary Education Relevance in Pastoralist Life

All respondent groups had a high opinion about the perceived usefulness of senior secondary education to pastoralist life. The use of the schooling system in the pastoralist communities was severely doubted by many parents and elders who claimed that senior secondary curriculum does not correlate to pastoralist livelihood and traditional knowledge systems. One parent stated that;

“Ile inafunzwa huko haisaidii watoto kuchunga mali yao (Wanyama). Wanasoma vitu ya maofisi huko mijini, na hapana hapa..”

This translates to:

“What they teach does not help our children take care of animals. They learn things for offices in towns, not life here.”

An elder similarly observed that:

“Education is good, but it should not make children forget who they are. Some children come back from school and despise our traditions.”

Teachers acknowledged this perceived disconnect, noting that the rigid curriculum does not recognize pastoralist realities. A teacher explained that:

“The curriculum is the same everywhere. It does not consider mobility or pastoralist knowledge, so parents see little benefit in senior school.”

The headteachers also observed that lack of belief in curriculum was a disadvantage to the community supporting transition with one saying that:

“What will the senior school become when there are no jobs here?”

More ambivalent views were expressed by learners. Some of them had common community reservations, but some also considered education as a means to other futures. One learner remarked that:

“What we study does not make us survive here but I still need education to make another life.”

This tension is an indication of the simultaneous perception of schooling as both alienated to cultural difference as well as possible to change.

These results indicate that the attitude of doubt towards the relevance of the curriculum contributes greatly to the lack of support of further schooling to higher levels within the community. Significantly, the results show that there is an internal conflict in the pastoralist community, where students can both doubt the relevance of schooling and hope to achieve other destinies. The analyzed literature recognizes the cultural dissonance between formal education and pastoralism ways of life, frequently stating that the curriculum is viewed as irrelevant or urban (Krätli, 2018; Pesambili & Novelli, 2021; Assefa et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the study reveal that the sociocultural styles of pastoralists, gender orientations, relevance of formal education are the key factors that determine the transition of learners to senior secondary school in Turkana County. Nomadic movement and herding of livestock were established to be in direct conflict with schooling, especially in the adolescence period when the labor need is high. Gender norms also influence outcomes of transition where girls tend to drop out of schooling because of early marriage and domestic demands whereas boys are pulled out of school to play herding duties. Also, there is a common belief among a majority that senior secondary education is not well suited to pastoralism livelihoods, which undermines the community commitment to further education. These results suggest that the low rates of transition are closely related to the cultural and structural misfit and not the uninterestedness towards education.

Based on these results, the culturally responsive and flexible education policy should be taken to embrace pastoralist livelihoods. Adaptable school timetables, mobile/community-based senior secondary models, and gender-sensitive interventions to help deal with early marriage and disproportionate work expectations should be supported by the Ministry of Education and county authorities. Reform of the curriculum incorporating pastoralist knowledge and livelihood skills would make co-education at senior secondary school appear more relevant. Ensuring building of school community partnerships by involving parents, elders and learners is key towards enhancing trust, ownership and transition outcomes of pastoralist communities.

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