School Social Environment and Psychological Wellbeing among Learners in Junior Schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

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Abstract:- **The study sought to establish the relationship between school social environment and psychological wellbeing among learners in Junior Schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. It adopted descriptive survey and correlational research designs. Multistage sampling was used to select 377 respondents comprising of 328 grade 8 learners, 42 grade 8 class teachers and 7 Sub- County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers. Psychometric test instrument, questionnaires and interview schedules were used to collect data from sampled respondents. Reliability of the instruments was ascertained through Cronbach analysis of data obtained from a pilot study carried among 53 respondents sampled from the same study area but who were not involved in the actual study. Data was collected from 325 grade eight learners, 41 grade eight class teachers and 5 Sub-County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers (SQASO) in Tharaka Nithi County giving the study a return rate of 98.41%. Qualitative data obtained was analyzed thematically while quantitative data was analyzed descriptively and inferentially with the aid of the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.0 computer software. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the existing relationship between the variables while hypothesis was tested using regression analysis at 95% level of significance. The study established that a positive social relationship between among peers and positive interactions between learners and teachers catalyze the social environment which promotes junior school learners psychological wellbeing. It concluded that the school's social environment is negatively and significantly related to the psychological wellbeing of junior school learners.The study recommended that management of public junior school in collaboration with other education stakeholders launch and monitor turn-around initiatives aimed at fostering quality school social environment for learners' improved psychological wellbeing. Areas of focus could include workshops on peer relations, stress management techniques, seminar on teacher-learner interaction, problem-solving techniques, and goal-setting for social and academic success could be part of the initiatives.**

Keywords:- Social Environment, Coping Strategies, Psychological Wellbeing, Junior School, Learner, Psychometric Test.

I. INTRODUCTION

Middle schools play an important role in the development of adolescents. They provide a context in which learners learn implicitly and explicitly about themselves and relationships (Dodge & Sherrill, 2006).They also learn how to navigate the turbulent waters of early adolescence. The level of the school learners' psychological well-being is considered as an indicator of the social welfare and a measure of the educational systems effectiveness (Barger, Donoho, Wayment, 2009, Huebner, Hills, 2015, Heffner &Antaramian, 2016). It includes relationships with oneself, social involvement, motivation and positive interactions with other people (Huebner, Suldo, Smith, McKnight & Life, 2012). Learners' well-being is closely associated with a positive school environment, which involves the social and academic adaptation of learners (Huebner et al 2012). According to World Health Organization (2022), mental and psychological illnesses are increasing in society and schools are not spared. The school environment provides sources of stress as well as sources of resilience for the learners. Therefore, promoting learners' psychological wellbeing is a global priority and schools have an important role to play in ensuring that the learners develop adaptive coping strategies

In the contemporary society, learners face increasing life pressures, leading to a growing concern about their psychological well-being. Psychological well-being equips learners to cope with environmental challenges effectively. Conversely, learners with compromised psychological well-being are more susceptible to experiencing depression and anxiety (Waters, Lester, Cross, & Shaw, 2022). The prevalence of psychological well-being issues among learners, including high mental stress, has been widely reported in various educational settings (He, 2018). To capture the multidimensional nature of psychological well-being, Ryff (1989) proposed a framework encompassing various intersecting aspects such as autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive associations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Similarly, Rehman, Bhuttah & You (2020) discovered a significant association between psychological wellbeing and academic accomplishment, suggesting implications for overall learner satisfaction. This implies that for learners to achieve academic goals successfully they need to be psychological healthy.

According to World Health Organization (2018), approximately half of all mental health disorders first emerge before age 14, and global estimates indicate the prevalence of mental difficulties to be between 10% and 20% during adolescence. Coincidentally, most of the transition from primary schools to Junior Schools take place at around 14 years. Moreover, adolescent mental health often shows a continued trajectory into adulthood, with a range of social and health consequences (Clayborne, 2019). As such, adolescent mental wellbeing is a critical area for public health policy (House of Commons, 2019;).This has highlighted the need for research to uncover potentially modifiable factors associated with mental wellbeing during this life stage (World Health Organization, 2013). Given the large amount of time that learners spend within school settings, it is mporant to establish how school social environment influences their psychological wellbeing. Psychological well-being significantly contributes to the overall well-being and quality of life of junior school learners. It influences their sense of happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction with life. When learners are psychologically healthy, they tend to experience higher levels of well-being, enjoy school more and have a more positive outlook on life.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➢ *School Social Environment and Psychological Wellbeing*

The school social environment plays a vital role in shaping the social and emotional development of learners. This study examines peer relationships and teacher-learner interactions as crucial components of the school social environment, and their influence on learners' psychological wellbeing.

➢ *Peer Relationships*

Peer relationships are a fundamental aspect of the school social environment and critical to social and emotional development. They encompass the interactions and connections that individuals of similar age or status establish with their peers. Adolescents and learners universally rely on these relationships for various purposes, such as social support, friendship, social skill development, and cultivating a sense of belonging and identity. The quality of these relationships may significantly influence the psychological well-being of learners. Positive peer interactions are marked by friendships, social acceptance and a strong sense of belonging within the school community.

Positive peer relationships are associated with higher psychological well-being levels among learners. For instance, a study conducted in America by Roach (2018) emphasizes the positive correlation between strong peer relationships and learners' emotional and psychological health. Roach's findings indicate that when learners experience a sense of belonging and acceptance among their peers, they tend to have better mental health outcomes. Conversely, the negative aspects of peer relationships, such as peer exclusion and bullying, have been demonstrated to harm learners' psychological health. Roach further points out that the school environment should actively foster positive peer interactions

through structured social activities and peer support programs to enhance learners' well-being.

In Asia, Liang et al. (2020) explored the dynamics of peer relationships among adolescents and found that positive peer interactions were linked to reduced levels of anxiety and depression. The study highlighted the importance of fostering an inclusive school environment where all learners feel accepted and valued. Liang and colleagues emphasized the role of school counselors and teachers in mediating peer conflicts and promoting a culture of empathy and respect among learners. In Europe, research by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2019) in the UK demonstrated that peer relationships significantly impact learners' social and academic outcomes. Their study found that learners who enjoyed strong, supportive friendships were more engaged in school activities and performed better academically. Hargreaves and O'Connor suggested that schools implement social skills training programs to help learners develop and maintain positive peer relationships.

In Australia, a study by Graham and Fitzgerald (2020) underscored the importance of peer relationships in promoting psychological well-being among learners. Their research indicated that learners who experienced positive peer interactions were more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors and report higher levels of life satisfaction. Graham and Fitzgerald advocated for the integration of peer support programs within the school curriculum to foster a collaborative and supportive school culture. In South Africa, Mampane and Bouwer (2020) investigated the role of peer relationships in the psychological well-being of learners in disadvantaged communities. Their findings revealed that strong peer bonds provided emotional support and a sense of security, which were crucial for learners facing external stressors such as poverty and violence. Mampane and Bouwer recommended that schools in similar contexts prioritize the development of peer support networks to enhance learners' resilience and well-being. Another study in Ghana by Nyarko et al. (2020) on the impact of stressful life events on learners' mental health indicated that such events were associated with higher levels of depressive and psychological distress symptoms. This underscores the critical role of supportive peer relationships in mitigating the adverse effects of stress. Nyarko and colleagues suggest that schools need to create environments that support resilience and provide mechanisms for learners to seek help when faced with stressors. Learners who feel connected to their school and classmates are more likely to be engaged in learning and thrive academically. Okata calls for more research into how different forms of peer influence affect learners across diverse cultural settings to develop more targeted interventions. Further research by Muriuki (2022) pointed out that positive peer interactions significantly contributed to reduced stress levels and improved academic performance among learners. Muriuki called for schools to implement peer support programs and provide resources to foster a positive school culture that supports learners' social and emotional development.

➢ *Teacher -Learner Interactions*

The interactions between teachers and learners are a vital and universally significant aspect of the school social environment. Across the world, these interactions encompass a spectrum of experiences, ranging from classroom engagement to mentorship and guidance. Research from various cultural and educational contexts highlights the substantial impact of positive teacher-learner relationships on learners' psychological well-being. When learners feel connected to their teachers, experience respect, and perceive genuine care and support from their educators, it significantly contributes to their psychological well-being. A study conducted in Iceland by Egilson and Traustadottir (2020) emphasized that positive teacher-learner relationships are associated with improved academic performance, higher self-esteem, and enhanced overall psychological wellbeing. Egilson and Traustadottir argue that these relationships foster a sense of security and trust, which are essential for learners' emotional development. They advocate for teacher training programs that emphasize the importance of building strong, supportive interactions with learners.

This pattern is not unique to one geographical area, underlining the global significance of these relationships, Coronado et al. (2021) in California found that the teacher-learner relationship played a key role in supporting social-emotional learning, encouraging prosocial behaviors, and creating more engaged and motivated learning opportunities for the learners. Their study suggests that teachers who actively engage with their learners and provide consistent support contribute to a positive school climate, enhancing learners' overall wellbeing. Unsupportive teacher-learner relationships may result in stress and hinder the development of positive psychological attributes among In Asia, a study by Kim and Lee (2021) in South Korea explored the influence of teacher-learner interactions on learners' psychological well-being. Their findings indicated that supportive teacher behaviors were linked to reduced levels of student anxiety and increased academic motivation. Kim and Lee recommended that schools implement training programs to help teachers develop skills in providing emotional support and creating inclusive classroom environments.

In Europe, a study by Müller and Schröder (2020) in Germany examined the impact of teacher-student relationships on learners' psychological well-being. Their research found that positive teacher-learner interactions were associated with higher levels of student engagement and lower levels of stress. Müller and Schröder emphasized the importance of professional development programs that equip teachers with strategies to build strong, supportive relationships with their learners. In Australia, a study by Brown and Purdie (2019) highlighted the role of teacher-learner relationships in promoting learners' mental health and academic success. Their findings indicated that learners who felt supported by their teachers were more likely to report higher levels of well-being and academic achievement. Brown and Purdie advocated for schools to prioritize the development of teacher-learner relationships through mentoring and professional development programs.

In North Africa, El-Sayed and Hassan (2020) in Egypt highlighted the importance of teacher-learner relationships in promoting learners' psychological well-being. Their research found that positive teacher-learner interactions were linked to higher levels of learner engagement and lower levels of stress. El-Sayed and Hassan recommended that schools implement professional development programs that help teachers develop skills in building supportive relationships with their learners. In Central Africa, Ndayishimiye and Uwizeye (2021) in Rwanda examined the role of teacher-student relationships in promoting learners' psychological well-being. Their findings indicated that supportive teacher behaviors were associated with reduced levels of student anxiety and increased academic motivation. Ndayishimiye and Uwizeye called for schools to prioritize the development of teacher-student relationships through mentoring and professional development programs.

A Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) promotes the development of a cordial relationship between learners and teachers, emphasizing mentoring, facilitating, supervising, and coaching (Muchira, Morris, & Wawire, 2023). Teachers are encouraged to empathize with learners, facilitate autonomous learning, and provide both constructive and qualitative forms of feedback (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013). Research shows that learners who trust their teachers are more motivated and perform better in school (Alam, 2022). Therefore, the teaching role is geared toward helping learners gain personalized learning experiences designed to meet their individual needs, abilities, paces, and capabilities. Muchira and colleagues suggest that the success of CBC largely depends on the ability of teachers to adapt to these new roles, and ongoing professional development is crucial.

While the influence of teacher-learner interactions on learners' psychological well-being is well documented in various parts of the world, it is essential to explore the nuances of these interactions within the Junior School context in Tharaka Nithi County. Local cultural norms, educational practices, and the specific characteristics of the Junior School system may shape these relationships in distinct ways. Therefore, investigating the nature and impact of teacher-learner interactions in this unique context is essential for a comprehensive understanding of how these interactions affect the psychological well-being of learners.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

➢ *Research Design*

Both descriptive survey and correlational research designs were used. Descriptive survey according to Ranganathan and Wadhwa (2019) provides quantitative description of trends, attitudes, opinions or behavior of a population by studying a sample of that population. The design was deemed fit because it gave the researcher the opportunity to describe the information about school physical environment and psychological wellbeing as they were without manipulating anything. According to Bhandari (2021), a correlational research design investigates

relationships between variables without the researcher controlling or manipulating any of them.

➢ *Population of the Study*
The population for this research encompassed 6,274 grade 8 Junior School learners, 446 class teachers and 7 sub–County Quality Assurance and Standard Officers (SQASO) in Tharaka Nithi County, resulting to 6,727.

➢ *Sample Size and Sampling Procedure*
The study adopted the Yamane method to determine the sample size of the respondents to take part in the study. The sample size for participating respondents arrived at based on Yamane formula (Nakamura,2012) was 328 grade 8 learners,42 class teachers and 7 Sub county Quality Assurance and Standards Officers totaling to 377 respondents. A multi-stage sampling method was used to select different categories of respondents from the target population. To facilitate a proportionate sample of respondents participating in the study, stratified random sampling was used to get the schools of different categories, with the sub-County as the sampling unit from which a proportionate sample will be drawn. Purposive sampling was used to identify Sub County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers. Moreover, the researcher employed simple random sampling technique to select the learners and class teachers who participated in the data collection process at the school level.

➢ *Research Instruments*
The study administered a psychometric test instrument to learners, a questionnaire for teachers and an interview schedule for the Sub County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers. The researcher also used a questionnaire to collect data from the sampled grade 8 class teachers and an interview schedule to collect data from Sub County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers.

➢ *Learners' Psychometric Test Instrument*
The psychometric test instrument administered to learners was constructed from items adopted from psychological Wellbeing Scale, School Environment Scale and Coping Strategies Indicator.

• *Psychological Wellbeing Test*
The study adapted the PWBS proposed by Ryff (Díaz et al., 2006; Ryff, 1989) for the evaluation of children and adolescents' psychological well-being. It is a six-item psychometric scale measuring psychological well-being. The scale uses the single-item dimension According to the Ryff Scale Psychological, well-being is associated to autonomy, self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, personal growth, and purpose in life.

• *School Environmental Scale (SES)*
The School Environment Scale (SES) is a research instrument that measures the social-psychological aspects of a school environment. The SES is based on the conceptual framework developed by Rudolf Moos, which suggests that a school environment consists of three dimensions: relationship, personal development, and system maintenance

and change, middle/junior high, and high schools. Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements about their school environment, using a five-point Likert scale.

• *The Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI)*
The Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI) is a self-report measure of situational coping encompassing the strategies of avoidance, problem solving and seeking social support. Problem Solving Scale assesses instrumental problem-oriented approaches to active management of stressors and is derivative of primitive ''flight'' tendencies. Seeking Social Support scale measures attempt at human contact during times of duress for the comfort such contact provides.

➢ *Questionnaire for Class Teachers*
The structured questionnaire for class teachers consisted of four sections. The class teachers were expected to give their perceptions about the learners based on the study variables. Section one consisted of questions on demographic information, section two consisted of questions on psychological wellbeing, section three will consisted of questions on school environment and section four consisted of questions on coping strategies. A Likert scale consisting of five response questions where the teachers were required to indicate the level of their agreement on the provided statements were utilized.

➢ *Interview Schedule for SQASO*
The Sub County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers being stakeholders in the education system were interviewed using a structured interview schedule. The Questions were based on the officers' views about learners. This instrument served as a vital means to gather qualitative data concerning the intricate relationship between school environments, coping strategies and the psychological wellbeing of learners in Junior Schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya.. To ensure accuracy and depth in data collection, the interviews were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and in-depth analysis.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS, HYPOTHESES TESTING AND DISCUSSIONS.

➢ *Data Analysis*
Quantitative data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics, facilitated by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. The study objective explored the relationship between the school social environment and psychological well-being. Descriptive statistics summarized the data, while Pearson correlation analysis assessed the relationship, indicated by the correlation coefficient (r).

Qualitative data from Sub County Quality Assurance and Standards Officers obtained through interview was analyzed using thematic analysis. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim or near verbatim (Willig, 2008) and each transcript read, and short notes made in order to have a summary of statements of the main points of each respondent. For confidentiality, each respondent's name was changed to

a case number when reporting findings according to recommendations of (Berg 2001).

> *Descriptive Findings*

The objective sought to determine the relationship between school social environment and Psychological Well-being among learners in Junior School learners in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. To achieve the purpose of this objective, grade eight learners were provided with psychometric test items on peer relations and teacher-learner interactions. Their teachers were also provided with questionnaire items on social environment. Table1 presents data obtained from the psychometric test administered to grade eight learners on peer relations and how it could be contributing towards their psychological wellbeing.

Table 1 Peer Relations and Psychological Wellbeing

How often would your classmates:	N	R	S	O	A	Total
Choose you on their team.	41.8	20.3	9.7	11.2	17.0	100.0
Help you if you were hurt.	47.3	25.5	8.8	10.3	8.2	100.0
Explain something to you if you did not understand.	52.4	19.7	10.9	7.9	9.1	100.0
Help you if something is bothering you.	11.5	10.0	11.8	28.8	37.9	100.0
Tell you to join them when you are alone and share things with them.	12.1	4.8	14.8	23.3	44.8	100.0

Information obtained show that a much less proportion of sampled grade eight learners (28.2%) indicated that their classmates would often or always choose them on their team, less than a quarter (18.5%) would be helped by classmates if you were hurt and would be explained for something if they did not understand (17.0%) often or always. However, a majority indicated that they could be helped if something was bothering them often or always (66.7%) and told to join them when alone and share things with them (68.1%) often or always. Findings therefore indicated that less than a half of the sampled grade eight learners (39.7%) confirmed having a healthy relationship with their peers. Data obtained as regards teacher-learner interaction was as presented in Table 2

Table 2 Teacher-Learner Interactions and Psychological Wellbeing

Statements	N	R	S	O	A	Total
My teachers are fair when dealing with learners	8.5	15.2	10.6	17.9	47.9	100.0
I feel I can go to my class teacher with the things that are in my mind	6.1	9.7	18.5	32.4	33.3	100.0
Teachers believe that all learners can learn	23.3	40.0	11.2	11.2	14.2	100,0
Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say	7.9	6.7	15.2	32.7	37.6	100.0
Teachers respect my opinions in the classroom.	8.6	4.2	14.8	34.2	38.2	100.0
Teachers value my contributions in the classroom.	4.8	9.2	13.3	30.3	42.4	100.0

Data obtained show that about two thirds of the sampled grade eight learners (65.8%) acknowledged that their teachers are fair when dealing with learners, a similar proportion indicated that they felt they could go to their class teacher with the things that are in their mind (65.7%) though only a quarter confirmed that their teachers believe that all learners can learn (25.4%) often or always. At the same, a majority of the sampled learners (70.3%) said that most of their teachers really listen to what they have to say often or always, slightly more than this proportion believed that their teachers respect their opinions in the classroom (72.4%) and that teachers value their contributions in the classroom (72.7%) often or always. Findings imply that a majority of the sampled grade eight learners (62.05%) confirmed having a healthy teacher-learner interaction is significant for their psychological wellbeing. Findings from grade eight class teachers were as presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Social Interactions and Psychological Wellbeing of Learners

In our school,	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Peer relationships affect the psychological wellbeing of learners	7.3	7.3	2.4	53.7	29.3	100.0
Close friendships and social connections with peers is important for learners' social and emotional development.	-	4.9	9.8	36.6	48.7	100.0
Teachers have a sense of collective responsibility for learners' wellbeing	-	2.4	2.4	48.8	46.4	100.0
Teachers always show respect towards learners	-	4.9	14.6	22.0	58.5	100.0

Information obtained from grade eight class teachers show that more than three quarters of them (83.0%) believe that peer relationships affect the psychological wellbeing of learners and close friendships and social connections with peers is important for learners' social and emotional development (85.3%). Similarly, a majority (95.2%) confirmed that teachers have a sense of collective responsibility for learners' wellbeing and teachers always show respect towards learners (80.5%). Findings show that a significant majority of the sampled grade eight class teachers (86.0%) confirmed that social interaction among learners is significant for their psychological wellbeing.

> *Hypothesis Testing*

The study sought to determine the relationship between school social environment and Psychological wellbeing

among Junior School learners. The hypothesis, **H₀1** formulated for this purpose sought to establish whether there existed a significant relationship between school social environment and psychological well-being among learners in Junior Schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. The study thus tested the relationship between elements of social environment and psychological wellbeing of junior school learners. Since normality test showed that data obtained from study variables were non-normal, logistic regression was used for the test. Table 4 and 5 presents the findings.

Table 4 Relationship between Social Environment and Psychological Wellbeing of Junior School Learners (Model Summary)

Step	-2log likelihood	Cox & Snell R^2	Nagelkerke R^2	χ^2	df	Sig.
1	208.057 ^{a}	.133	.179	1.062	1	.303

a. Estimation terminated at iteration number 5 because parameter estimates changed by less than .001.

Independent variable in the model was school environment. The model was significant χ^2 (1) =141.469, p<0.001 and the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test confirmed model fit, χ^2 (1) =1.062, p=0.303. Cox & Snell R square predicted a variance of 13.3% while Nagelkerke R square predicted 17.9% variation in psychological wellbeing of the junior school learners explained by the model. The model with independent variable explained 90.2% of psychological wellbeing, an improvement from the initial 85.1% initially predicted. Table 4 presents information on variables in the equation.

Table 5 Relationship between Social Environment and Psychological Wellbeing of Junior School Learners
(Regression Coefficient)

		B	SE	Waldχ^2	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1	Social Environment	-.384	.374	5.052	1	.025	3.468
	Constant	2.760	.577	22.884	1	.000	.063

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Social Environment.

Regression analysis illustrated that social environment negatively and significantly predicted psychological wellbeing of junior school learners, Waldχ^2 (1) =5.052, p=0.025, Exp (B) = 3.463. Findings mean that social environment is negatively significantly related to psychological wellbeing of junior school learners. Therefore, the second hypothesis which stated that there is no statistically significant relationship between social environment and psychological well-being among learners in Junior Schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya was rejected.

➢ *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Qualitative data was also sought from SQASO on the contribution of social environment to psychological wellbeing of junior school learners within their areas of jurisdictions. To begin with, as regards strategies employed by the county education department to promote positive peer relationship among learners, interviewees observed that;

- P1: *Encouraging peer teaching, strengthening guidance and counselling among peers, encouraging social interaction during co-curricular activities and emphasizing teaching of physical education lessons.*
- P3: *Emphasize teaching of life skill lessons and encouraging head teachers to promote co-curricular activities such as games, sports and music among others.*
- P5: *Formation of peer counselling clubs, organizing of career days for junior school learners and facilitating opportunities for peer feedback and reflection.*

Findings show that according to the interviewees, positive peer relationships among junior school learners is being fostered through formation of peer counselling clubs, encouraging social interaction during co-curricular activities such as games, sports and music among others. The study also sought to establish strategies in place to nurture teacher-learner relationships. In response, interviewees observed that:

- P2: *Schools are encouraged to establish teacher-learner welfare clubs, teacher-learner academic families, operational guidance and counselling departments and open school sports days for teachers and learners.*
- P4: *Encouraging dialogue sessions between teachers and learners on matters of concern and involving teachers and learners in collaborative decision making.*

Findings showed that by schools establishing teacher-learner welfare clubs, teacher-learner academic families, operational guidance and counselling departments and open school sports days for teachers and learners they provide opportunities for teacher learner interactions. Schools can also support the interactions by encouraging dialogue sessions between teachers and learners on matters of concern and involving teachers and learners in collaborative decision making. Ultimately, social interactions was indicated to contribute to learners' psychological wellbeing and academic success in that:

- P1: *When learners are able to appreciate their social environment in comparison to others, they are motivated and ultimately enhances their efforts in academics.*
- P3: *When interactions between learners and learners as well as learners and teachers are both positive, psychological wellbeing is influenced positively which in turn promotes academics.*

Findings therefore confirm that a positive social interaction among learners themselves and learners and their teachers catalyze the social environment which not only

promotes junior school psychological wellbeing but also their academic wellbeing.

➤ *Discussions on Findings*

The objective sought to determine the relationship between school social environment and Psychological Well-being among learners in Junior Schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. To achieve this, quantitative data was sought from sampled grade eight learners from the study area, their class teachers through questionnaires and qualitative data from sub-county quality assurance and standard officers through interview. Information was sought on peer relations and teacher-learner interactions. A study conducted in America by Roach (2018) emphasizes the positive correlation between strong peer relationships and learners' emotional and psychological health. Roach's findings indicate that when learners experience a sense of belonging and acceptance among their peers, they tend to have better mental health outcomes. Conversely, the negative aspects of peer relationships, such as peer exclusion and bullying, have been demonstrated to harm learners' psychological health. Roach points out that the school environment should actively foster positive peer interactions through structured social activities and peer support programs to enhance learners' well-being.

Information on teacher-learner relations showed that a majority of the sampled grade eight learners (62.05%) confirmed having a healthy teacher-learner interaction is significant for their psychological wellbeing. A study conducted in Iceland by Egilson and Traustadottir (2020) emphasized that positive teacher-learner relationships are associated with improved academic performance, higher self-esteem, and enhanced overall psychological wellbeing. They argue that these relationships foster a sense of security and trust, which are essential for learners' emotional development. They advocate for teacher training programs that emphasize the importance of building strong, supportive relationships with learners. Similarly, Coronado et al. (2021) in California found that the teacher-learner relationship played a key role in supporting social-emotional learning, encouraging prosocial behaviors, and creating more engaged and motivated learning opportunities for the learners. Their study suggests that teachers who actively engage with their learners and provide consistent support contribute to a positive school climate, enhancing learners' overall wellbeing. The researchers therefore recommend schools to implement professional development programs that help teachers develop skills in social-emotional learning and learner engagement.

Information from class teachers as regards the relationship between social environment and learners' psychological wellbeing showed that a significant majority of the sampled grade eight class teachers (86.0%) confirmed that social interaction among learners is significant for their psychological wellbeing. A study by Fourie and de Klerk (2024) in South Africa emphasize the importance of a supportive school climate in fostering learners' engagement and enhancing educational achievement. In their paper on Self-esteem and locus of control as predictors of psychological wellbeing of senior secondary school

adolescents in Nigeria, Enwere and Mbakwe (2021) mention that there is a growing recognition of the need to address social aspects within educational settings to promote learners' holistic development. Teachers play a critical role in creating a conducive learning environment through positive interactions and effective pedagogical approaches. Additionally, ensuring the psychological safety of learners within the school environment is identified as a key priority for promoting their well-being.

Inferential analysis based on regression analysis illustrated that social environment negatively and significantly predicted psychological wellbeing of Junior School learners, Wald^2 (1) =5.052, p=0.025, Exp (B) = 3.463. Findings mean that social environment is negatively and significantly related to psychological wellbeing of Juniors School learners. Previously studies have shown that perceptions of the social environment significantly influence individuals' psychological well-being across diverse contexts (Väisänen et al., 2017), and learners' experiences within the school environment crucially shape their engagement with the educational process (Bae & Yoon, 2021). Thus, studying school environment is relevant for comprehending the intricate interplay between educational settings and learners' psychological well-being, social dynamics, and academic success.

Qualitative analysis showed that positive peer relationships among Junior School learners is being fostered through formation of peer counselling clubs, encouraging social interaction during co-curricular activities such as games, sports and music among others. It was also illustrated that by schools establishing teacher-learner welfare clubs, teacher-learner academic families, operational guidance and counselling departments and open school sports days for teachers and learners provide opportunities for teacher learner interactions. Schools can also support the interactions by encouraging dialogue sessions between teachers and learners on matters of concern and involving teachers and learners in collaborative decision making. Findings therefore confirm that a positive social interaction among learners themselves and learners and their teachers catalyze the social environment which not only promotes junior school psychological wellbeing but also their academic wellbeing. A study carried out by Hinze (2023) in the United Kingdom's UK) Junior Secondary schools evidenced that better learner-rated school environment, at the learner and school level was associated with lower risk of depression, fewer social-emotional-behavioral difficulties and higher wellbeing in young people. This research demonstrates that positive relationships are essential to promote wellbeing and protect against the onset of mental health problems developing in learners.

Findings therefore showed that the social environment in a significant proportion of the junior schools are inadequate which could be having a negative effect on the junior school learner's psychological wellbeing. It was also generally illustrated that social environment is significantly related with learners' psychological wellbeing implying that poor social environment influencing the psychological wellbeing of the

junior school learners negatively and vice versa. Phuntsho and Dendup (2020) from Bhutan in Asia carried out research on the relationship between school climate, learner engagement and academic achievement in higher secondary school. Their study emphasizes the significance of a nurturing school climate in fostering active learner engagement and enhancing academic achievement. Their findings were collaborated by López et al., (2021) from the US and Bae and Yoon (2021) from Vietnam. However, while physical infrastructure and teaching methodologies are crucial aspects, more attention needs to be directed towards understanding the social dynamics within educational settings (Väisänen et al., 2017). Positive peer interactions and supportive teacher-learner relationships are essential for promoting a conducive learning environment and facilitating educational success (Maneeza, 2019). Moreover, psychological safety within the educational environment is recognized as a national priority, as it significantly influences learners' holistic development and societal well-being.

V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

➢ *Summary*

Data obtained revealed that less than a half of the sampled grade eight learners enjoyed a healthy relationship with their peers implying that a majority of the sampled learners had poor relations with their peers which could be detrimental to their psychological wellbeing. Information on teacher-learner relations showed that a majority of the sampled grade eight learners confirmed having a healthy teacher-learner interaction significant for their psychological wellbeing. Information from class teachers as regards the relationship between social environment and learners' psychological wellbeing showed that a significant majority of the sampled grade eight class teachers confirmed that social interaction among learners is significant for their psychological wellbeing. Inferential analysis based on regression analysis illustrated that social environment negatively and significantly predicted psychological wellbeing of junior school learners. Qualitative analysis showed that positive peer relationships among junior school learners is being fostered through formation of peer counselling clubs, encouraging social interaction during co-curricular activities such as games, sports and music among others. It was also illustrated that by schools establishing teacher-learner welfare clubs, teacher-learner academic families, operational guidance and counselling departments and open school sports days for teachers and learners they provide opportunities for teacher learner interactions.

➢ *Conclusions*

The study findings showed that social environment negatively and significantly predicted psychological wellbeing of junior school learners implying that school's social environment is negatively and significantly related to the psychological wellbeing of junior school learners. It can therefore be concluded that the school's social environment is negatively and significantly related to the psychological wellbeing of junior school learners.

➢ *Recommendations*

The positive and significant relationship therefore imply that strategies directed at strengthening the aspects of school environment would result in enhanced wellbeing of the junior school learners. It is therefore recommended that public junior school managements in collaboration with other education stakeholders should put in place strategies aimed at strengthening aspects of school environment in order to foster junior school learners' psychological wellbeing. In particular, they should; launch and monitor turn-around initiatives aimed at fostering quality school social environment for learners' improved psychological wellbeing. Areas of focus could include workshops on peer relations management techniques, seminar on teacher-learner interaction, problem-solving techniques, and goal-setting for social and academic success could be part of the initiatives.

➢ *Suggestion for Further Studies*

- The location of this study was in Tharaka Nithi in Kenya while the subject of focus was the relationship between school environment and psychological well-being of junior school learners. Studies in other location to establish the relationship between school environment and psychological well-being of junior school learners is proposed.
- The study adopted a descriptive and correlational research design. A longitudinal study to determine the relationship between school environment and psychological well-being of junior school learners in Kenya is suggested.
- A comparative study of the relationship between school environment and psychological well-being of learners in public and private junior schools in Kenya is also suggested.

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