



Investigating the Influence of School-Based Student Retention Strategies in Public Secondary Schools in Mufundi District Council, Tanzania

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Abstract: *The study investigated the influence of retention strategies on students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufundi District Council. Specifically, the study examined the influence of the school feeding programme, and assessed the influence of the school guidance and counselling services on student retention. The study involved 624 participants, of which 366 were students, 248 teachers, and 10 heads of schools. The study employed a mixed-methods approach and a convergent parallel design. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires from students and teachers, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with heads of schools. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 27), whereas qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clark's approach. The findings revealed that both retention strategies significantly and positively influenced students' retention. Regression results showed that the school feeding programme had the strongest predictive influence on students' retention ($R^2 = 0.566$, $p < 0.001$), followed by school guidance and counselling services ($R^2 = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$). Qualitative results further highlighted that a sustainable feeding programme, along with effective guidance and counselling services, significantly enhanced attendance, engagement, and continuity in schooling. The study concludes that integrating school feeding programme and guidance and counselling services enhances students' retention in public secondary schools. The study recommends increased investment in school feeding programmes and strengthened professional development for counselling units to promote regular attendance, reduce dropout rates, and enhance students' retention in Mufundi District Council.*

Keywords: *Retention strategies, Students' retention, Feeding programme, Counselling services, Mufundi, Tanzania*

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1. Introduction

Student retention is a worldwide concern that affects both developed and developing countries, although the causes

and interventions differ significantly across regions (Altbach et al., 2019). Borgen and Borgen (2016) define

retention as the ability of students to remain in school until completing their education. High retention rates are crucial for economic development, social stability, and workforce readiness (UNESCO, 2021). Despite this, many students drop out of school due to factors such as poverty, child labour, early pregnancies, and strict school policies (Sarker, 2019). Developing nations are particularly affected, with approximately 263 million children and youth out of school globally, concentrated mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (World Bank, 2022; Srivastava & Agarwal, 2020). In contrast, wealthier countries have implemented financial aid, career guidance programs, and early intervention strategies to support retention. European countries generally report high retention rates due to structured educational policies, financial support, and vocational training opportunities (OECD, 2021). For instance, Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands boast retention rates above 90%, supported by comprehensive students' guidance and counselling services, personalized learning plans, and active parental involvement (European Commission, 2022). Germany's dual education system, combining classroom instruction with apprenticeships, has notably improved retention (Brunello & Rocco, 2017). Finland emphasizes holistic development over exam performance, using student-centered approaches and limited standardized testing to maintain high retention (Sahlberg, 2015). However, Southern European countries, including Spain, Portugal, and Italy, face dropout rates of 10–20% due to economic disparity, youth unemployment, and disengagement with formal schooling (OECD, 2022). Spain has responded with early intervention programs and enhanced vocational education, while the EU's Youth Guarantee initiative ensures young people enter education, employment, or training shortly after finishing school (European Commission, 2022).

In Asia, retention outcomes vary. South Korea and Japan maintain rates above 98% through strict regulations, long school days, and strong academic expectations (Lee & Shouse, 2011). Parental engagement, after-school tutoring, and intensive counselling further support student continuation in Japan (OECD, 2019). Singapore reduces dropout rates by emphasizing skills-based learning and continuous assessments (Ng, 2018). Conversely, emerging economies like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India experience high dropout rates, particularly among girls and low-income students. India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme, which offers free lunches, has improved nutrition and school attendance, thereby boosting retention (UNESCO, 2019). Similarly, Bangladesh's Secondary Education Stipend Programme provides financial incentives that encourage students to complete secondary education (World Bank, 2022). Despite these programs, challenges such as early marriage, poor infrastructure, and limited quality education persist. Africa continues to face significant retention

challenges, primarily due to poverty, early pregnancies, inadequate learning resources, and weak school infrastructure (UNICEF, 2021). Secondary school completion in Sub-Saharan Africa averages just 42% (World Bank, 2022). Countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo report dropout rates exceeding 30%, often linked to tuition fees, long travel distances, and household economic responsibilities (UNESCO, 2020). Some countries have responded with policies such as Free Day Secondary Education in Kenya, which increased enrolment but created challenges, including overcrowded classrooms and teacher shortages (UNESCO, 2021).

In Tanzania, student retention remains a pressing concern due to financial constraints, cultural norms, and policy limitations (United Republic of Tanzania - URT, 2016; URT, 2018). Existing reports indicate that school dropout rates have increased significantly, rising from 9.1% in 2019 to 27.5% in 2023, highlighting a persistent and growing challenge in student retention (Basic Education Statistics in Tanzania - BEST, 2025). In addressing these challenges, Tanzania has introduced various strategies to improve student retention, including the Fee-Free education policy, improving infrastructure, strengthen community engagement, integrating co-curricular and life skills, promoting safe and inclusive learning environment, introducing school counselling services, developing school feeding programme and building hostel/dormitories for student travelling long distance (URT, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Accordingly, Tanzania launched the National School Feeding Guideline (NSFG) in March 2021 to provide uniform guidance for schools, the community, and local government on the management and coordination of the school feeding programme (URT, 2021). The NSFG emphasizes the importance of school meals in improving nutrition and student attendance. Moreover, the Ministry of Education developed and issued the Education Circular No. 11 of 2002 that emphasized the introduction of school guidance and counselling services in secondary schools to help students overcome personal, social, and academic challenges, thereby enhancing their motivation to remain in school (Philemon & Mkulu, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Despite the government's implementation of various intervention strategies to retain students in school, the problem persists, therefore, this study investigated the extent to which school feeding programmes and counselling services influence students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Student retention is a critical measure of the effectiveness of an education system, influencing learners' academic progression, workforce readiness, and overall national

development. High retention rates ensure the production of skilled human capital, support economic stability, and contribute to long-term poverty reduction (UNESCO, 2021). In response, the Government of Tanzania has implemented a variety of retention strategies, including the Fee-Free Basic Education programme, school feeding programme, improvements in school infrastructure, introduction of school guidance and counselling service, and active community engagement in education (URT, 2014; World Bank, 2022; BEST, 2025; Philemon & Mkulu, 2020). Notwithstanding these interventions, student retention in Mufindi District Council remains a significant concern. Reports indicate that retention rates increased modestly from 75% in 2021 to 81% in 2024; however, despite this improvement, a substantial proportion of students continue to leave school before completing their education (BEST, 2025). Moreover, although national retention initiatives have been assessed, limited empirical evidence exists on the direct impact of specific interventions such as school feeding programmes and school guidance and counselling services on students' retention in public secondary schools within Mufindi District Council, a gap this study seeks to fill. To address this gap, the study examined the influence of the school feeding programmes and school guidance counselling services on student retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council.

1.2 Research Objectives/Questions

1.2.1 Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of school feeding programme on students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council
2. To assess the influence of guidance and counselling services on students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council

1.2.2 Research Questions

What is the influence of school feeding programmes on students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council?

What is the influence of guidance and counselling services on student retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Resource-Based Theory (RBT), developed by Barney (1991). The theory posits that an organization's long-term success depends on how effectively it manages and utilizes its internal resources, rather than relying solely on external factors. In the education sector, schools are organizations that require both tangible and intangible resources, such as infrastructure, trained personnel, support services, and educational programmes, to deliver quality education and retain students. According to the RBT, simply possessing resources is not sufficient; it is the strategic use and integration of these resources within the school environment that create conditions conducive to academic success and reduce student dropout rates. In the context of this study, RBT provides a useful framework for analyzing how school-based retention strategies function as internal resources that can influence students' retention (Mailani et al., 2024). School feeding programmes act as tangible resources that improve students' concentration, reduce absenteeism, and enhance classroom participation, thereby supporting continued student retention. Similarly, guidance and counselling services function as vital resources that support students' psychological and emotional well-being, helping them navigate academics and personal challenges that might otherwise lead to withdrawal from school. The relevance of RBT to this study lies in its focus on the strategic management of internal resources to achieve organizational objectives, in this case, improved students' retention. By examining how feeding programmes and guidance and counselling services are utilized within public secondary schools, the theory aligns closely with the study's specific objectives. It also highlights potential gaps in resource management that may hinder student persistence, offering insights into how schools can optimize their support systems to foster a learning environment conducive to students' retention. While other frameworks, such as Human Capital Theory or Social Support Theory, could provide additional perspectives, RBT is particularly appropriate for this study because it emphasizes the strategic use of school-based interventions as resources. This directly supports the investigation of internal school-based strategies as key determinants of students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council.

2.2 Empirical Review

School Feeding Programme and Students' Retention

Mketo et al. (2022) examined the influence of school feeding programmes (SFPs) on students' academic performance in Shinyanga Municipality. The study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection through questionnaires and interviews. Simple random and purposive sampling techniques were used to select participants. Descriptive statistics and inferential analysis, including regression, were applied to examine changes in academic performance before and after the introduction of SFPs. Findings showed that school feeding programmes led to improved class attendance and participation. More importantly, students' examination scores increased significantly following the implementation of the SFPs. Regression analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between school feeding programmes and academic performance (p -value = 0.000), indicating a statistically significant linear association. The study explicitly explored the role of school feeding programmes on students' performance, while the current study examines the influence of school feeding programmes on students' retention. Ibrahim et al. (2023) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of the primary School Feeding Programme (SFP) on pupils' enrolment, retention, and academic performance in Katsina State, Nigeria. The study used a survey research design and a multistage sampling technique to select 542 respondents. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed through both descriptive and inferential statistics, including One-Way ANOVA and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC). The findings revealed a notable improvement in school enrolment and retention as a result of the SFP. Furthermore, Acquah (2023) investigated the impact of the Ghana School Feeding Programmes (GSFP) on pupils' enrolment, attendance, and retention in the Sekyere South District of the Ashanti Region. The study employed a descriptive survey design grounded in quantitative methods, and it was underpinned by Change Theory. A total of 265 respondents were selected using mixed sampling techniques, while additional secondary data were sourced from the District Education Office. The findings revealed a significant increase in enrolment, attendance, and retention in schools participating in the GSFP from 2008 to 2022. In contrast to the current study, the two studies (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Acquah, 2023) were based on primary schools in Nigeria and Ghana, respectively, leaving a gap that the current study seeks to fill by conducting a study on public secondary schools in Mufundi, Tanzania.

Guidance and Counseling Services and Students' Retention

Ndanu et al. (2022) investigated the effectiveness of guidance and counseling programmes in enhancing student retention in public day secondary schools in Nyahururu Sub-County, Laikipia County, Kenya. The study was grounded in the Person-Centered Theory and Retention Theory, and it employed an ex-post facto research design. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews, a total sample of 341 participants, including 174 boys, 155 girls, 6 school counselors, and 6 principals. The findings demonstrated that effective guidance and counseling programmes significantly contributed to enhancing student retention. Contextually, the study was carried out in Nyahururu Sub-County, Kenya, and its focus was on the effectiveness of counselling services, the current study that seeks to examine the influence of the same on students' retention. Adikwu et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine the role of supervision as a strategy for student retention and its implications for counseling in secondary schools. The study adopted a descriptive survey design and involved a population of teachers in Benue State, Nigeria, comprising 2,608 males and 1,123 females. Using the Yaro-Yamane formula, a sample of 347 respondents was drawn and a structured 14-item questionnaire was used for data collection. The findings revealed that effective supervision relies heavily on the availability and deployment of both human and material resources. Moreover, Mbegalo (2024) conducted a case study to explore strategies for enhancing service satisfaction and student retention in private secondary schools in Iringa Municipality, Tanzania. A total of 47 participants were involved in the study, including students, parents, school managers, head teachers, and other education stakeholders. The study utilized interviews, observations, and documentary reviews to collect qualitative data, which were then analyzed through content analysis. Findings revealed low levels of service satisfaction among students and other school clients despite the presence of some institutional strategies. Many schools failed to meet the expectations of students and parents, leading to a heightened risk of student withdrawal and reduced retention. Contrary to the current study, this study focused on only public secondary schools, leaving behind the public sector, and also it was on service delivery and customer satisfaction, which may not necessarily include counseling and guidance as one of the strategies to retain students in schools.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study establishes a relationship between school-based retention strategies and students' retention in public secondary schools. It

postulates that key interventions such as school feeding programmes and guidance and counselling services play a significant role in influencing students' decisions to remain in school. These strategies are critical in addressing students' physical, emotional, and academic needs. When effectively implemented, they are expected to reduce

absenteeism, improve regular attendance, and encourage students overall engagement with school, consequently leading to increased students' retention and completion rates. The framework therefore provides a basis for understanding how targeted school-based interventions can promote persistence and minimize dropout rates.

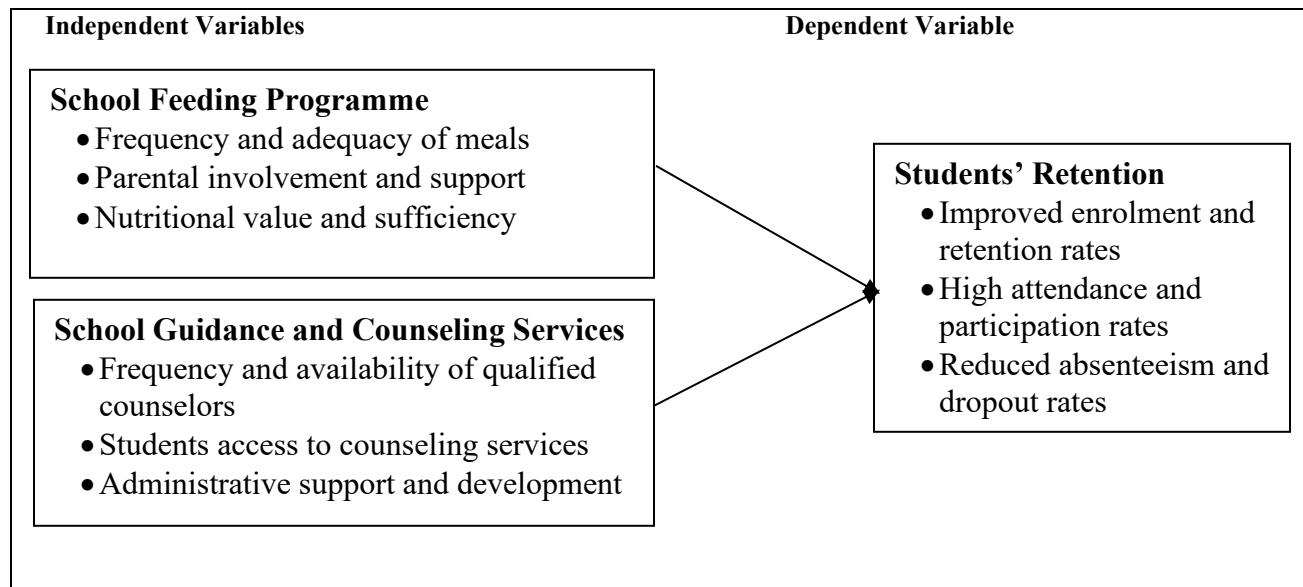


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques and applied a convergent parallel design. Quantitative methods were used to measure the extent to which school feeding programmes and school guidance and counselling services influenced students' retention levels. The integration of both methods facilitated triangulation, thereby improving the validity, reliability, and richness of the findings. This approach provided a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how different school-based strategies contributed to student persistence and reduced dropout (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The convergent parallel design enabled the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously and analyze them separately before integrating the findings during interpretation (Bhana, 2024). Through merging the two data strands, the study generated comprehensive insights into the influence of school-based retention

strategies on students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufundi District Council.

3.2 Study Area

The study was carried out in Mufindi District Council, located in the Iringa Region of Tanzania. Mufindi District was purposefully selected because of its documented challenges with student retention in public secondary schools, coupled with its diverse socio-economic and geographical characteristics. The district encompasses both rural and semi-urban areas, which present varying educational needs, infrastructure conditions, and social context factors that are essential for understanding the influence of students' retention strategies, such as the school feeding programme and guidance and counselling services. Mufindi district also has several public secondary schools implementing different forms of students' retention initiatives, such as fee-free education policy and a re-enrolment window that allows girls to return to public schools to continue their education within two years of giving birth, among others, making it an ideal context for

investigating school-based intervention strategies on students' retention in public secondary schools.

3.3 Population and Sample Size

The targeted population comprised stakeholders directly involved in or affected by student retention strategies within the Mufindi District Council. Specifically, the population included 41 heads of schools, 739 teachers, and 19915 students, making a total population of 20695 from

all 41 public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council. To obtain a sample size for teachers and students, the study adopted Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table of sample size determination and purposive sampling for heads of schools. Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for sample size determination suggested a sample of 254 teachers and 377 students, while purposive sampling was used to select 10 heads of schools that were directly involved in the implementation of students' retention strategies, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Population and Sample Size Distribution

Category	Population	Sample Size	Sample Determination
Teachers	739	254	Krejcie and Morgan (1970)
Students	19915	377	Krejcie and Morgan (1970)
Heads of School	41	10	Purposive
Total	20695	641	

Source: Field Data (2026)

3.4 Sampling Strategies

Stratified random sampling was applied to select teachers and students across public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council. The population was first divided into strata based on characteristics such as school location (urban or rural) and school retention performance levels (high or low). Within each stratum, random sampling was conducted to ensure that all sub-groups were proportionately represented. This technique improved representativeness and reduced sampling bias, ensuring that perspectives from schools facing varying challenges were adequately captured. Purposive sampling was used to select heads of schools who were directly involved in planning, managing, and implementing student retention strategies within Mufindi District Council. These participants were chosen purposively due to their specific roles, experience, and knowledge in school leadership and students' welfare. The method ensured the collection of in-depth and relevant information from key stakeholders who influenced decisions related to the school feeding programme and school guidance and counselling interventions.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

The study employed questionnaires, interviews, and document reviews to collect data from study participants. The data collection methods employed were consistent with the mixed-methods research design and ensured the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data that

together provided a comprehensive understanding of the study problem (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Kumar, 2022). Structured questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from teachers and students, while semi-structured

interviews were used to collect qualitative data and gain in-depth insights into how retention strategies were planned and executed within schools. Questionnaires were preferred because they allowed the collection of standardized and quantifiable information from a large number of respondents within a short time, while interviews were selected for their flexibility and their ability to capture rich, detailed information that could not emerge through questionnaires (Patton, 2022; Tracy, 2020).

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires from teachers and students were analyzed using descriptive statistics that included frequencies, percentages, and means to summarize the characteristics of respondents and the distribution of responses using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 27). Additionally, inferential statistical techniques such as Pearson correlation and regression analysis were employed to assess the strength, direction, and significance of relationships between independent variables and the dependent variable. Qualitative data obtained from interviews with heads of schools were analyzed thematically, following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2022). This involved identifying recurring patterns and themes to generate deeper contextual insights into the

influence of school-based students' retention strategies. The results from quantitative and qualitative analysis were integrated during interpretation to triangulate findings, enhancing the reliability and robustness of conclusions about the influence of school-based retention strategies in reducing dropout rates and improving students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to ethical principles to protect participants and maintain research integrity. Ethical clearance was sought from the Research and Publication Committee of the Institute of Accountancy, Arusha, and relevant local government authorities in the study area to ensure compliance with institutional and national research ethics guidelines. Participants were fully informed about the research purpose, procedures, and their voluntary right to participate or withdraw at any point without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and

anonymity was maintained by safeguarding personal identifiers. The researcher ensured the confidentiality of the information obtained from all participants and took deliberate measures to prevent any physical or psychological harm to participants throughout the study period.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (teachers only)

Most respondents were male (73.8%), the dominant age group was 30 but below 40 years (51.6%), with teaching experience of 5 but below 10 years (40.8%), and having a bachelor's degree (68.5%) as the highest level of education, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Teachers

Description	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender of respondents	Male	183	73.8
	Female	65	26.2
Age group in years of the respondents	Up to 30	45	18.2
	30 but below 40	128	51.6
	40 and above	75	30.2
Teaching experience in years of the respondents	Up to 5	59	23.8
	5 but below 10	101	40.8
	10 and above	88	35.4

Source: Field Data (2026)

Influence of School Feeding Programme on Students' Retention

Tables 3 and 4 present teachers and students' perceptions on the influence of the school feeding programme on students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement using a five-point Likert scale, where 1

= Strongly Disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = Neutral (N), 4 = Agree (A), and 5 = Strongly Agree (SA), on whether school feeding program improve regular attendance, reduce dropout rates and increase the likelihood of students remaining in school. The frequencies, mean scores, and overall ratings provide a summary of teachers' perceptions of the school feeding programme's influence on students' retention.

Table 3: Teachers' Frequency Distribution on School Feeding Programme (N = 248)

SN	Statement	SD Count (%)	D Count (%)	N Count (%)	A Count (%)	SA Count (%)	Mean Count	Overall Rating
1	The school feeding programme improves students' regular attendance and participation				28 (11.3)	220 (88.7)	4.89	Strongly Agree
2	Students who take part in the school feeding programme are more likely to remain in school throughout		4 (1.6)		46 (18.5)	198 (79.8)	4.77	Strongly Agree
3	Providing meals in schools has a positive impact on students' academic focus and progression	21 (8.5)	4 (1.6)	4 (1.6)	66 (26.6)	153 (61.7)	4.31	Agree
4	The school feeding programme helps reduce dropout rates		4 (1.6)		66 (26.6)	178 (71.8)	4.69	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean							4.67	Strongly Agree

The descriptive statistics in Table 3 indicate that teachers strongly perceived the school feeding programme as an effective strategy for improving student retention. All respondents (100%) agreed that the feeding programme improves students' regular attendance and participation. The overall mean of 4.89 suggests that teachers strongly agreed that providing meals in schools acts as a motivation for students' regular attendance and participation in various school activities. Similarly, on whether students who take part in the school feeding programme are more likely to remain in schools, the result indicates that most teachers (98.4%) agreed, as opposed to (1.6%) who disagreed. An overall mean of 4.77 indicates that accommodating all students and providing them with meals significantly

increases the likelihood of their retention in school. Additionally, on whether providing meals in schools has a positive impact on students' academic focus and progression, results show that the majority (88.3%) agreed, while (10.1%) disagreed, and (1.6%) were undecided. The overall mean of 4.31 suggests that while the majority of teachers perceived that meals were impactful on students' retention, a minority felt otherwise. Regarding whether the school feeding programme helps reduce dropout rates among students, the result revealed that the majority (98.4%) agreed, while (1.6%) disagreed. The overall mean score of 4.69 suggests that the school feeding programme is a crucial component of students' retention as it plays a significant role in reducing dropout rates.

Table 4: Students' Frequency Distribution on School Feeding Programme (N = 366)

SN	Statement	SD Count (%)	D Count (%)	N Count (%)	A Count (%)	SA Count (%)	Mean Count	Overall Rating
1	The school feeding programme makes me attend school regularly		3 (0.8)	15 (4.1)	276 (75.4)	72 (19.7)	4.14	Agree
2	I am more likely to remain in school as long as there are meals provided		9 (2.5)	12 (3.3)	237 (64.8)	108 (29.5)	4.21	Agree
3	Having meals at school improves my concentration during lessons	3 (0.8)	6 (3.3)	12 (3.3)	275 (75.1)	70 (19.1)	4.10	Agree
4	Providing meals in schools motivates students from low-income families to continue their education	3 (0.8)	15 (4.1)	13 (3.6)	245 (66.9)	90 (24.6)	4.11	Agree
Overall Mean							4.14	Agree

The findings in Table 4 on whether the school feeding programme makes them attend school regularly, revealed

that the majority (95.1%) agreed, whereas (0.8%) disagreed, and (4.1%) were undecided. The mean score of

4.14 suggests that students perceived the school feeding programme as an integral part of their regular school attendance. Regarding whether students were more likely to remain in school as long as meals were provided, the majority (94.2%) agreed, whereas (2.5%) and (3.3%) were undecided. The mean score of 4.21 indicates that access to nutritious meals at school contributes significantly to retention by alleviating hunger-related barriers that may lead to dropout. Likewise, on whether having meals at school improves their concentration during lessons and other extra-curricular activities, results show that (93.1%) of the respondents agreed, whereas (3.6%) disagreed and (3.3%) were undecided. The mean score of 4.10 suggests that well-fed students are more active and engaged in class activities. The mean score of 4.10 supports this conclusion, indicating that the school feeding programme enhances students' concentration and academic engagement. Similarly, on whether providing meals in schools motivates students from low-income families to continue their education, the majority (91.5%) agreed, whereas (4.9%) disagreed and (3.6%) were undecided. The mean score of 4.11 indicates that school feeding programmes play a significant role in mitigating economic challenges, thereby supporting vulnerable students to remain in school, promoting equity, and reducing dropout rates.

The descriptive results presented in Tables 3 and 4 were further corroborated with heads of schools across the study area. The findings from the key informants revealed that schools rely heavily on parents to provide food items and/or financial contributions, which are subsequently managed by school committees, as one informant noted:

The programme has since been implemented in collaboration with school boards, parents, and village elders, and depends heavily on contributions from parents. Since its inception, the school feeding programme has significantly increased students' attendance and participation, leading to a notable reduction in absenteeism and

dropouts in our schools. (Head of School C, February, 2026).

In an interview with heads of schools, they pointed out clearly that daily school meals motivated students, improved punctuality, and yielded positive outcomes, as one observed:

There have been significant improvements in students' regular attendance, accompanied by a substantial decline in absenteeism. This outcome is attributed to the school feeding initiative, in which meals provided by parents and managed by the school committee serve as a strong incentive for students' continued attendance. (Head of School E, February, 2026).

The qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative evidence that the school feeding initiative has a substantial impact on improving student attendance and retention. Consistent provision of meals encourages learners to remain in school, minimizes absenteeism, and reduces dropout rates.

Guidance and Counselling Services on Student Retention

The results in Tables 5 and 6 present teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the influence of guidance and counselling services on student retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council. Respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which school guidance and counselling services help students solve problems, provide motivation, address academic and personal needs, and reduce absenteeism and dropout rates. The frequencies, mean scores, and overall ratings provide a summary of respondents' perceptions regarding the influence of school guidance and counselling services on students' retention.

Table 5: Teachers' Frequency Distribution on Counselling Services (N = 248)

SN	Statement	SD Count (%)	D Count (%)	N Count (%)	A Count (%)	SA Count (%)	Mean Count	Overall Rating
1	Guidance and Counselling sessions help students resolve problems that may lead to school dropout	54 (21.8)	36 (14.5)	21 (8.5)	36 (14.5)	101 (40.7)	3.68	Agree
2	Students are motivated to continue schooling due to the support they receive from school counsellors	93 (37.5)	24 (9.7)	24 (9.7)	3 (1.2)	104 (41.9)	3.56	Agree
3	School guidance and counselling services play an effective role in addressing students' academic and personal needs	136 (54.8)	31 (12.5)	31 (12.5)	9 (3.6)	41 (16.5)	2.60	Undecided
4	School guidance and counselling services have helped reduce absenteeism and dropout rates in schools	93 (37.5)	15 (6.0)	15 (6.0)	15 (6.0)	110 (44.4)	3.69	Agree
Overall Mean							3.38	Agree

The results in Table 5 show that respondents generally acknowledged the importance of school guidance and counselling services; however, perceptions of their impact vary across schools. In that regard, about (55.2%) of the respondents agreed, whereas (36.3%) disagrees, and (8.5%) were undecided on whether guidance and counselling sessions help students resolve problems that may lead to school dropout. The mean score of 3.68 suggests that respondents perceived that school guidance and counselling influenced students' retention. At the same time, a minority felt that there was little or no direct effect of school counselling on students' retention. Regarding whether students are motivated to continue schooling due to the support they receive from school chancellors, the majority (47.2%) disagreed, whereas (43.1%) agreed, and (9.7%) were undecided. The mean score of 3.56 suggests that respondents felt that counselling services have a moderate impact on motivating students to remain in

school. In terms of whether counselling services play an effective role in addressing students' academic and personal needs, the majority (67.4%) disagreed, whereas (20.1%) agreed, and (12.5%) were undecided. The mean score of 2.60 indicates that many teachers perceive the counselling service as inadequate in meeting students' academic and personal needs. Conversely, (50.4%) of teachers agreed that counselling helps reduce absenteeism and the desire to leave school, whereas (43.5%) disagreed, and (6.1%) were undecided. The mean score of 3.69 suggests a positive effect on retention. Therefore, the overall average mean score of 3.38 indicates that teachers view counselling as a moderately effective retention strategy. These findings highlight that while counselling contributes to student engagement and reduces dropout risk, there is a need to improve the quality, consistency, and responsiveness of these services to fully support students' academic and personal challenges.

Table 6: Students' Frequency Distribution on Guidance and Counselling Services (N = 366)

SN	Statement	SD Count (%)	D Count (%)	N Count (%)	A Count (%)	SA Count (%)	Mean Count	Overall Rating
1	Guidance and counselling services assist me in addressing challenges that could otherwise cause me to drop out of school	3 (0.8)	36 (9.8)	21 (5.7)	252 (68.9)	54 (14.8)	3.88	Agree
2	I feel motivated to continue schooling because of the support I receive from my school counsellors.	3 (0.8)	3 (0.8)	24 (6.6)	243 (66.4)	93 (25.4)	4.13	Agree
3	Guidance counselling services effectively address my academic and personal needs		9 (2.5)	31 (8.5)	190 (51.9)	136 (37.2)	4.24	Agree
4	Guidance and counselling services have helped me reduce my absenteeism and desire to leave school.		15 (4.1)	15 (4.1)	243 (66.4)	93 (25.4)	4.13	Agree
Overall Mean							4.10	Agree

The results in Table 6 show that most students (83.7%) agreed that counselling sessions help them solve problems that might cause them to drop out of school, whereas (10.6%) disagreed, and (5.7%) were undecided. The mean score of 3.88 indicates that students viewed counselling interventions as playing a crucial role in addressing students' dropout-related issues. Moreover, the majority of respondents (91.8%) agreed that they felt motivated to continue schooling because of the support they received from school counsellors, whereas (1.6%) disagreed, and (6.6%) were undecided. The mean score of 4.13 demonstrates that school counselling services have a strong motivational impact, encouraging persistence and enhancing learners' emotional stability. Likewise, on whether counselling services effectively address their academic and personal needs, the majority (89%) agreed, whereas (2.5%) disagreed, and (8.5%) were undecided. Findings highlight the multidimensional role of counselling in supporting both academic and personal well-being. The mean of 4.24 further indicates strong satisfaction with the relevance and effectiveness of school counselling services. Additionally, (91.8%) agreed that counselling has helped reduce absenteeism and the desire to leave school, whereas (4.1%) disagreed, and (4.1%) were undecided. The mean of 4.13 supports these views, suggesting that counselling contributes significantly to consistent school attendance. An overall mean score of 4.10 indicates that counselling services are effective in

enhancing student motivation, addressing both academic and personal concerns, and promoting retention in public secondary schools in the study area.

The quantitative results presented in Tables 5 and 6 were supported by qualitative findings obtained through interviews with heads of selected public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council. Participants were asked to describe how guidance and counselling services were organized in their schools and moreover, how they helped students deal with their academic and/or social challenges. The findings revealed that most schools had established guidance and counselling units managed by both male and female teachers to ensure gender-sensitive support. The presence of these services were perceived to create a safe space for learners to express their challenges freely, thereby reducing truancy and improving school retention as one of the interviewee observed:

Guidance and counselling services are delivered by teachers appointed by their heads of schools. Typically, both a male and a female teacher are assigned, which helps students feel more comfortable sharing their academic and/ or personal challenges. This arrangement has enabled students received timely and effective

support for both academic and social issues affecting their well-being (Head of School A, February, 2026).

Similarly, heads of schools explained that guidance and counselling services were structured to include both group and individual sessions, ensuring that learners at different levels of schooling and needs received support whenever they needed. Participants observed that guidance and counselling approaches focused on building trust and maintaining confidentiality between counsellors and learners. They also reported that, in some instances, students from hostile home environments were relocated to school hostels for protection and support as one asserted:

Guidance and counselling services are conducted in a designated office, and counsellors are selected by students themselves to ensure protection, openness, and trust. The services have proven highly beneficial, as some challenges originating from home are effectively addressed within the school setting. In more severe cases,

school management may reallocate affected students to the hostel at no cost, protecting them from risky environments that could contribute to dropout (Head of School B, February, 2026).

Therefore, these findings demonstrate that counselling services play a crucial role in enhancing students' emotional well-being, addressing academic and personal challenges, and ultimately promoting school retention. However, heads of schools were concerned that some underlying challenges that affect this arrangement, which included the reluctance of students and/ or parents to open up to counselors and cooperate, limited facilities, stigma associated with one's challenges, and a lack of professional training. Addressing these challenges could greatly enhance the role of the counselling service in supporting students' retention and overall well-being.

Tables 7 through 9 present regression analysis indicating the degree to which the predictive variables (school feeding programme and school guidance and counselling services) predict the independent variable (students' retention) in public secondary schools in Mufundi District Council, as illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7: Regression Analysis Results on Students' Retention

Predictor Variable	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F-Value	β (Beta)	t-Value	Sig.
School Feeding Programme	.752	.566	.563	.312	324.4	.752	18.0	.000
Guidance and counselling services	.642	.412	.407	.356	175.5	.642	13.2	.000

The regression results presented in Table 7 show that both predictor variables (school feeding programme and guidance and counselling services) are positively and significantly related to student retention ($p < 0.001$). For the school feeding programme, the R^2 value of 0.566 suggests that 56.6% of the variation in students' retention is explained by the school feeding programme. The standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.752$) signifies a strong and positive effect, implying that as the quality and consistency of school meals improve, student attendance and persistence also increase. This finding underscores the role of nutrition in sustaining concentration, reducing absenteeism, and encouraging continued schooling, especially for students from low-income families. For school guidance and counselling services, the R^2 value of 0.412 indicates that counselling explains 41.2% of the

variance in students' retention. The beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.642$) shows that guidance and counselling interventions play a significant role in helping students overcome academic, emotional, and social challenges. Through guidance and psychosocial support, counselling strengthens motivation, reduces dropout tendencies, and fosters a positive attitude toward schooling. Overall, the findings demonstrate that both predictor factors significantly influence students' retention, with the school feeding programme being the strongest predictor, followed by guidance and counselling services. These results suggest that a comprehensive approach combining school meals and psychosocial support is the most effective in improving students' regular attendance and retention levels.

Table 8: Model Summary

<i>Model</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R Square</i>	<i>Adjusted R Square</i>	<i>Std. Error of the Estimate</i>
1	.752	.566	.563	.312
2	.642	.412	.407	.356

The results in Table 8 present the model summary for the direct influence of the school feeding programme and guidance and counseling services on students' retention. The models suggest that both predictors, the school feeding programme and guidance and counselling services, were positively correlated with student retention. The school feeding program had the strongest relationship ($R = 0.752$,

$R^2 = 0.566$), indicating that 56.6% of the variance in student retention was explained by feeding initiatives, followed by guidance and counselling services ($R = 0.642$, $R^2 = 0.412$), suggesting that school guidance and counselling services accounted for 41.2% of the variation in student retention. Both models were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming their predictive relevance to student retention.

Table 9: ANOVA Summary

<i>Model</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
1	101.45	1	101.45	324.4	0.000
2	77.80	1	77.80	175.5	0.000
Residual	89.35	246	0.402	-	-
Total	189.10	247	-	-	-

The ANOVA results in Table 9 confirm that all regression models were significant at $p < 0.001$. The F-values of 324.4 for the school feeding programme and 175.5 for guidance and counselling services demonstrate that each independent variable made a statistically significant contribution to explaining student retention. This demonstrates that the combined effect of these strategies significantly reduces dropout rates and enhances student retention.

4.2 Discussion

The study findings indicate that school feeding programme significantly influenced students' retention in public secondary schools in Mufindi District Council. Regression analysis revealed that the school feeding programme predicted 56.6% of the variation in student retention ($R^2 = 0.566$), with a standardized regression coefficient (β) of 0.752 at $p < 0.001$. The findings are consistent with those of Jomaa et al. (2011), who found that school feeding programmes improve attendance and learning performance in low-income contexts. Similarly, Bundy et al. (2009) observed that provision of school meals increases school enrolment and reduces absenteeism in Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, Ibrahim et al. (2023) observed a notable improvement in school enrolment and retention following the implementation of the school feeding programme (SFP). Additionally, Acquah (2023) reported a significant increase in enrolment, attendance, and retention under the GSFP from 2008 to 2022. Regarding school guidance and counseling, results revealed a statistically significant positive influence on students' retention. Regression

results indicated that the counselling service explained 41.2% of variation in student retention ($R^2 = 0.412$), with a standardized regression coefficient (β) of 0.642 at $p < 0.001$. These findings align with those of Ndanu et al. (2022), who found that effective guidance and counseling programmes play a significant role in enhancing students' retention. Similarly, Adikwi et al., (2020) observed that counselling programmes reduce dropout by addressing emotional and academic challenges. Furthermore, Wambugu et al. (2013) reported similar findings in Sub-Saharan Africa, indicating that effective counselling increases attendance and retention.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study concluded that well-structured school-based retention strategies, such as school feeding programmes and guidance and counselling services, have a significant and positive influence on students' retention in Mufindi District Council. Both quantitative and qualitative findings revealed a significant contribution of school meals and counseling interventions to students' retention in public secondary schools. These findings suggest that school feeding programmes and counseling services help address critical barriers faced by students, including hunger, reduced concentration, and challenges related to socio-psychological well-being. The regression analysis confirmed that school feeding programme and guidance and counselling services account for a substantial portion of the variation in students' retention ($R^2 = 0.566$; $R^2 = 0.412$), respectively, and the influence is statistically

significant ($p = 0.000$), indicating a strong positive effect on retention. The implications of these findings are substantial, as providing consistent nutritional support enables schools to improve retention rates and promote students' overall well-being. Both students and teachers reported that school counselling services provide essential emotional, academic, and social support, helping learners navigate social and personal challenges that might otherwise result in absenteeism or dropout. However, inadequate professional training, limited parental participation, and cultural barriers constrain the full utilization of the retention strategies, addressing these challenges could enhance their effectiveness and further reduce dropout rates.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. To strengthen retention strategies, schools must prioritize consistent community engagement. Parents should be regularly sensitized to the importance of timely contributions for feeding programmes. In addition, schools can implement recognition initiatives for consistent student attendance and parental support, which may motivate active participation and help ensure that retention strategies remain effective and sustainable.
2. Teacher training is essential for the effective implementation of school guidance and counselling services. Professional development workshops and/or seminars can strengthen teachers' capacity to address sensitive issues, manage conflicts, and provide psychosocial support. With enhanced skills, staff is better equipped to respond to students' academic and personal challenges. Schools should also invest in counselling infrastructure, ensure continuous professional development for counsellors, strengthen parental engagement, and collaborate with NGOs to improve the overall quality of service.
3. Regular monitoring and evaluation of the school feeding programmes and guidance and counselling services are essential. Schools should systematically track attendance, retention rates, and programme effectiveness to identify gaps and inform evidence-based interventions. Furthermore, government and non-governmental organizations should be formalized to support these initiatives. Robust policy frameworks should be put in place to facilitate resource mobilization, provide technical assistance, and enhance capacity building for school staff.

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