

To cite this article: Indimuli Harrison Munala, Dr. Shikuku Musima Mulambula and Dr. Ngeno Godfrey (2026). SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF LEARNERS IN BOARDING SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BUNGOMA COUNTY, KENYA, International Journal of Education and Social Science Research (IJESSR) 9 (5): 140-174 Article No. 1288, Sub Id 1971

SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF LEARNERS IN BOARDING SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BUNGOMA COUNTY, KENYA

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37500/IJESSR.2026.9507>

ABSTRACT

Boarding secondary schools remove adolescents from family support structures for extended periods, leaving peer relationships to carry much of the social integration function that families ordinarily perform. Peer counselling is widely expected to discharge that function, yet in Kenya the magnitude of its contribution to learners' social well-being has never been quantified, nor has it been established whether that contribution differs between boys and girls or across class levels. This study examined the contribution of peer-counselling models to the social well-being of learners in boarding secondary schools in Bungoma County, Kenya. Anchored on Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and adopting a pragmatic paradigm, the study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design within a descriptive survey framework. Two-stage stratified sampling drew 15 schools from a population of 60; cluster and simple random sampling yielded 300 learners in Grade 10, Form Three and Form Four; and purposive sampling secured interviews with ten deputy principals. Data were generated through a 47-item learner questionnaire, a semi-structured interview schedule, a document analysis checklist and an observation checklist, and were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, simple and multiple regression and dummy-variable regression in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26), together with thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Social well-being was rated very high ($M = 4.386$, $SD = .604$), the strongest indicator being the perceived adequacy of peer support, endorsed by 99.7% of learners, and the weakest the reduction of loneliness ($M = 4.040$). Composite model implementation accounted for 95.0% of the variance in social well-being ($B = .796$, $\beta = .975$, $p < .001$), and the four models jointly for 95.9%, $F(4, 295) = 1,712.19$, $p < .001$. Ranked singly, the Peer Leadership ($\beta = .977$) and Helper/Peer Mentor ($\beta = .975$) models associated most strongly, while the most extensively implemented model, Peer Support Group, associated most weakly ($\beta = .842$). Gender explained none of the variance ($B = .008$, $p = .912$), whereas class level explained 44.1%, $F(2, 297) = 116.98$, $p < .001$, following an inverted-U trajectory peaking in Form Three ($M = 4.820$) and falling sharply in Form Four ($M = 3.864$). The null hypothesis was rejected. Peer counselling in the county makes social support visible and accessible without making it transformative of learners' inner experience, and psychosocial provision contracts at precisely the point in the

learner's career when demand is greatest. The study recommends protected counselling time in the terminal examination year, deliberate strengthening of relational model design, and competency-based selection and training of peer counsellors.

KEYWORDS: peer counselling; peer-counselling models; social well-being; boarding secondary schools; Social Support Theory; class level; gender; Bungoma County, Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

Schools are no longer defensibly understood as sites of academic instruction alone. They are among the most consequential environments for adolescent psychosocial development, and the structured counselling interventions they house shape academic achievement, career readiness, social competence and emotional regulation (ASCA, 2019; Carey & Dimmitt, 2012). Durlak et al. (2021) establish that school psychosocial support systems strengthen learner resilience and reduce behavioural difficulty, and comparative international evidence shows that adolescents in boarding institutions present psychological well-being needs materially distinct from those of day scholars, owing to prolonged separation from family, regimented routine and intensified peer contact, with direct implications for the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Muslikah, Kholiq, Baroroh & Dewi, 2026). The distinguishing feature of the boarding institution is precisely that the relational resources ordinarily supplied by the family must be reconstituted inside the school, and it is the social dimension of well-being — belonging, relationship quality, freedom from isolation — that is most directly exposed when that reconstitution fails.

The international literature is clear that the benefit of school-based support is contingent on how the support is structured, supervised and integrated into institutional leadership. Setiawan, Aslamiah, Noorhapizah and Novitawati (2026) argue from cross-continental evidence that counselling attains its intended outcomes only where school leadership deliberately builds synergy between administrative structures and guidance services. Systematic review and meta-analytic comparison of school-based interventions across the United States and East Asia demonstrates that outcomes vary appreciably with cultural context, delivery model and implementation fidelity, cautioning against the uncritical transfer of counselling models between settings (Park et al., 2026; Anfone & Galigao, 2024; Jackson & Takahashi, 2026). Within self-determination theory, perceived student cohesiveness, equity, teacher support and autonomy support significantly predict learner engagement (Bizimana, 2026), while studies of peer support among refugee and internationally mobile learners confirm that peer relationships enhance motivation, self-efficacy and psychological adjustment during transition and dislocation (Zimmerman, 2026; Charania, 2025; Koirala et al., 2026; Soetan, Umukoro & Odeh, 2026), with person-centred evidence indicating that such motivational and adjustment profiles differ meaningfully by gender (Li, King & Wang, 2026). Whether that gender differentiation extends to the social benefits of peer counselling in a boarding context is an open empirical question, and one this paper answers.

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, attention to adolescent mental health, psychosocial support and behavioural adjustment in school environments has grown considerably (Mutiso et al., 2018). Regional studies report rising emotional distress, peer pressure, behavioural difficulty and social adjustment challenge among secondary school learners, positioning schools as decisive developmental environments. Peer counselling, understood as a programme in which peers assist peers to identify and resolve their own difficulties, has emerged as a culturally adaptable and low-cost response. In Nigeria, Adewumi and Adeniran (2019) established that structured peer counselling significantly improves adolescents' behavioural adjustment, self-concept and emotional stability. Kakinda, Croudace, Plouffe and Amone-P'Olak (2026) identify persistent barriers to adolescent help-seeking across the region — stigma, confidentiality concern and limited mental health literacy — alongside facilitators such as trusted peer relationships, and both the barriers and the facilitators are magnified in boarding schools, where learners depend disproportionately on within-school support.

In Kenya, the Ministry of Education (2018) recognises guidance and counselling as a central component of the learner support framework, and empirical work confirms that effective counselling services strengthen learner discipline and academic performance (Kilonzo, 2019; Ndegwa, 2020). Peer counselling has been commended as a strategy for curbing indiscipline (Baliach et al., 2022), with evidence that it influences discipline and mitigates truancy and substance use (Ngumi & Kariuki, 2018) and contributes to self-efficacy, emotional adjustment and interpersonal relationships (Wango, 2019). Gachunga (2017) reports an association between peer-counselling models and student social integration, and Mbiti and Nzomo (2019) document the salience of social support to learner well-being in Kenyan boarding schools specifically. In Kiambu County, peer-counselling interventions reduced bullying, fights and strikes (Kariithi, Mukolwe & Kimani, 2022); in Meru South, by contrast, programmes were constrained by uncoordinated selection criteria, inadequate training and the absence of programme evaluation (Kamore & Tiego, 2015). The Kenyan evidence base thus establishes that peer counselling can work, and simultaneously that it frequently does not, for reasons of design rather than of principle.

Bungoma County brings this tension into sharp relief. Its boarding secondary schools are strongly performance-oriented, and county education priorities emphasise examination results and school ranking as the principal indicators of institutional success (Bungoma County Government, 2018), an emphasis that may unintentionally displace structured psychosocial support. Related work on peer mentoring in the county reports improved learner adjustment, smoother transition into boarding life and reduced disciplinary cases (Makokha & Sang, 2020). Yet between 2020 and 2026 the county recorded repeated and destructive incidents of learner unrest and dormitory fire across multiple boarding institutions. Peer-counselling programmes were formally in place in schools of exactly this kind. Establishing how much social benefit those programmes actually deliver, and to whom, is the task this paper undertakes.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Boarding secondary schools should operate structured and professionally supervised peer-counselling models in which trained learner-counsellors work in deliberate synergy with school leadership, guidance departments and classroom teachers to safeguard learners' socio-emotional well-being (Setiawan et al., 2026). Because boarding learners are separated from their families for extended periods, such models are expected to substitute for the lost family support system by supplying accessible emotional support, positive peer cohesiveness and autonomy-supportive relationships that strengthen belonging, engagement and adaptive coping (Muslikah et al., 2026; Bizimana, 2026; Zimmerman, 2026).

Boarding secondary schools in Bungoma County, however, remain heavily oriented towards examination performance, with limited attention to learners' social needs. Learners consequently continue to present with loneliness, poor social adjustment, bullying and weak peer integration even in schools where peer-counselling programmes have been formally introduced. Global evidence warns that unaddressed adolescent distress within school environments is strongly associated with severe outcomes, and that weak social support is among its most consistent correlates (Zhong et al., 2026; Reupert et al., 2026).

The gap lies here. Although the reviewed literature converges on the proposition that peer counselling supplies the emotional, informational and appraisal resources through which belonging and peer relationship quality are constructed (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Zysberg & Zisberg, 2020; Schlesier, Parade & Rank, 2026), the magnitude of that contribution in boarding secondary schools has not been established, and it is not known whether it differs between boys and girls or across class levels. The available evidence on school-based counselling effectiveness is drawn predominantly from meta-analytic and cross-national work conducted in the United States, East Asia and OECD contexts, whose cultural, institutional and resource conditions differ substantially from those of Kenyan boarding schools (Park et al., 2026; Kim, 2026; Anfone & Galigao, 2024; Jackson & Takahashi, 2026), while related work on peer support and student adjustment has concentrated on international, refugee and tertiary-level populations rather than on adolescent boarders in county-level African secondary schools (Koirala et al., 2026; Charania, 2025; Soetan et al., 2026). Schools in Bungoma County therefore sustain peer-counselling programmes without evidence of what social benefit they yield, for which learners, and at which point in the learner's school career — and risk directing scarce provision to the cohorts that need it least.

1.2 Purpose, Objective, Research Question and Hypothesis

The purpose of the larger study was to examine peer-counselling models and their association with the socio-emotional well-being and discipline of learners in boarding secondary schools in Bungoma County, Kenya. Boarding institutions were targeted specifically because learners in them spend extended periods away from parental and family support and therefore depend disproportionately on within-school relationships for emotional support, social integration and behavioural regulation. This paper reports the second objective.

Objective. To establish the contribution of peer-counselling models to the social well-being of learners across different school categories and types in boarding secondary schools in Bungoma County, Kenya.

Research question. What is the contribution of peer-counselling models to the social well-being of learners across different school categories and types in boarding secondary schools, considering differences across gender, in Bungoma County, Kenya?

Null hypothesis (H_0). Peer-counselling models have no significant contribution to the social well-being of learners in boarding secondary schools in Bungoma County, Kenya.

1.3 Justification and Significance

The study is justified on the ground that learners' alienation from family support structures during long residential stays creates conditions conducive to social isolation and adjustment difficulty, and that as boarding schools place progressively greater emphasis on academic performance there is a corresponding neglect of the social welfare on which holistic development depends. That imbalance warranted systematic investigation. The study is significant in that it quantifies, for the first time in this setting, the association between peer-counselling provision and learners' social well-being; it establishes which models carry the strongest relational benefit and which do not; it identifies the class level at which social well-being is most vulnerable; and it generates policy recommendations that are directly usable by school administrators and by county and national policy organs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept and Historical Development of Peer Counselling

Peer counselling has evolved considerably and is now integral to educational provision. Counselling itself is an ancient practice, but modern education systems have adapted it to changing requirements, as illustrated by Zimbabwe's counselling history, which dates to the pre-colonial era and has since been reshaped by contemporary educational and healthcare dynamics (Richards et al., 2012). Internationally, peer-led initiatives such as the Supplemental Instruction Programme have produced measurable academic gains in demanding subjects (Parkinson, 2009), while the Women's HIV/Prison Prevention Programme demonstrated the capacity of peer-led approaches to reduce recidivism and improve health outcomes (Vigilante et al., 1999). Topping (2022) consolidates this evidence, concluding that peer education and peer counselling yield consistent benefits for health and well-being, but that effects depend heavily on training quality, supervision and programme structure. Lee et al. (2026) show that youth mental health literacy interventions improve help-seeking and reduce stigma when delivered through developmentally appropriate, socially embedded channels. The consistent qualifier across four decades of evidence is structural: peer counselling works where it is designed and underperforms where it is improvised.

2.2 Peer Counselling in the Kenyan School System

In Kenya, guidance and counselling deepened through the 1990s and early 2000s as the sector sought alternatives for managing indiscipline, drug abuse and social challenge. The Ministry of Education institutionalised these services, and peer counselling emerged as an approach in which trained students offer emotional support and mentorship under teacher-counsellor supervision. Studies confirm that peer counselling significantly influences discipline and addresses truancy, drug abuse and academic failure (Kariithi, Mukolwe & Kimani, 2022), improves discipline management where counsellors are trained and supervised (Njeri, Mumiukha & Ronoh, 2023), and enhances academic performance and psychosocial adjustment (Onyango, Aloka & Raburu, 2018). Gachunga (2017) links peer-counselling models specifically to student social integration, and Mbiti and Nzomo (2019) establish social support as a salient determinant of learner well-being in Kenyan boarding schools. Too and Orao (2026) document counselling techniques in Kenyan public universities, revealing both professionalisation and uneven application. What this literature has not done is quantify the size of the social-well-being association or test whether it holds equally across gender and class level.

2.3 Peer Counselling and the Social Well-Being of Learners

Learners in secondary school settings present a wide spectrum of socio-emotional needs that extend well beyond academic instruction. Peer counselling constitutes one support mechanism, providing a secure setting in which learners voice concerns and seek guidance, thereby strengthening social well-being and, in turn, academic achievement. This need is amplified by the prevalence of school violence, bullying and aggressive or disruptive behaviour, which teachers themselves identify as a principal threat to classroom climate and learner welfare, while acknowledging that they are frequently under-prepared and under-resourced to respond to it effectively (Pliogou & Tromara, 2026).

The support that peer counselling delivers can be understood through established typologies of social support. Emotional support, comprising empathy, care, trust and affection, is a significant determinant of learners' social skills and academic success and is particularly critical during periods of personal difficulty and readjustment (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Informational support, involving guidance, advice and useful direction, similarly contributes substantially to academic outcomes, since counsellors and mentors are commonly regarded as reliable sources of academic direction. Appraisal support, encompassing constructive feedback and social comparison that inform self-evaluation, plays a mediating role in reducing distress during stressful circumstances (Zysberg & Zisberg, 2020). In boarding school environments, where learners live in continuous group contact and are separated from family, these forms of support are transmitted largely through peer relationships, making the structure and quality of peer-counselling models decisive for social cohesion. Comparative examination of primary and secondary education systems reinforces this position, showing that systems which deliberately institutionalise relational and emotional support achieve stronger learner adjustment than those relying on academic instruction alone (Schlesier, Parade & Rank, 2026).

A distinction internal to the social support literature is analytically important for what follows. Perceived support — the belief that support would be available if needed — and received support —

the assistance actually transacted — are conceptually and empirically distinct, and it is perceived support that Social Support Theory identifies as the operative buffer against stress (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). An instrument that measures both, as the present one does, therefore permits a gradient to be observed between the availability of support, the quality of the relationships it generates, and its effect on subjective isolation. The reviewed literature converges on the proposition that peer counselling contributes to social well-being principally by supplying emotional, informational and appraisal resources; what remains unestablished is the magnitude of that contribution in boarding secondary schools, and whether it differs between boys and girls or across class levels. These are the questions to which the present objective is addressed.

2.4 Cultural Embeddedness and the Bukusu Context

Culture is decisive in shaping values, beliefs, behaviours and social interaction, and therefore emotional and psychological well-being (Hofstede, 2001). Bungoma County is inhabited principally by the Bukusu, Tachoni, Sabaot and Teso communities, with the Bukusu forming the majority. Like many indigenous African cultures, Bukusu culture embodies norms and social structures that support social well-being through rituals and shared practices, including storytelling, peer discussion and ceremonial gathering, which enable learners to express emotion, share experience and cope collectively. Ntumi et al. (2022) affirm that culture shapes perceptions of mental health and coping and functions as a protective factor against psychological distress, while Springer (2022) notes that cultural identity rooted in tradition strengthens resilience and frames life challenges meaningfully. Collectivist orientations emphasising cooperation, shared responsibility and dense relational networks foster belonging and reinforce peer relationships in group-living environments. Comparative evidence confirms that culturally attuned support services are more accessible and more effective than uniformly transplanted models (Duhaney, Phung, Beamer & Hammoud, 2026; Abeasi, Nkosi & Suglo, 2026), and that education policy is best understood as a dialectic between global frameworks and local realities (Desjardins, Jang & Walder, 2025). Embedding Bukusu cultural values within peer-counselling models therefore offers a culturally resonant pathway for strengthening learners' social well-being, and provides the interpretive lens through which the findings reported below are read.

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Social Support Theory

The study adopted Social Support Theory as developed by Cohen and Wills (1985), which holds that social support, whether emotional, instrumental, informational or appraisal in form, plays a crucial role in determining an individual's health and well-being. Traceable to the mid-1970s and early 1980s and grounded initially in early childhood attachment, the theory has evolved to provide a multidimensional account of interrelation that extends beyond individual interaction to the relationships that develop between individuals and the systems established around them (Peterson & Bredow, 2014). It was formulated to explain how support cushions individuals against life stressors, and its four constructs remain the standard basis for categorising and measuring the components of social support.

The theory is particularly apposite to boarding schools, where learners are separated from primary family support structures for extended periods and where peer relationships consequently assume a

substitutive function. Emotional support involves the provision of empathy, love, trust and care; Malecki and Demaray (2003) establish it as a significant determinant of students' social skills and academic success. Informational support supplies advice and knowledge, instrumental support supplies tangible assistance, and appraisal support supplies feedback that informs self-evaluation. The buffering proposition of the theory generates a testable expectation for this objective: if peer counselling functions as a substitute support system, learners' strongest endorsement should fall on the perceived availability of support rather than on its downstream effects, and provision should matter most where alternative sources of support are least accessible. Both expectations are examined against the data below.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The study employed a mixed-methods approach within a pragmatic paradigm. Bano et al. (2019) argue that a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon is better reached when the two main research approaches are combined, and that mixed-methods research is appropriate where the purpose is to describe, explain or evaluate. This study described the peer-counselling models operating in boarding secondary schools in Bungoma County, quantified their association with learners' social well-being, and interrogated the mechanisms through which that association is understood by those who run and receive the programmes; it therefore fell squarely within those conditions.

Specifically, the study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design within a descriptive survey framework. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same field period, analysed separately, and brought together at the interpretation stage. The quantitative strand, based on the learner questionnaire, established the extent of implementation of each model and the strength of its association with social well-being. The qualitative strand, based on deputy principal interviews, learner open-ended responses, document analysis and observation, established how the models operate and what obstacles they encounter. The two strands were given equal weight, and their convergence and divergence are reported explicitly.

A descriptive survey was preferred to a quasi-experimental alternative for two reasons. First, peer-counselling models in Bungoma County's boarding schools are not researcher-administered treatments; they are pre-existing, naturally occurring school programmes that differ in type and intensity for institutional reasons predating the study, and assigning schools to models would have required an intervention the study was neither funded nor mandated to deliver. Second, the question at issue is one of magnitude and distribution within existing provision, which a survey answers and an experiment presupposes.

Consequence for interpretation.

The design is cross-sectional and descriptive rather than experimental or longitudinal, the study examined associations and not causal effects. Data on peer-counselling provision and on learner outcomes were collected at the same moment from the same respondents, and no intervention was

administered or withheld. All findings and interpretations are accordingly framed in associative language.

3.2 Location, Population and Sample

The study was carried out in Bungoma County, in the former Western Province of Kenya, along the international border with the Republic of Uganda. The county lies between latitudes 0°28' and 1°30' North and longitudes 34°20' and 35°15' East and covers approximately 3,032.4 km². Its selection was strategic: it recorded repeated learner unrest and dormitory fires across multiple boarding schools between 2020 and 2026, and it possesses a diverse educational structure spanning all school categories and types, permitting examination of institutional variation within a single administrative unit.

A target population is the population to which the researcher would ideally like to generalise (Gay & Airasian, 2000), drawn from a study population sharing characteristics of interest (Best & Khan, 1993). The target population comprised learners and deputy principals in the county's 60 boarding secondary schools, categorised by gender composition into girls-only, boys-only and mixed institutions, and by Ministry of Education classification into National (C1), Extra-County (C2) and County (C3) schools. The county has no Sub-County (C4) boarding secondary schools; institutions at that level operate as day schools and fall outside the study. Form One and Form Two learners were excluded because the study required respondents with sufficient exposure to their school's peer-counselling arrangements to evaluate them, so the accessible population comprised learners in Grade 10, Form Three and Form Four. Deputy principals were included because they directly oversee learner discipline and the guidance and counselling function.

The learner sample of 300 was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula, $n_0 = Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p) \div e^2$, where $Z = 1.96$ for a 95% confidence level, $p = 0.5$ and $e = 0.05$, giving $n_0 = 384.16$. Because the accessible population is finite, the finite population correction was applied and the figure rounded to a working sample of 300. This sample satisfies three further design requirements bearing directly on the present objective: it provides approximately 150 learners of each gender for the gender comparison; approximately 100 learners at each of the three class levels for the class-level comparison; and statistical power of approximately .80 to detect a medium effect size ($d = 0.33$) in a two-group comparison and a correlation of $r = 0.16$ at the .05 level. All 15 deputy principals of the sampled schools were targeted for interview, giving a combined target sample of 315 respondents.

3.3 Sampling Procedures

A multi-stage procedure was used. Schools were selected by two-stage stratified sampling: in the first stage schools were stratified by type (girls-only, boys-only, mixed), and in the second by category (C1, C2, C3), with proportional allocation determining the number drawn from each type-category combination. Learners within the 15 selected schools were then sampled by cluster sampling, each school constituting a cluster and one intact stream being selected at each of the three eligible class levels. Intact streams were used because Kenyan secondary schools' timetable by stream and withdrawing individual learners from several streams simultaneously would have disrupted

instruction. Within each selected stream, individual learners were drawn by simple random sampling from the class register using a table of random numbers, which gave every learner an equal and independent probability of selection and guarded against the self-selection that volunteering would have introduced. For the qualitative strand, deputy principals were selected purposively, purposive sampling being a non-probability method in which participants are intentionally selected because they hold information relevant to the phenomenon (Patton, 2002; Singleton, Straits & Straits, 1993).

Table 1: Population and Sampled Boarding Secondary Schools by Type and Category

School type	C1 population	C2 population	C3 population	Total population	Schools sampled
Girls-only	2	6	19	27	7
Boys-only	1	4	12	17	4
Mixed	0	3	13	16	4
Total	3	13	44	60	15

Source: Kenya Schools Directory, Bungoma County (Kagos, 2025) and researcher's proportional allocation. Sampled schools comprised 2 C1, 4 C2 and 9 C3 institutions, representing 25% of the county's boarding schools.

County (C3) schools dominate both population and sample, accounting for 44 of the 60 boarding schools and 9 of the 15 sampled, reflecting the structure of boarding provision in the county. Only two National (C1) schools entered the sample, since the county has only three in total, so estimates involving C1 rest on a small cell and are correspondingly imprecise. No National mixed school appears in either population or sample because the county has none.

3.4 Research Instruments

Four instruments were used. The learner questionnaire, titled "Student Questionnaire on Peer Counselling Models and Socio-Emotional Well-Being in Boarding Secondary Schools of Bungoma County", was developed by the researcher from the study objectives and the reviewed literature. Questionnaires were selected because they permit efficient collection from large samples while upholding consistency across respondents (Creswell, 2014; Orodho, 2009). The instrument comprised 47 items across six sections: background information (6 items); models of peer counselling (13 items across four subscales, namely Helper/Peer Mentor, Peer Support Group, Peer Education and Peer Leadership/Empowerment); socio-emotional well-being (10 items, of which four measure social and six measure emotional well-being); discipline and behaviour change (10 items); challenges of peer

counselling (8 items); and three open-ended items. Closed items were measured on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

A semi-structured interview schedule was used with deputy principals, covering the model of peer counselling operating in the school, the procedures by which peer counsellors are selected and trained, the issues learners commonly bring, the perceived contribution of the programme to well-being and discipline, the challenges encountered, and recommendations for improvement. A document analysis checklist, document analysis being a systematic process of reviewing and interpreting existing materials (Bowen, 2009), was used to review peer-counselling policies, training records, activity schedules, guidance and counselling reports, learner discipline records and meeting minutes. An observation checklist recorded the availability and condition of counselling space, the presence of peer-counselling information on notice boards, observed peer support behaviours and general school climate.

3.5 Scoring and Derived Variables

No item required reverse scoring. All items measuring models, well-being and discipline were positively worded so that a higher rating consistently denotes greater implementation or better well-being. The eight challenge items were uniformly worded as statements of difficulty and retained in that direction, so that a higher score denotes a greater perceived challenge; the challenges composite is therefore interpreted in the opposite direction and is not aggregated with the others. The absence of reverse-worded items is acknowledged below as a contributor to acquiescent responding. A composite score was computed for each subscale as the arithmetic mean of its constituent items, retaining the original one-to-five metric, and composite means were interpreted using the conventional decision rule in which 1.00–1.79 denotes very low, 1.80–2.59 low, 2.60–3.39 moderate, 3.40–4.19 high and 4.20–5.00 very high.

3.6 Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

Validity concerns whether an instrument measures what it purports to measure and reliability whether the measurements obtained are consistent (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kothari, 2004). Content validity was established judgementally: the researcher's supervisors and two independent subject experts in guidance and counselling independently rated each item against the study objectives and conceptual framework, and items rated irrelevant or ambiguous by more than one expert were revised or dropped. Face validity was established through the pilot study, in which respondents were asked whether each item appeared on its face to measure what it claimed and whether its wording was clear. Construct validity was established statistically using pilot data through item-to-total correlations computed within each subscale, with items correlating below $r = .30$ with their own subscale total reviewed for retention or revision.

A qualification must be recorded, because it bears directly on the interpretation of the findings.

The main-study data disclosed correlations between conceptually distinct constructs approaching the reliability ceiling of the scales themselves. Discriminant validity was therefore not achieved in the main study, notwithstanding the content and construct validity procedures described above. The several subscales may consequently be measuring a single latent evaluative orientation towards the school's peer-counselling programme rather than the distinct constructs the instrument was designed to separate. This is carried forward into the limitations.

Internal consistency reliability was estimated using Cronbach's alpha computed first from pilot data and subsequently from the achieved sample of 300, with $\alpha \geq .70$ taken as acceptable. Test-retest reliability was estimated by administering the questionnaire to the pilot group on two occasions two weeks apart and computing the Pearson correlation between the two sets of composite scores. Inter-rater reliability was estimated by having the researcher and one trained research assistant independently code the same subset of interview transcripts and open-ended learner responses and computing percentage agreement.

Reliability of the qualitative strand was supported through methodological triangulation, the combination of two or more theories, data sources, methods or researchers in the study of a topic (Halcomb & Andrew, 2005). Four data sources were drawn upon, namely the learner questionnaire including its open-ended section, deputy principal interviews, document analysis and observation, and brought together at the interpretation stage. The researcher employed bracketing, the deliberate suspension of prior judgements and beliefs during data collection and analysis (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999), and respondent validation, in which interpretations were shared with respondents who checked, amended and confirmed whether the findings were consistent with their own experience (Bryman, 2001).

3.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple and multiple linear regression. Group comparisons conventionally reported as t-tests and analyses of variance were conducted as dummy-variable regressions, of which they are special cases, taking the general form $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_1 + \beta_2 D_2 + \epsilon$, where D_1 and D_2 are indicator variables for the second and third groups, β_0 is the mean of the reference group, and β_1 and β_2 are the differences between each group and the reference. The gender $\times$ class-level interaction was assessed by adding product terms to the additive model. All hypotheses were tested at the .05 level. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using the six-phase procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually and a research assistant independently coded a subset of scripts. Verbatim extracts are reported with respondent identifiers (DP1–DP10 for deputy principals; R1–R60 for learners) to preserve anonymity.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Response Rate

Table 2: Response Rate of the Study

Category of respondent	Targeted	Returned	Response rate (%)
Learners (questionnaire, Sections A–E)	300	300	100.0
Learners (open-ended items, Section F)	300	60	20.0
Deputy principals (interview schedule)	15	10	66.7
Overall (quantitative instrument)	315	310	98.4

Source: Field Data (2026)

The overall return rate of 98.4% is well above the 70% threshold that Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) and Orodho (2009) regard as excellent for descriptive survey research. The exceptional learner return rate is attributable to the personal administration procedure, in which the researcher and trained research assistants administered the instrument during allocated class hours and collected it immediately, a procedure whose superiority in Kenyan secondary-school contexts is documented by Denscombe (2010). The lower return among deputy principals reflects the competing administrative demands of the school calendar; the ten schools represented nevertheless span both boys-only and girls-only institutions and both National and Extra-County categories, providing sufficient breadth for a qualitative strand whose purpose was corroborative rather than representative.

4.2 Reliability of the Research Instruments

Table 3: Internal Consistency Reliability of the Questionnaire Subscales (N = 300)

Subscale	No. of items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Helper / Peer Mentor Model	4	.990	Excellent
Peer Support Group Model	3	.959	Excellent
Peer Education Model	3	.998	Excellent
Peer Leadership / Empowerment Model	3	.991	Excellent
Peer-counselling models (composite)	13	.992	Excellent
Social well-being	4	.904	Excellent
Emotional well-being	6	.988	Excellent
Socio-emotional well-being (composite)	10	.983	Excellent
Discipline / behaviour change	10	.996	Excellent
Challenges of peer counselling	8	.996	Excellent

Source: Field Data (2026)

All ten subscales returned coefficients well in excess of the .70 threshold, indicating that items within each subscale measured a common underlying construct with a high degree of consistency. Two observations merit explicit acknowledgement. Alpha values approaching unity ($\alpha > .95$) are ordinarily interpreted as evidence of item redundancy rather than simply of superior measurement, since alpha is a positive function of both the number of items and the average inter-item correlation, and several items within subscales were near paraphrases of one another. Further, because all constructs were measured through a single self-report instrument administered at a single point in time, the coefficients are inflated by common-method variance. Both issues are carried forward into the limitations.

4.3 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4: Demographic Characteristics of Learner Respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	146	48.7
	Female	154	51.3
Class level	Grade 10	90	30.0
	Form Three	111	37.0
	Form Four	99	33.0
School type	Girls-only	106	35.3
	Boys-only	104	34.7
	Mixed	90	30.0
School category	National (C1)	19	6.3
	Extra-County (C2)	110	36.7
	County (C3)	171	57.0
Peer-counsellor status	Yes	79	26.3
	No	221	73.7
Length of stay in school	Less than 1 year	113	37.7
	1–2 years	124	41.3
	3–4 years	63	21.0
Total		300	100.0

Source: Field Data (2026)

The achieved sample was very nearly balanced by gender, satisfying the design requirement of approximately 150 respondents per gender group and yielding approximately equal statistical power for the two groups. This matters directly for the present objective, since the gender comparison is one of its two central analytical questions. The class-level distribution was well spread across Grade 10, Form Three and Form Four, exceeding the minimum of 90 respondents per level anticipated in the sampling plan. School category departed from strict proportionality, with National schools contributing only 6.3% of learners, but this mirrors the composition of the sampling frame; the small C1 cell is a feature of the population rather than a defect of the sample, although it constrains precision.

Slightly more than one quarter of respondents identified themselves as serving peer counsellors while 221 were recipients rather than providers of peer support, a composition that is analytically valuable because it ensures that perceived support is captured from the standpoint of the ordinary learner and not merely of the programme's officeholders. Finally, 79.0% of respondents had been in their current school for two years or less, consistent with the exclusion of Form One and Form Two learners.

4.4 Descriptive Overview of the Study Variables

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for the Composite Study Variables (N = 300)

Construct	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis	Interpretation
Helper / Peer Mentor Model	4.070	.788	3.00	5.00	-.177	-1.376	High
Peer Support Group Model	4.357	.682	3.00	5.00	-.771	-.496	Very high
Peer Education Model	4.038	.786	3.00	5.00	-.064	-1.382	High
Peer Leadership Model	4.063	.790	3.00	5.00	-.144	-1.390	High
Peer-counselling models (composite)	4.132	.742	3.00	5.00	-.301	-1.291	High
Social well-being	4.386	.604	3.00	5.00	-.582	-1.226	Very high

Construct	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis	Interpretation
Emotional well-being	4.097	.754	3.00	5.00	-.141	-1.358	High
Discipline / behaviour change	4.112	.746	3.00	5.00	-.163	-1.354	High
Challenges of peer counselling	2.356	1.163	1.00	4.00	.165	-1.474	Low

Source: Field Data (2026)

Every construct associated with peer-counselling provision and its outcomes returned a mean above 4.00, while the challenges construct returned a mean of 2.356, well below the scale midpoint. A notable feature of the distributions is that the observed minimum on every positively worded composite is 3.00: no learner in the sample returned an average rating in the disagree range on any model, well-being or discipline subscale. Skewness values fall between $-.771$ and $+.165$ and kurtosis values between -1.474 and $-.496$, within the ± 2 range conventionally accepted as indicating approximate normality for regression purposes, and Spearman's rank-order coefficients computed as a non-parametric check corroborate the correlation results reported below.

4.5 Correlation and Collinearity Diagnostics

Table 6: Pearson Correlations of the Peer-Counselling Model Subscales with Social Well-Being and the Other Study Constructs (N = 300)

Variable	Social well-being	Emotional well-being	Discipline	Challenges
Helper / Peer Mentor Model	.975**	.991**	.994**	-.963**
Peer Support Group Model	.842**	.862**	.842**	-.864**
Peer Education Model	.961**	.987**	.990**	-.967**
Peer Leadership Model	.977**	.994**	.995**	-.971**

Variable	Social well-being	Emotional well-being	Discipline	Challenges
Peer-counselling models (composite)	.975**	.995**	.993**	-.976**
Social well-being	1.000	.974**	.977**	-.953**

Note: ** $p < .001$ (two-tailed). Source: Field Data (2026)

Every correlation is significant at the .001 level. All associations between the model subscales and social well-being are positive and very strong ($r = .842$ to $.977$), while the association between the models and the challenges construct is strongly negative. Spearman's coefficients returned a virtually identical pattern, confirming that the findings are not an artefact of the distributional properties noted above. Two properties of this matrix govern the interpretation of every regression reported hereafter and are stated at the outset.

Multicollinearity among the predictors. The four model subscales correlate with one another at levels between .821 and .995. Table 7 presents the collinearity diagnostics obtained when all four are entered into a single regression equation.

Table 7: Collinearity Diagnostics for the Four Model Subscales as Joint Predictors

Predictor	Tolerance	VIF	Acceptable threshold
Helper / Peer Mentor Model	.00026	3,826.27	VIF < 10
Peer Support Group Model	.01050	95.26	VIF < 10
Peer Education Model	.00093	1,071.67	VIF < 10
Peer Leadership Model	.00033	3,007.70	VIF < 10

Note: Eigenvalues of the predictor correlation matrix = 3.731, .246, .020, .004; condition number = 30.14. Source: Field Data (2026)

Variance inflation factors of this magnitude indicate severe multicollinearity. The consequence is that the individual partial regression coefficients obtained when all four models are entered simultaneously are unstable and must not be read as a ranking of model effectiveness. Simple linear regressions are

therefore reported as the primary basis for interpreting the standing of each model, with the multiple regression used only to establish the joint explanatory contribution of the set.

Absence of discriminant validity.

Correlations of .97 and above between conceptually distinct constructs indicate that, in these data, learners are not discriminating sharply between the constructs the instrument was designed to separate. This is the signature of common-method variance in a single-informant, single-occasion, uniformly positively worded instrument, and it is carried forward as a limitation.

4.6 Descriptive Findings on Social Well-Being

Table 8: Learners' Ratings of Social Well-Being Indicators (N = 300)

Item	M	SD	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I receive adequate social support from peers in this school	4.707	.463	99.7	0.3	0.0
Peer counselling has improved my relationships with other learners	4.473	.747	84.7	15.3	0.0
I feel comfortable interacting socially with my peers	4.323	.703	86.3	13.7	0.0
Peer counselling has reduced my feelings of loneliness	4.040	.783	71.3	28.7	0.0
Composite social well-being	4.386	.604			

Source: Field Data (2026)

Social well-being was rated very high overall ($M = 4.386$, $SD = .604$). The strongest indicator was the perceived adequacy of social support from peers, endorsed by 99.7% of learners, followed by social comfort (86.3%) and improved interpersonal relationships (84.7%). The weakest indicator, though still high, was the reduction of loneliness ($M = 4.040$), endorsed by 71.3%.

The gradient across these four items is theoretically meaningful and should not be passed over as a matter of decimal places. Learners report most strongly on the *availability* of peer support, somewhat less strongly on the *quality* of the relationships it generates, and least strongly on its *effect on subjective isolation*. This ordering corresponds closely to the distinction between perceived and received support,

and to Lakey and Cohen's (2000) argument that the perceived availability of support and its experienced effect are conceptually and empirically distinct. Peer counselling in these schools is, on this evidence, more successful at making support visible than at making it transformative.

4.7 Regression of Social Well-Being on the Peer-Counselling Models

Simple linear regression was used to quantify the association between each model and social well-being, taking the form $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \varepsilon$, where Y is social well-being and X is the model subscale.

Table 9: Simple Linear Regression of Social Well-Being on Each Peer-Counselling Model

Predictor	Constant	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI for B	R ²	F(1, 298)
Helper / Peer Mentor	1.343	.748	.010	.975	76.20	< .001	[.728, .767]	.951	5,807.0
Peer Support Group	1.139	.745	.028	.842	26.90	< .001	[.691, .800]	.708	723.8
Peer Education	1.406	.738	.012	.961	60.06	< .001	[.714, .762]	.924	3,607.5
Peer Leadership	1.351	.747	.010	.977	78.48	< .001	[.728, .766]	.954	6,158.4
Models (composite)	1.102	.796	.011	.975	75.60	< .001	 [.775, .817]	.950	5,715.5

Note: Durbin–Watson statistics ranged from 2.08 to 2.93. Source: Field Data (2026)

Every model is strongly and positively associated with social well-being when considered singly. The composite implementation score accounts for 95.0% of the variance in social well-being, and the fitted equation is Social well-being = 1.102 + .796 × (model implementation). A one-unit increase in perceived peer-counselling implementation is associated with a .796-unit increase in social well-being on the five-point scale.

Ranked by the strength of their individual association, the models order as Peer Leadership ($\beta = .977$, $R^2 = .954$), Helper/Peer Mentor ($\beta = .975$, $R^2 = .951$), Peer Education ($\beta = .961$, $R^2 = .924$) and Peer Support Group ($\beta = .842$, $R^2 = .708$).

The Peer Support Group Model, despite being the most extensively implemented of the four, shows the weakest association with social well-being.

The gap is substantial: the group modality accounts for roughly a quarter less variance than either relational model. This inversion between what is most delivered and what is most associated with benefit is the central practical finding of this objective.

Table 10: Multiple Regression of Social Well-Being on the Four Peer-Counselling Models

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	1.198	.047	—	25.38	< .001	[1.105, 1.291]
Helper / Peer Mentor	.447	.109	.582	4.11	< .001	.[233, .660]
Peer Support Group	.100	.020	.113	5.07	< .001	.[061, .139]
Peer Education	-.110	.057	-.144	-1.93	.054	[-.223, .002]
Peer Leadership	.339	.096	.444	3.54	< .001	.[150, .528]

Note: $R^2 = .959$, Adjusted $R^2 = .958$, $F(4, 295) = 1,712.19$, $p < .001$, Durbin-Watson = 2.81. Source: Field Data (2026)

The four models jointly account for 95.9% of the variance in social well-being. The Peer Education Model carries a **negative** partial coefficient ($B = -.110$, $\beta = -.144$) despite a zero-order correlation with social well-being of $r = .961$. This sign reversal is the direct consequence of the multicollinearity documented in Table 7, under which the Peer Education subscale correlates at .986 with the Helper subscale and .982 with the Peer Leadership subscale. It is a suppression artefact of collinear predictors and **must not be interpreted as evidence that peer education is detrimental to social well-being**. The simple regressions in Table 9 provide the sound basis for interpreting the standing of each model; the multiple regression is reported only to establish the joint contribution of the set.

4.8 Social Well-Being by Gender and Class Level

Gender and class-level comparisons were conducted through dummy-variable regression, with male learners and Grade 10 learners as reference categories.

Table 11: Dummy-Variable Regression of Social Well-Being on Gender and Class Level

Model	Predictor	B	SE	t	p	R ²	F
Gender model	Constant (Male)	4.382	.050	87.86	< .001	.000	0.01
	Female	.008	.070	0.11	.912		
Class model	Constant (Grade 10)	4.425	.048	92.64	< .001	.441	116.98***
	Form Three	.395	.064	6.14	< .001		
	Form Four	-.561	.066	-8.51	< .001		

Note: *** $p < .001$; $df = (2, 297)$ for the class model. Reference categories: male, Grade 10. Source: Field Data (2026)

Table 12: Class-Level Group Means for Social Well-Being

Class level	n	M	SD
Grade 10	90	4.425	.366
Form Three	111	4.820	.373
Form Four	99	3.864	.587
Total	300	4.386	.604

Note: With Form Three as the reference category, the Form Four coefficient is $B = -.956$, $SE = .063$, $t(297) = -15.26$, $p < .001$. Source: Field Data (2026)

Gender accounts for essentially none of the variance in social well-being ($R^2 = .000$, $p = .912$). Male and female learners reported effectively identical levels, and the negligible coefficient indicates a substantive equivalence rather than a failure of statistical power: with approximately 150 learners per group, the design had power of about .80 to detect a difference of one third of a standard deviation.

Class level, by contrast, accounts for 44.1% of the variance in social well-being. Form Three learners scored .395 of a point above Grade 10 learners, while Form Four learners scored .561 of a point below

them. Re-running the model with Form Three as the reference category shows the Form Four deficit relative to Form Three to be .956 of a point, the largest class-level difference recorded for this outcome. The trajectory is therefore an inverted U: social well-being rises from Grade 10 to Form Three and then falls sharply in the terminal year.

The interaction between gender and class level was assessed by adding product terms to the additive model. The additive model returned $R^2 = .441$ and the interactive model $R^2 = .462$, an increment of .021 with both product terms significant (Female $\times$ Form Three: $B = -.341$, $p = .008$; Female $\times$ Form Four: $B = -.413$, $p = .002$). The class-level trajectory therefore differs modestly between boys and girls: among Grade 10 learners, girls reported higher social well-being than boys (4.562 versus 4.268), whereas by Form Four the ordering had reversed (3.808 versus 3.926). Gender is thus irrelevant to the overall level of social well-being but not to its trajectory across the school career.

4.9 Test of Hypothesis

Table 13: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Analytical procedure	Principal statistics	Decision
H ₀₂ : Peer-counselling models have no significant contribution to the social well-being of learners	Simple and multiple linear regression; dummy-variable regression for gender and class level	Composite: $B = .796$, $\beta = .975$, $t(298) = 75.60$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .950$. Four models jointly: $R^2 = .959$, $F(4, 295) = 1,712.19$, $p < .001$. Gender: $B = .008$, $p = .912$, $R^2 = .000$. Class level: $R^2 = .441$, $F(2, 297) = 116.98$, $p < .001$	Rejected

Source: Field Data (2026)

The null hypothesis H₀₂ is rejected.

Peer-counselling models make a statistically significant contribution to the social well-being of learners in boarding secondary schools in Bungoma County. That contribution is invariant across gender but varies substantially across class levels.

4.10 Qualitative Findings

Deputy principals were unanimous that peer counselling contributes positively to learners' social well-being, and their accounts converge closely on the mechanisms specified by Social Support Theory. Three sub-themes emerged. The first concerned emotional release and disclosure. DP5 observed that learners experiencing socio-emotional challenges are able to vent and be assisted, and DP9 that most learners have been able to open up to their peers and in the process gain the confidence to face what

they are going through. DP6 provided the fullest articulation, reporting that the programme reduces anxiety, loneliness and depression while boosting self-esteem, empathy and coping skills, and attributing this to the ease with which learners open up to peers at a similar life stage, which fosters a safe environment for emotional release and personal growth. DP6's explanation identifies precisely the mechanism the theory specifies: low social distance and shared developmental position, not technical expertise, is what makes the peer an effective support provider.

The second concerned self-concept and interpersonal relationships. DP3 reported improved self-image; DP8 improved self-esteem and interpersonal relationships; DP7 that the programme changed learners' view of life and how they interact with one another positively; DP10 reported reduced stress, an absence of suicide cases and good relationships at class and house level. The third concerned the well-being-performance linkage, DP6 arguing that a learner whose socio-emotional well-being is catered for is a focused learner who knows what she wants in life, and DP7 that improved self-esteem produces a positive attitude towards school.

Table 14: Thematic Analysis of Learner Open-Ended Responses (n = 60 scripts)

Theme	Frequency (f)	% of scripts
Perceived benefits of peer counselling		
Better stress management and emotional coping	22	36.7
Improved confidence and self-esteem	20	33.3
Stronger peer relationships and sense of belonging	17	28.3
Improved academic focus and performance	11	18.3
Reduced indiscipline and improved behaviour	10	16.7
Reduced risky behaviour (drugs, pregnancy, peer pressure)	6	10.0
Challenges affecting the programme		
Inadequate time and competing school programmes	28	46.7
Negative attitude, stigma and low participation	17	28.3

Theme	Frequency (f)	% of scripts
Inadequate training and counselling skill	11	18.3
Inadequate resources and facilities	11	18.3
Breach of confidentiality and lack of trust	10	16.7
Weak teacher and administrative support	6	10.0
Suggestions for improvement		
Stronger teacher and administrative backing	25	41.7
Timetabled, regular counselling sessions	23	38.3
Systematic training and capacity-building	20	33.3
Provision of resources and facilities	11	18.3
Involvement of external professional counsellors	5	8.3
Motivation and recognition of peer counsellors	5	8.3

Source: Field Data (2026)

Stronger peer relationships and a sense of belonging were coded in 28.3% of learner scripts, the third most frequent benefit. R23 reported that the programme has reduced tensions in school, united teachers and learners, and reduced the lack of confidence in learners so that they can now share their problems easily. R6 situated the benefit in a material context, observing that many learners in the school are poor and have been helped to have confidence and continue with their studies. Several learners reported benefits extending into the socio-economic and protective domains: R3 described the programme as helping to minimise teenage pregnancies, peer influence and school drop-out, and as assisting orphaned and needy learners with uniforms and lunch money. These accounts describe instrumental support in the sense of Cohen and Wills (1985) and indicate that peer-counselling structures in some schools serve as an informal welfare mechanism as well as a psychosocial one.

The qualitative strand also supplies the mechanism for the class-level finding. Nearly half of all scripts (46.7%) identified inadequate time and competition from other school programmes as the principal constraint. R1 cited the fixed programme of the school and the volume of other activities including

games; R8 reported simply that there is too little time for counselling; R6 that peers in the school do not have time to discuss peer experiences. One deputy principal reported that when time is set aside for counselling, some teachers regard it as a diversion from academic programmes. This is the single strongest convergence between the two strands, and it points directly at the sharp decline in reported social well-being among Form Four learners.

5. DISCUSSION

Three findings warrant discussion, and together they reframe how the social benefit of peer counselling in this county should be understood.

The finding that peer-counselling implementation is strongly and positively associated with learners' social well-being provides direct empirical support for the buffering proposition of Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985) in the boarding-school context. Learners who are separated from family support structures for extended periods report their strongest social gains precisely in the domain the theory predicts: the perceived availability of support, endorsed by 99.7% of the sample. This corroborates the contention that peer counselling alters social well-being through the provision of communication skills, conflict-resolution capacity and a supportive environment for discussing social difficulties, and it is consistent with Makokha and Sang's (2020) report from the same county that structured peer support improves learner adjustment and smooths transition into boarding life. It is also consistent with Gachunga's (2017) link between peer-counselling models and social integration, and with Mbiti and Nzomo's (2019) account of social support in Kenyan boarding schools. What the present study adds is magnitude: the association is not merely detectable but dominant within these data.

That magnitude, however, requires interpretive restraint, and the point is made here rather than deferred to the limitations because it changes what the finding means. The variance explained ($R^2 = .950$ for the composite predictor) vastly exceeds anything reported in the controlled experimental literature on school-based interventions, where meta-analytic effect estimates are small. The discrepancy is methodological rather than substantive: both predictor and outcome were measured through learner self-report on a single instrument at a single point in time, so learners who hold a favourable general view of their school's programme are disposed to endorse both sets of items. The correct inference is that *learners who perceive peer-counselling models to be well implemented also perceive their own social well-being to be high* — a finding of practical importance in its own right, since perceived support is the construct Social Support Theory identifies as the operative buffer (Lakey & Cohen, 2000) — but not that peer counselling produces effects of the magnitude the R^2 values imply.

The second finding of consequence is the inversion between delivery and benefit. The Peer Support Group Model is the most extensively implemented of the four yet carries the weakest association with social well-being, while the two relational models, Peer Leadership and Helper/Peer Mentor, carry the strongest. Group-based peer support is the least resource-intensive of the four models: it can be delivered to an entire stream in a single session, requires no individual case management and imposes

minimal supervisory burden. Its prominence in resource-constrained boarding schools is therefore unsurprising, and it echoes Kamore and Tiego's (2015) finding that peer-counselling provision in Kenyan schools gravitates towards whatever arrangement is administratively convenient rather than towards the arrangement best matched to learners' presenting needs. The consequence, on this evidence, is that schools are investing most heavily in the modality that returns least in relational terms. Since social well-being is constructed through sustained relationship rather than through scheduled address to a collective audience, this is theoretically coherent as well as empirically observed.

The absence of a gender difference is noteworthy and departs from the pattern that might have been anticipated from Li, King and Wang (2026), who report gender-differentiated motivational and adjustment profiles among adolescents. Two interpretations are plausible. The first is that peer support functions as a general adolescent developmental resource whose social benefits are not gender-specific, so that boys and girls derive comparable benefit from structurally different arrangements. The second is that the single-sex composition of most schools in the sample means that gender and school type are largely coextensive, so that the null-gender result partly reflects the fact that each gender is being served by the modality that has taken root in its own institutional setting. Given the confounding documented in the sample, the second interpretation cannot be excluded, and the finding should be read as indicating comparable outcomes under different arrangements rather than the irrelevance of gender to peer support. The significant interaction terms qualify this further: the level is equivalent, but the trajectory is not, with girls beginning higher and ending marginally lower than boys.

The class-level pattern is the most striking result under this objective and the most actionable. Social well-being rises from Grade 10 to Form Three and then falls sharply in Form Four. The most plausible substantive explanation is examination pressure: Form Four is the terminal, examination year of the 8-4-4 cycle, during which learners in Kenyan boarding schools are subjected to intensified academic scheduling, extended preparation programmes and the withdrawal of co-curricular and pastoral time. This account is supported directly by the qualitative data, in which learners identified competition between counselling time and academic programmes as the foremost constraint in 46.7% of scripts. The finding thus operationalises the concern that examination orientation in Bungoma County's boarding schools may unintentionally overshadow structured psychosocial support, and it does so at precisely the point in the learner's career when psychosocial demand is greatest. An alternative and non-exclusive explanation is a cohort or maturational effect, whereby older learners evaluate school programmes more critically. Distinguishing these explanations would require longitudinal data, which the present design does not supply. Either way, the operational implication is the same: provision contracts when it should expand.

The cultural evidence sharpens rather than softens these conclusions. Bukusu social organisation already supplies the raw material for effective relational peer support: storytelling, peer discussion, ceremonial gathering, age-set mentorship and intergenerational guidance are indigenous mechanisms for collective coping (Ntumi et al., 2022; Springer, 2022), and comparative evidence confirms that culturally attuned services are more accessible and more effective than transplanted models (Duhaney

et al., 2026; Abeasi et al., 2026). The county therefore does not face a deficit of cultural resource; it faces a deficit of institutional design. The task is not to import a model but to formalise, train and supervise the relational practices already present.

6. CONCLUSION

Peer-counselling provision is substantially and positively associated with the social well-being of learners in boarding secondary schools in Bungoma County, and this association holds equally for boys and girls. Learners' strongest endorsement fell on the perceived availability of peer support, which is precisely the construct that Social Support Theory identifies as the operative buffer against stress. The study therefore concludes that Social Support Theory holds explanatory value in the Kenyan boarding-school context and that peer counselling functions in these institutions as a partial substitute for the family support structures from which boarders are separated.

A more qualified conclusion attaches to the gradient across the four social well-being indicators. Learners reported most strongly on the availability of support, less strongly on the quality of relationships it generates, and least strongly on its effect on subjective loneliness. The arrangements currently in place are more successful at making support *visible and accessible* than at making it *transformative of learners' inner experience*. The same conclusion is reinforced from a different direction by the model rankings: the most extensively implemented model is the one least strongly associated with social benefit, so that provision and benefit are inversely ordered.

The most consequential conclusion under this objective concerns class level. Learners' social well-being deteriorates sharply in the terminal examination year, and that deterioration coincides with the point at which counselling time is most heavily displaced by academic programming. Form Four learners reported the lowest social well-being of any class level, with a deficit of nearly a full-scale point relative to Form Three. Psychosocial support in these schools is therefore withdrawn at precisely the point in the learner's career when psychosocial demand is greatest, and this constitutes the single most actionable weakness identified under this objective. Peer counselling in Bungoma County does not need to be introduced. It needs to be protected, restructured and sustained through the terminal year.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the strength of the foregoing, the County Director of Education, working with the Ministry of Education, should require every boarding secondary school to protect a timetabled counselling slot that is maintained through Form Four rather than suspended in favour of examination preparation, since the terminal-year collapse in social well-being is the clearest and most remediable finding of this objective. Because learners themselves identified timetabled regular sessions and stronger administrative backing as their two leading recommendations, this measure has the further advantage of matching the constituency it is meant to serve.

Schools should rebalance model design towards the relational modalities. Given that the Peer Leadership and Helper/Peer Mentor models carry the strongest association with social well-being while the group modality carries the weakest, schools that currently rely predominantly on scheduled group sessions should introduce or strengthen a structured mentoring component, with defined mentor–mentee pairings, a minimum contact frequency and a named supervising teacher. Group sessions should be retained for reach and for awareness-raising, but should not be treated as the organising logic of the programme.

Selection and preparation of peer counsellors should be placed on a competency basis. A selection instrument assessing empathy, listening capacity, discretion and emotional stability should replace character nomination, popular election and self-selection; initial training by an external professional counsellor should be mandatory, supplemented by termly refreshers and a defined supervision ratio. Because learners identified breach of confidentiality and lack of trust in 16.7% of scripts, confidentiality should be addressed explicitly in training and reinforced by a written protocol distinguishing what peer counsellors may hold in confidence from what must be escalated.

Programme design should draw explicitly on Bukusu relational practices, including age-set mentorship, storytelling and structured group discussion, rather than importing an external template. Schools should maintain policies, training records, activity schedules and case-trend summaries against which county offices require periodic reporting, so that evaluation becomes routine. Finally, further research should employ longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs, multi-informant measurement and reverse-worded items to establish direction of influence, to separate the constructs the present measurement could not, and to determine whether the terminal-year decline reflects withdrawal of provision, maturational change in evaluation, or both.

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