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# Influence of Household Food Insufficiency on Learners' Enrolment in Public Junior Schools in Voi Sub-County, Taita Taveta County, Kenya

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to investigate influence of household food insufficiency on learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi sub-county, Taita Taveta county, Kenya. It was guided by one research question: To what extent does insufficient household food influence learners' enrolment? The study was anchored on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory. A mixed methods approach, with convergent design was employed. The target population comprised of 45 public junior schools, 45 heads of institutions, 3,276 learners, 274 junior school teachers, 620 parents, and one sub-county director of education in Voi sub-county. Sample size included: 10 public junior schools which were selected using stratified and random sampling, 328 learners selected using systematic sampling, 73 teachers selected using simple random sampling, 10 heads of institutions were selected using criterion purposive sampling, and 1 SCDE selected using criterion purposive sampling. Data collection instruments included: questionnaires for teachers, interview guides for heads institutions and SCDE, and focus groups discussion guide for learners. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 28 for descriptive and inferential statistics, and NVivo for thematic analysis of qualitative data. Research instruments were validated through face validity, and reliability ensured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.80. Findings were presented in tables and graphs. Ethical considerations were observed. The study may find that household food insufficiency negatively influences learners' enrolment through increased absenteeism, reduced school participation, and delayed entry into junior schools. It may conclude that food insecurity remains a significant barrier to educational access. The study recommends strengthening school feeding programmes, supporting vulnerable households, and promoting community-based interventions to improve learners' enrolment and retention.*

**Key Words:** Household food insufficiency; Food insecurity; Food access; Nutritional adequacy Learners' enrolment; School participation; School attendance; and Learner retention

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## Background to the Study

Household food insufficiency refers to the inability of households to consistently access adequate, safe, nutritious, and affordable food required for active and healthy living. Food insufficiency is a dimension of household food insecurity, which includes uncertainty regarding future food availability and limited financial access to nutrient-rich diets (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2023). Food insecurity extends beyond hunger to include inadequate food affordability, unstable food supplies, and coping strategies that negatively affect household welfare. Learners' enrolment refers to the process through which children enter and register in educational institutions. When households experience food shortages, families may prioritize immediate survival needs over educational investments, affecting children's ability to enrol in schools.

Education stakeholders increasingly recognize household food security as an important factor influencing children's access to education. International organizations argue that poverty and hunger create barriers to equitable educational participation. UNESCO (2024) notes that universal education access cannot be achieved when hunger prevents children from entering and completing schooling. Similarly, UNICEF (2023) emphasizes that vulnerable children from food-insecure households are more likely to experience delayed enrolment or withdrawal from school due to competing household survival needs. The World Food Programme (2025) further explains that households experiencing food shortages often prioritize food expenditure over education-related costs, demonstrating the close relationship between household food access and school participation.

Globally, household food insufficiency remains a major challenge affecting children's educational opportunities, particularly among vulnerable populations. Food insecurity is influenced by factors such as poverty, climate change, economic instability, conflicts, and limited livelihood opportunities. According to FAO (2024), millions of people globally experience acute food insecurity, with rural communities being among the most affected. These conditions influence children's educational participation because households may struggle to provide resources necessary for schooling. Although many countries have implemented education support and nutrition programmes, sustainable educational access depends on addressing underlying household food challenges. The relationship between nutrition and education has therefore become central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 on Zero Hunger and Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education.

In developed countries such as the United States and Canada, household food insufficiency continues to influence children's educational experiences despite stronger social protection systems. In the United States, Gundersen and Ziliak (2023) found that children from food-insecure households experienced challenges in maintaining regular school participation because families struggled to provide nutritious diets and meet educational costs. Similarly, in Canada, Tarasuk et al. (2022) established that persistent household food insecurity was associated with delayed school enrolment and irregular educational involvement among children from disadvantaged households. Rising food prices reduced household purchasing power, forcing families to adopt coping strategies such as reducing food quality and diverting resources away from education. These

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findings demonstrate that food insecurity remains an educational concern even in developed economies.

Other developed countries, including Australia and the United Kingdom, have also identified household food insecurity as a factor affecting children's wellbeing and educational participation. Although these countries have comprehensive welfare systems, vulnerable families continue to experience difficulties accessing adequate food due to income inequalities and rising living costs. Food shortages may affect children's concentration, attendance, and engagement with learning activities. Evidence from developed contexts demonstrates that economic development alone does not completely eliminate educational inequalities associated with food access. Instead, sustained interventions addressing household poverty, nutrition support, and social protection remain necessary. These experiences provide important lessons for developing countries where household food insufficiency is often intensified by limited resources, climate challenges, and weaker safety nets.

Across Africa, household food insufficiency remains a significant barrier to universal access to education due to persistent poverty, droughts, climate variability, conflicts, and unstable livelihoods. FAO (2024) reports that a substantial proportion of Africa's population experiences acute food insecurity, with rural households being disproportionately affected. These challenges influence children's schooling because families often face difficult choices between meeting food requirements and supporting education-related expenses. Although many African countries have introduced free basic education policies, successful implementation depends on households having adequate food and other essential resources to enable children to attend school consistently. Food insufficiency therefore remains an important factor influencing enrolment, retention, and participation among learners across the continent.

In Ethiopia and Malawi, studies demonstrate the relationship between household food insufficiency and children's educational participation. Abebe, Tadesse, and Bekele (2023) found that household food insecurity significantly reduced school enrolment in drought-prone regions of Ethiopia, particularly among pastoralist and low-income communities. Long-term drought reduced agricultural production and limited parents' ability to support children's education. Similarly, Chirwa and Mvula (2022) established that economic shocks and increasing food costs in Malawi reduced school enrolment because households struggled to meet food needs alongside indirect educational expenses such as uniforms and learning materials. These studies show that although the causes may differ, household food insecurity negatively affects educational engagement through reduced household capacity to support schooling.

In Kenya, education is recognized as a fundamental right through the Constitution, Vision 2030, and competency-based education reforms. The introduction of junior schools in 2023 aimed to improve transition and equitable access to quality education. However, household conditions, including food availability, remain important determinants of enrolment. UNICEF (2024) observes that food insecurity limits parents' ability to enrol children, particularly in economically disadvantaged households. National drought conditions have further intensified food challenges, especially in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs), where reduced rainfall affects household income, agricultural production, and food availability. The National Drought Management

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Authority (NDMA, 2025) emphasizes the importance of strengthening school nutrition and social protection programmes to protect learners' educational participation.

County-level experiences in Kenya demonstrate how local socioeconomic and environmental conditions influence the relationship between food insecurity and education. In Turkana County, frequent droughts, livestock losses, and declining household incomes have contributed to food shortages affecting children's participation in school. Similarly, Kitui County experiences seasonal food shortages caused by unreliable rainfall and reduced agricultural productivity, leading some households to prioritize food needs over education. Although interventions such as humanitarian assistance and school feeding programmes have supported learners, these measures have not completely addressed underlying household vulnerabilities. Other counties facing similar challenges include Kilifi and Machakos, where poverty, climate variability, and dependence on agriculture influence household food security and educational outcomes.

Taita Taveta County experiences food security challenges associated with climatic conditions, agricultural limitations, and household economic vulnerabilities. The county has communities that depend heavily on agriculture and natural resources, making household food availability vulnerable to environmental changes and economic shocks. Although government interventions such as school feeding programmes, cash transfers, and bursary schemes have been implemented, some households continue to experience food shortages that may affect children's ability to participate in education. Strengthening household resilience remains essential for improving educational access. Evidence from Kenya indicates that households benefiting from social protection programmes have better capacity to meet children's nutritional and educational needs compared with vulnerable households without such support (Muhindi et al., 2024).

Voi Sub-County in Taita Taveta County faces educational challenges influenced by household socioeconomic conditions, including food availability and affordability. Households experiencing food insufficiency may struggle to meet education-related costs, resulting in delayed enrolment, irregular attendance, or reduced participation among learners. Although national programmes such as school meals and social protection initiatives have supported vulnerable learners, evidence regarding how household food insufficiency specifically influences enrolment in public junior schools in Voi remains limited. Existing research has focused more on northern ASAL counties, leaving limited empirical evidence from Taita Taveta County. Therefore, understanding the situation in Voi Sub-County is important for developing context-specific strategies that enhance junior school enrolment.

The existing literature reveals important gaps that justify the current study on household food insufficiency and learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi Sub-County. Although previous studies have examined food insecurity and educational participation, limited attention has been given to junior schools established under Kenya's Competency-Based Education system. Furthermore, existing studies rarely examine specific household food insufficiency factors such as frequency of food shortages, food affordability, coping strategies, and their direct influence on learners' enrolment decisions. Additionally, much available evidence focuses on northern ASAL counties, creating limited understanding of contexts such as Taita Taveta County. This study

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therefore seeks to generate empirical evidence on how household food insufficiency influences learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi Sub-County.

## Statement of the Problem

Every school-age child should have equal access to education, regardless of their family's financial situation. The Competency-Based Education introduced junior school in Kenya with the goal of boosting enrolment and guaranteeing a universal transition to basic education. However, in some ASAL counties, such as Taita Taveta, where household food insecurity still exists, this goal is still challenging to accomplish. The National Drought Management Authority (2025) states that many households are still vulnerable to food shortages due to frequent droughts, growing food costs, and falling household incomes. As a result, despite government support programs, school administrators, parents, and county education authorities have voiced concern that learners from food-insecure households are less likely to register in junior schools.

Kenya's commitment to the CBE, Sustainable Development Goal 4, and Vision 2030 may be undermined if this situation continues, as many qualified learners might not enroll in junior school. While food insecurity and educational results have been studied in the past, the majority of these research have concentrated on attendance, academic performance, or elementary primary rather than Junior school enrollment. Additionally, the majority of previous study has focused on other ASAL counties, leaving essentially no empirical data from Voi sub-county and very little from Taita Taveta County. Therefore, it is yet unknown how learners' enrollment in public junior schools in Voi Sub-County is influenced by household food insufficiency, food affordability, the frequency of food shortages, and household food insecurity coping techniques. These significant contextual and empirical gaps are the focus of this investigation on influence of household food insecurity on learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi sub-county, Taita Taveta county, Kenya

## Research Question

To what extent does household food insufficiency influence learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi Sub-County, Taita Taveta County?

## Theoretical Framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, developed by Abraham Maslow in 1943 and expanded in *Motivation and Personality* (Maslow, 1954), provides the foundation for this study. The theory explains that human needs exist in a hierarchical arrangement, beginning with physiological needs such as food, water, shelter, and clothing, followed by safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Maslow (1943) argues that individuals are primarily motivated to satisfy basic needs before pursuing higher-level goals. In this study, household food insufficiency represents an unmet physiological need that may limit learners' ability to participate in education. When families struggle to access adequate food, they may prioritize survival needs over educational investments, influencing learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi Sub-County.

A major strength of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory is its ability to explain how basic household conditions influence educational participation. The theory provides a logical framework

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for understanding why learners from food-insecure households may experience challenges in enrolling and participating in school. Collie (2021) notes that the theory remains relevant in educational research because learners require their basic physiological and safety needs to be met before they can effectively focus on academic goals. Recent evidence from UNESCO (2024) and FAO et al. (2024) further demonstrates that adequate nutrition improves school attendance, engagement, and learning outcomes. Therefore, the theory supports the examination of how household food insufficiency affects learners' enrolment by emphasizing the importance of meeting basic needs.

Despite its relevance, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory has limitations that should be considered when interpreting findings. One major criticism is that human needs do not always follow a fixed sequence because individuals may pursue higher-level goals even when basic needs remain unmet. For example, some learners from food-insecure households may continue attending school because education is viewed as a pathway toward improving future living conditions (UNESCO, 2024). Additionally, the theory may not fully consider external factors such as government interventions, school feeding programmes, social protection initiatives, and community support systems that influence educational decisions. The World Bank (2022) argues that such interventions can enable vulnerable households to maintain children's participation in education despite food insecurity challenges.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory is applicable to this study because it provides a framework for explaining how household food insufficiency may influence learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi Sub-County, Taita Taveta County. The theory suggests that inadequate access to food may affect parents' decisions regarding education because household resources may be directed toward immediate survival needs rather than school-related expenses. FAO et al. (2024) emphasize that food insecurity remains closely connected with educational participation, particularly among vulnerable households. The theory therefore guides this study in examining how food availability, household coping strategies, and nutritional challenges influence enrolment decisions. By linking physiological needs with educational participation, Maslow's theory provides a foundation for understanding barriers to learners' access to junior school education.

**Review of Related Empirical Literature**

Using nationally representative household survey data gathered in 2022, Rabbitt et al. (2023) investigated the frequency and features of household food insecurity in the United States. In order to determine vulnerable population categories, evaluate food security levels, and investigate the connection between household economic conditions and food access, the study used descriptive statistical analysis. The results showed that food insecurity had significantly increased from the prior year, especially among low-income families and those with children. Inadequate home food supply increases nutritional vulnerability and restricts possibilities for healthy development, which has a detrimental impact on children's wellbeing and involvement in school, according to the study. To improve children's wellbeing and academic results, it suggested bolstering food assistance programs and home financial support.

The study did not particularly look at how home food insufficiency influence learners' school enrollment, despite offering extensive national data on household food insecurity. The

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study's findings are less applicable to rural and semi-arid regions like Voi sub-county because it concentrates on a developed-country setting with substantial social safety programs. Additionally, it looked at household food security in general rather than household food inadequacy as a separate factor influencing school enrollment. In order to bridgr these gaps, the current study focused on how much household food insecurity influence learners' enrollment in public junior schools. The study, which was carried out in a semi-arid Kenyan setting, produced context-specific evidence by looking at learners' enrollment and household food insufficiency.

Among 101 school-age children from fishermen's households in Terengganu, Malaysia, the study by Hashim (2021), examined the relationship between household food insecurity, academic achievement, and nutritional status. Children's academic performance and anthropometric characteristics were examined in conjunction with home food insecurity using a cross-sectional survey approach. Chi-square tests were used to evaluate the data. According to the results, 43.2% of the children had food insecurity at home. However, neither academic achievement nor nutritional status were shown to be statistically significantly correlated with household food insecurity. The authors came to the conclusion that more research with bigger sample sizes and in various parts of Malaysia is required to fully comprehend the effects of household food insecurity on education.

The study focused on academic performance and nutritional status rather than learners' enrollment, even though it looked at home food insecurity among school-aged children. It also targeted youngsters from Malaysian fishing communities, whose socioeconomic background is different from that of Kenya's semi-arid areas. Additionally, the study used a somewhat small sample, which would restrict how broadly its findings can be applied. By examining the influence of home food insufficiency on learners' enrollment in public junior schools in Voi sub-county, utilising data from a semi-arid Kenyan setting, the current study sealed these contextual, methodological, and information gaps.

Aurino, Tranchant, Diallo, and Gelli's (2021) study examined the relationship between home food insecurity and scholastic outcomes among Ghanaian adolescents enrolled in secondary schools. Interviewer-administered questionnaires and school administration records from 2,201 students in 100 schools were used in a cross-sectional study design. The Household Food Insecurity Access Scale was used to quantify household food insecurity, and the data was analysed using multilevel statistical modelling. The results showed that compared to their peers from food-secure households, teenagers from food-insecure households had considerably lower math achievement, worse school attendance, lower academic self-efficacy, and weaker educational goals. The authors came to the recommended that among school-age teenagers, household food poverty had a negative impact on both academic performance and educational involvement.

The study found that household food poverty had a detrimental impact on educational outcomes, however it focused more on academic achievement and school attendance than learner enrolment. Furthermore, the study was carried out among teenagers in Ghana, whose educational system and socioeconomic circumstances are different from Kenya's public junior schools and Competency-Based Curriculum, which limits the applicability of its conclusions. By particularly examining the influence of home food inadequacy on learners' enrolment in public junior schools

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in Voi sub-county, the current study filled in these contextual and knowledge gaps. By doing this, it closed the geographic gap and offer context-specific empirical data to guide initiatives related to food security and education.

Gebresilassie, Tesfay, Abay, and Mpungose (2025) investigated whether Ethiopia's Urban Productive Safety Net Programme enhanced children's educational outcomes in Tigray and decreased household food insecurity. The researchers evaluated the program's influence on children's school attendance and household food security using data from household surveys and impact evaluation methods. The results demonstrated that by increasing home access to food and economic support, the program considerably decreased household food insecurity while also enhancing children's school attendance and educational participation. The study found that by lowering family food insufficiency and enhancing families' capacity to satisfy children's nutritional and educational needs, social protection programs improve educational outcomes.

The study assessed the effects of a particular intervention rather than the direct influence of home food scarcity on learners' enrollment, even if it demonstrates the efficacy of a government safety-net program in increasing educational engagement. Furthermore, the study was conducted in metropolitan Ethiopia following a conflict, where socioeconomic circumstances are very different from those in Voi Sub-County. Therefore, without restricting the research to recipients of a social security program, the current study aims to determine the degree to which household food insufficiency influence learners' enrollment in public junior schools.

The study by Kiboi et al (2022), examined coping mechanisms and food insecurity in households with school-age children enrolled in Nairobi County's Food for Education School Feeding Program. Households with children enrolled in participating public schools were included in a cross-sectional survey approach. Standardised food security indicators were employed to evaluate household food insecurity, and coping strategies and food insecurity levels were investigated using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Despite the benefits of school feeding interventions, the results showed that many homes still faced moderate to severe food insecurity. Reducing meal quantities, skipping meals, and buying fewer desirable foods were common coping mechanisms. The study came to the conclusion that while school feeding programs increase children's access to meals, they are not enough to end food insecurity in households.

The study looked at household food insecurity among families with school-age children, however it concentrated more on coping mechanisms and food insecurity levels than on how household food insufficiency directly affected students' enrollment. Additionally, the study's conclusions cannot be applied to semi-arid areas because it was carried out in Nairobi county, an urban area with very well-established school food programs. By examining the degree to which home food scarcity influence learner' enrollment in public junior schools in Voi sub-county, the current study filled in these conceptual and contextual gaps and offers context-specific empirical support for an ASAL environment.

The study by Kinagu, Ayaga, Kikechi (2023), looked at how pre-primary students' enrollment in public primary schools in Sabatia sub-county, Vihiga county, was affected by take-home food rations. Head teachers, teachers, and County Assembly Education Board members

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participated in a descriptive survey design. Questionnaires and interviews were used to gather data, which was then analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The results showed that by lowering absenteeism and motivating parents to enroll and keep their children in school, take-home food rations greatly increased learner enrollment. The study suggested that food assistance programs are crucial for increasing children from low-income households' access to education.

The study examined a school feeding intervention rather than the direct influence of household food shortage, even though it proved that take-home food rations had a favourable influence on learners' enrolment. Furthermore, the study concentrated on pre-primary llearners in Sabatia sub-county, whose educational background is different from that of public junior schools that follow Kenya's Competency-Based Education. By investigating how household food insufficiency influence learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi sub-county, Taita Taveta county, the current study filled in these conceptual, contextual, and educational-level gaps and produces data that is directly related to junior school education and food insecurity in a semi-arid setting.

## Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design to obtain both quantitative and qualitative evidence regarding household food insufficiency and learners' enrolment. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), a mixed-methods approach enables researchers to collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, analyse each strand separately, and integrate findings during interpretation. The quantitative component employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine relationships between household food insufficiency and enrolment patterns, while the qualitative component used phenomenological approaches to explore experiences of learners, parents, school administrators, and education officials. This design was appropriate because it provided measurable evidence while also capturing detailed explanations of how household food challenges influence learners' educational participation.

The study was conducted in Voi Sub-County, one of the sub-counties in Taita Taveta County, Kenya. The area was selected because it experiences semi-arid climatic conditions characterized by irregular rainfall, drought occurrences, and periodic food shortages that influence household livelihoods. The target population consisted of stakeholders directly involved in learners' enrolment, including junior school learners, teachers, heads of institutions, parents or guardians, and the Sub-County Director of Education. Sampling involved both probability and non-probability techniques to ensure appropriate representation of participants. The study sampled public junior schools, learners, teachers, parents, heads of institutions, and the SCDE to obtain diverse perspectives on household food insufficiency and enrolment.

Data were collected using questionnaires, interview guides, focus group discussion guides, observation guides, and document analysis tools to facilitate triangulation of findings. Teachers and learners provided quantitative data through questionnaires, while heads of institutions, parents, and the Sub-County Director of Education provided qualitative information through interviews. The validity of instruments was established through expert review, while reliability of quantitative instruments was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha after pilot testing. Quantitative data were

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analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics through SPSS, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and protection of participants' identities, were observed throughout the study process.

**Presentation, Interpretation, and Discussion of Findings**

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements relating to household food insufficiency and learners' enrolment. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where 5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Uncertain, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree. The results obtained from the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Teachers' Responses to Household Food Insufficiency and Learners' Enrollment (n=75)*

| Statement | SA | A | U | D | SD | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Household food insufficiency reduces learners' enrolment. | 18 (24.0%) | 30 (40.0%) | 11 (14.7%) | 9 (12.0%) | 7 (9.3%) | 3.57 | 1.24 |
| Food insufficiency delays learners' school enrolment. | 17 (22.7%) | 29 (38.7%) | 10 (13.3%) | 11 (14.7%) | 8 (10.7%) | 3.48 | 1.29 |
| Learners from food-insufficient households miss school more often. | 16 (21.3%) | 28 (37.3%) | 11 (14.7%) | 12 (16.0%) | 8 (10.7%) | 3.43 | 1.29 |
| Household food insufficiency contributes to school dropout. | 17 (22.7%) | 31 (41.3%) | 12 (16.0%) | 9 (12.0%) | 6 (8.0%) | 3.59 | 1.20 |
| Food insufficiency affects transition to junior school. | 18 (24.0%) | 29 (38.7%) | 9 (12.0%) | 11 (14.7%) | 8 (10.7%) | 3.51 | 1.30 |
| Learners from food-insufficient households have low school retention. | 19 (25.3%) | 27 (36.0%) | 8 (10.7%) | 13 (17.3%) | 8 (10.7%) | 3.48 | 1.33 |
| Food insufficiency discourages parents from enrolling children. | 15 (20.0%) | 26 (34.7%) | 12 (16.0%) | 12 (16.0%) | 10 (13.3%) | 3.32 | 1.33 |
| Food insufficiency affects boys' and girls' enrolment differently. | 13 (17.3%) | 21 (28.0%) | 9 (12.0%) | 19 (25.3%) | 13 (17.3%) | 3.03 | 1.39 |
| Household food insufficiency lowers school participation. | 14 (18.7%) | 29 (38.7%) | 12 (16.0%) | 11 (14.7%) | 9 (12.0%) | 3.37 | 1.28 |
| Improved household food supply increases learners' enrolment. | 17 (22.7%) | 27 (36.0%) | 13 (17.3%) | 13 (17.3%) | 5 (6.7%) | 3.51 | 1.21 |

Source: *Researcher (2026)*

Table 1 demonstrates that students' enrolment in public junior schools was thought to decrease due to household food insecurity. In particular, 30 (40.0%) teachers agreed (A) and 18 (24.0%) strongly agreed (SA) that home food insecurity lowers enrolment, while 11 (14.7%) were indifferent (N). On the other hand, 7 (9.3%) severely disagreed (SD) and 9 (12.0%) disagreed (D). Despite some diversity among responders, the mean of 3.57 and standard deviation of 1.24 show

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a general tendency toward agreement. Inadequate household food may hinder children's capacity to enter or stay linked to schooling, according to the positive result that 48 (64.0%) agreed or strongly agreed. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, before students can successfully pursue higher-level needs like learning and achievement, their basic physiological need for nourishment must be fairly met. This view is consistent with the findings of Rabbitt et al. (2023), who found that a lack of food in the home increased children's nutritional sensitivity and limited their engagement in school and well-being. However, the 16 (21.3%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed offer a negative result, indicating that enrolment may not be solely determined by food insufficiency in all households.

Additionally, 17 (22.7%) teachers very agreed and 29 (38.7%) agreed with the statement that food insecurity hinders students' enrolment in school, while 10 (13.3%) were neutral, 11 (14.7%) disagreed, and 8 (10.7%) strongly disagreed. While the standard deviation of 1.29 shows substantial dispersion in instructors' judgements, the mean score of 3.48 suggests broad agreement. As a result, 46 respondents (61.4%) positively correlated delayed enrolment with insufficient food supply, while 19 respondents (25.4%) disagreed. Becker's Human Capital Theory (1964) offers a helpful explanation since education is an investment that helps people gain knowledge and skills that increase their productivity in the future. Immediate consumption requirements may take precedence over expenditures in children's education when households lack food and resources, which could cause enrolling to be delayed. This view is consistent with the findings of Kinagu, Ayaga, and Kikechi (2023), who revealed that take-home food rations motivated parents to enrolll and keep their kids in school. Hashim (2021) found no statistically significant correlation between home food insecurity and academic outcomes, suggesting that the impact of food insufficiency on education can vary depending on the social and geographic context.

Further, teachers reported that students from households with little food are more likely to miss school. Specifically, 28 (37.3%) agreed, 16 (21.3%) strongly agreed, and 11 (14.7%) were neutral. On the down side, 8 (10.7%) strongly disagreed and 12 (16.0%) disagreed. The resulting mean of 3.43 and standard deviation of 1.29 indicate a moderate level of agreement with discernible variations in the experiences of the respondents. In all, 20 people (26.7%) disagreed with the statement, while 44 people (58.6%) agreed. The result is in line with Maslow's Hierarchy of requirements Theory since a hungry student whose physiological demand for food is still unfulfilled would place more value on getting food or helping the household satisfy fundamental requirements than on attending class regularly. In a similar vein, Aurino et al. (2021) found that adolescents from Ghanaian homes experiencing food insecurity had worse educational outcomes and lower school attendance than those from households experiencing food security. Kiboi et al. (2022) also noted that households experiencing food insecurity used coping mechanisms such meal skipping and portion reduction.

A total of 48 (64.0%) respondents agreed, with 17 (22.7%) instructors strongly agreeing and 31 (41.3%) agreeing that household food inadequacy contributes to school dropout. Nine (12.0%) disagreed and six (8.0%) strongly disagreed, while another twelve (16.0%) were impartial. Compared to a number of other variables, the relatively high mean of 3.59 and the standard deviation of 1.20 show significant agreement and relatively low variability. This conclusion is

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explained by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which holds that learners' educational experiences are influenced by interrelated settings, especially the family microsystem. Food shortages in the home can affect family routines, financial choices, and parental ability to support education, all of which may raise the risk of school dropout. The results corroborate those of Aurino et al. (2021), who linked food insecurity to lower academic self-efficacy, lower attendance, and lower educational aspirations. It also reflects the findings of Gebresilassie et al. (2025), who found that better household availability to food increased school involvement and attendance.

Regarding the transfer to junior school, 18 respondents (24.0%) highly agreed and 29 respondents (38.7%) agreed that students' transition is negatively impacted by food insecurity, whereas 9 respondents (12.0%) were neutral. On the other hand, 8 (10.7%) strongly disagreed and 11 (14.7%) disagreed. A broad tendency toward agreement is confirmed by the mean score of 3.51, while moderate diversity of opinion is indicated by the standard deviation of 1.30. Therefore, compared to 19 (25.4%) teachers who did not believe that household food scarcity was a barrier to educational transfer, 47 (62.7%) teachers did. Maslow's Hierarchy of demands Theory, which suggests that physiological demands like sufficient nourishment serve as the basis for pursuing higher developmental and educational goals, might be used to interpret this finding. Progression to a higher level of education may take a backseat to essential survival demands when families are struggling to provide food. This claim is supported by Kinagu et al. (2023), who show that take-home food rations increased learner enrolment and retention.

The findings also indicated a connection between low school retention and food insecurity. A total of 27 (36.0%) teachers agreed and 19 (25.3%) strongly agreed that students from households with limited food have poor retention. Thirteen (17.3%) people disagreed, eight (10.7%) strongly disagreed, and eight (10.7%) were impartial. Although the significantly higher standard deviation of 1.33 indicates more variation in instructors' observations, the mean of 3.48 indicates general agreement. As a result, the total of 46 (61.3%) good comments exceeded the 21 (28.0%) negative responses. According to Becker's (1964) Human Capital Theory, continuing education is an ongoing investment in a student's knowledge and potential for future productivity. When limited resources must initially be used for subsistence, food insecurity may make it more difficult for households to sustain this investment. Supporting evidence is provided by Gebresilassie et al. (2025), who demonstrate that children's attendance and educational participation rose with greater household food security and economic support.

Regarding the willingness of parents to enrolll their children in school, 26 (34.7%) instructors agreed and 15 (20.0%) strongly agreed that food insecurity deters them from doing so. Ten (13.3%) strongly disagreed, twelve (16.0%) disagreed, and twelve (16.0%) were neutral. The standard deviation of 1.33 shows significant variances in respondents' opinions, while the mean of 3.32 shows moderate agreement. Despite the fact that 41 (54.7%) agreed or strongly agreed, a sizable 22 (29.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, making this outcome less apparent than a number of previous items. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, homes with little food may put basic physiological survival ahead of educational engagement. As a result, parents who are experiencing acute food shortages may decide to devote their labour, time, or money to

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taking care of their immediate home requirements rather than sending their children to school. While Kinagu et al. (2023) discovered that offering food rations encouraged parents to enrolll and keep children, Rabbitt et al. (2023) similarly identified families with children and low incomes as being especially vulnerable to food insecurity.

Regarding whether food insecurity has a different impact on the enrolment of boys and girls, teachers had the most divergent viewpoints. Nine (12.0%) were impartial, whereas thirteen (17.3%) definitely agreed and twenty-one (28.0%) agreed with the statement. On the other hand, 13 (17.3%) strongly disagreed and 19 (25.3%) disagreed. Significant disagreement and diversity among teachers are revealed by the mean of 3.03, which is near the neutral midpoint, and the comparatively high standard deviation of 1.39. 32 (42.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, compared to 34 (45.3%) who thought there were gender disparities. Because the impacts of food inadequacy on boys and girls may be influenced by interacting family expectations, cultural norms, school practices, and broader community structures, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) offers a suitable paradigm. While some families may treat boys and girls equally, in others, gender norms may dictate which child stays in school when finances become limited. The inconsistent outcome is in line with the contextual variation proposed by Hashim (2021), who discovered no statistically significant correlation between academic outcomes and home food insecurity in the Malaysian sample.

Regarding overall school involvement, 29 (38.7%) instructors agreed and 14 (18.7%) strongly agreed that students' participation in school is lowered by household food scarcity. Eleven respondents (14.7%) disagreed, nine respondents (12.0%) strongly disagreed, and twelve respondents (16.0%) were impartial. A standard deviation of 1.28 suggests some variation among responders, while the mean of 3.37 denotes moderate agreement. In total, 20 people (26.7%) opposed or strongly disagreed, while 43 people (57.4%) agreed. Since unfulfilled physiological requirements may lower students' ability and willingness to regularly participate in educational activities, this conclusion is obviously related to Maslow's Hierarchy of requirements Theory. Even when officially enrolled, a youngster who is malnourished may struggle to maintain attendance, focus, and participation. According to Aurino et al. (2021), food-insecure teenagers in Ghana have worse attendance, academic self-efficacy, and educational goals. In a similar vein, Rabbitt et al. (2023) linked insufficient nourishment in the home to fewer chances for healthy growth and involvement in school.

Finally, most educators concurred that increasing the availability of food at home may boost student enrolment. Thirteen (17.3%) were impartial, whereas seventeen (22.7%) strongly agreed and twenty-seven (36.0%) agreed with the statement. Five (6.7%) strongly disagreed, while thirteen (17.3%) disagreed. Overall agreement with very moderate response variance is indicated by the mean of 3.51 and standard deviation of 1.21. Thus, 44 (58.7%) respondents had a positive stance, while 18 (24.0%) opposed or strongly disapproved. Maslow's Hierarchy of demands Theory offers a clear explanation since maintaining a sufficient food supply meets a basic physiological need and establishes a more solid basis for addressing educational demands. The outcome is in strong agreement with Gebresilassie et al. (2025), who found that children's attendance and involvement in school increased when households had better access to food and

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financial support. Although Kiboi et al. (2022) warned that school feeding alone might not completely eradicate household food insecurity, Kinagu et al. (2023) found that take-home food rations improved enrolment and retention.

Regarding the impact of household food inadequacy on students' enrolment, the results from the observation guide mostly corroborated the instructors' answers in Table 1. The researcher noticed that certain students seemed tired, less focused, and occasionally missing during class activities—conditions that could be linked to eating too little at home. Furthermore, some students were said to be tardy or to rely significantly on school-provided meals. These findings provide credence to the theory that a lack of food in the home may lower regular school attendance, retention, and junior school advancement. The study did note, however, that not all students with consistent attendance seemed to originate from food-secure households, indicating that household food insecurity does not always lead to absenteeism or non-enrollment. Therefore, some students may be protected from its effects by school nutrition, family involvement, and community assistance.

In a similar vein, the patterns shown in Table 1 were mainly supported by the document analysis guide's findings. Upon reviewing class registrations, attendance records, enrolment records, and school progress reports, it was discovered that several students had inconsistent attendance, extended absences, delayed reporting, and occasional withdrawals. Teachers' belief that food insecurity can have a detrimental impact on enrolment, retention, and school engagement was supported by the fact that these trends were more pronounced among students who were recognised by school records as coming from economically challenged households. However, the documentary evidence also demonstrated that some students from low-income families successfully made the transition to junior school and maintained comparatively constant attendance. This result partially challenges the notion that educational engagement is solely influenced by home food insecurity. It implies that a number of interrelated factors, including as school food programs, parental support, home income, and the accessibility of social assistance programs, have an impact on enrolment outcomes.

Heads of institutions typically clarified throughout the interviews that students' enrolling, attendance, retention, and junior school transition were hampered by household food inadequacy. They revealed that when families were unable to provide enough food, some students from food-insufficient households reported tardiness, frequently missed classes, or temporarily stopped attending school. The heads also noted that parents were occasionally forced to put immediate survival demands ahead of education due to severe home food shortages. They did concede, though, that some impacted students were able to continue attending school in spite of these challenges because to school food programs and parental support. These opinions are consistent with Table 1, which shows that the impact of household food insufficiency was not consistent across households, as 48 (64.0%) teachers agreed or strongly agreed that it decreased enrolment, while 16 (21.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The following is how one of the heads of institutions described the circumstances,

Some of our pupils occasionally miss school because they don't have enough food at home.

Some people attend school primarily because they are aware that they might be given food.

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> Parents may keep kids at home or engage them in activities that help the family gather food when food becomes exceedingly scarce. But there are some kids from low-income families whose parents do everything in their power to make sure they regularly attend school in spite of these challenges (HOI, 4 Personal Correspondence, July 13, 2026)

The report supports the quantitative findings, especially the 44 (58.6%) instructors who agreed or strongly agreed that students from households with little food missed more school. However, the 20 (26.7%) who disagreed or strongly disapproved are supported by the recognition that some impacted students continued to attend school. This implies that the association between household food insufficiency and absence can be mitigated by school-based support and parental engagement.

Food insecurity in the home is a significant socioeconomic barrier to regular attendance at public junior schools, according to the Sub-County Director of Education (SCDE). Inadequate household food, according to the SCDE, may be a factor in erratic attendance, a delayed transition, poor retention, and, in certain cases, school exit. However, the officer stressed that parental attitudes, home poverty, domestic chores, migration, and school accessibility might also affect participation, thus household food shortage should not be the only reason for enrolment difficulties. Table 1, which shows the impact of additional contextual elements, is both qualified and supported by this interpretation. Of the teachers, 47 (62.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that food shortage affected transition to junior school, whereas 19 (25.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The SCDE went on to clarify,

> A youngster who is not guaranteed food may attend school irregularly, arrive late, or eventually lose interest in learning, all of which have an impact on education. However, food shortages cannot be the only cause of all low enrolment or dropout rates. While some students drop out of school due to parental neglect, household obligations, migration, or other social and economic pressures, some families manage to keep their kids in school despite severe dietary issues (SCDE, Private Correspondence, July 14, 2026).

This opinion is in line with the general trend shown in Table 1, where the majority of mean scores were higher than the neutral midpoint of 3.00, suggesting that enrolment was impacted by home food shortage. By demonstrating that enrolment is influenced by a number of interrelated socioeconomic and familial factors, the SCDE's argument also helps explain the discrepancy noted across the assertions.

The majority of parents surveyed stated that a lack of food put a lot of strain on households and occasionally interfered with kids' education. Some explained that when food was insufficient, the household's meagre income was initially used to buy food, leaving less money for necessities relating to education. Additionally, they mentioned that some kids periodically stayed at home due to hunger or engaged in activities meant to support their family financially or with food. Nonetheless, a number of parents insisted that they kept their kids in school in spite of food shortages because they believed that education was crucial to enhancing their opportunities for the future. These opinions are consistent with Table 1, which shows that whereas 22 (29.3%) teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed, 41 (54.7%) teachers agreed or strongly agreed that food insecurity inhibited parents from enrolling their children. One parent gave the following account of what happened,

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> Sometimes it's really hard to find enough food for the entire family, and when that happens, everything else takes a backseat since the kids need to eat first. Sometimes a youngster has nothing to eat, so they stay at home or go to school without eating breakfast. Despite these challenges, I do not want my kids to drop out of school because I think it will provide them with a better future than the one we currently lead (Parent 1, Private Correspondence, July 15, 2026).

By illustrating how home food problems might impede regular attendance and enrolment, the story bolsters the favourable quantitative findings. However, the 22 (29.3%) teachers who disputed or strongly disagreed that food insufficiency inevitably impeded enrolment also show the parent's resolve to continue the child's education. This implies that the negative impact of household food insufficiency can be mitigated by parental dedication to education.

Pupils discussed how household food insecurity affected their involvement in school in a variety of ways throughout the focus group talks. Some claimed that going to school while hungry made them feel weak, exhausted, preoccupied, and less able to engage in educational tasks. Others said that students occasionally skipped class because there wasn't enough food at home or when they had to help their families make ends meet. Some students, however, stated that they continued to go to school in spite of food shortages because they were afraid of falling behind academically. When accessible, school lunches were found to be a significant factor in encouraging attendance. These results corroborate Table 1, which shows that 20 (26.7%) teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that household food shortage reduced school attendance, whereas 43 (57.4%) teachers agreed or strongly agreed. During the focus group discussion, one student clarified,

> When there isn't any food at home, you may arrive at school hungry and find it hard to focus because you can't stop thinking about food. Some students may stay at home because they haven't eaten or because they are assisting their parents in finding food or money. However, some of us continue to attend classes because missing lessons makes it more difficult to catch up, and the availability of food at school provides us an additional incentive to do so (Learner FGD 1, Private Correspondence, July 16, 2026)

Teachers' opinions about absenteeism and decreased school participation are supported by the learner's account. However, the minority of teachers who disagreed with the quantitative claims is consistent with the fact that some students continued to attend despite household food shortages. This suggests that some children may be protected from the detrimental effects of household food shortage by school feeding, learner motivation, and dedication to education.

Generally, the quantitative and qualitative results consistently showed that learners' enrolment, attendance, retention, transition, and participation in public junior schools in Voi Sub-County were adversely affected by home food insecurity. The majority of teachers quantitatively agreed or strongly agreed with the assertions in Table 1, as indicated by mean ratings that were typically higher than the neutral midpoint of 3.00. Inadequate household food was linked to absence, delayed reporting, poor retention, and decreased involvement, according to qualitative observations, document analysis, interviews with parents, the SCDE, and directors of institutions, as well as focus group talks with students. However, both strands also showed that some students

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continued to attend despite food difficulties, indicating that the impact of home food scarcity on education was mitigated by learner motivation, school feeding programs, parental commitment, and other socioeconomic factors.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that household food insufficiency significantly influences learners' enrolment in public junior schools in Voi Sub-County, Taita Taveta County. Inadequate access to sufficient and nutritious food affects households' ability to meet education-related needs, contributing to delayed enrolment, irregular attendance, and reduced participation in schooling. The findings indicate that food insecurity is not only a nutritional challenge but also an educational barrier, particularly among vulnerable households affected by poverty, drought, and unstable livelihoods. Therefore, improving learners' access to education requires addressing household food challenges alongside existing educational interventions. Strengthening food security remains essential for promoting equitable enrolment and retention in public junior schools.

## Recommendations

The study recommends that the government, education stakeholders, and community organizations strengthen school feeding programmes and social protection initiatives to support learners from food-insecure households. There is also a need to promote household resilience through agricultural support, livelihood improvement programmes, and nutrition education to enhance families' capacity to provide adequate food. Schools should establish mechanisms for identifying learners affected by food insufficiency and provide targeted support through collaboration with parents, communities, and relevant agencies. The Ministry of Education and county authorities should integrate food security considerations into education planning, especially in semi-arid areas such as Voi Sub-County, to improve learners' enrolment, participation, and retention.

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