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The Impact of Socio-Cultural Practices on Girls' Learning Experiences: A Case of Public Secondary Schools in Kisarawe District, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Socio-cultural practices continue to significantly influence girls' learning experiences, often shaping their academic performance in both positive and negative ways. Traditional practices, language challenges, and social interaction dynamics play a key role in the educational outcomes of female students. This study investigates the impact of socio-cultural practices on girls' learning experiences, focusing on factors such as motivation, encouragement, socialization, self-disclosure, feedback, and positive criticism. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining both qualitative and quantitative research designs. The quantitative phase involved collecting data through a five-point Likert scale to assess students' academic performance, followed by qualitative data collection using interviews to explore the deeper influences of socio-cultural practices. The study utilized a cross-sectional design, collecting data from a sample of 236 students, 86 teachers, 6 school heads, and 24 parents from public secondary schools in Kisarawe district. The findings indicate that socio-cultural factors such as motivation, encouragement, and socialization significantly affect girls' academic success. Additionally, the study highlights the role of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in fostering collaborative learning environments. These results suggest that educational policies should consider the socio-cultural context in which girls learn, promoting supportive interactions and addressing cultural barriers to enhance their academic performance.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural Practices; Girls' Learning Experiences; Academic Performance; Zone of Proximal Development; Socialization; Gender Expectations; Kisarawe District

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1. Introduction

Socio-cultural practices encompass the everyday actions, behaviors, and norms embedded within societies, significantly shaping individuals' interactions with their environment, peers, and institutions^[1]. In the context of education, these practices influence how students engage with learning, as emphasized by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which views learning as a social process shaped by language, interaction, and cultural norms^[2]. International studies have demonstrated the strong influence of socio-cultural factors on academic performance. In Turkey, Bayar and Karaduman found that a supportive school culture fosters motivation and improves student achievement^[3]. Similarly, research in Ecuador highlighted that while demographic factors such as parental education play a role, family support remains a critical socio-cultural determinant of students' academic success^[4]. In the United States, Hunter-Johnson identified language barriers and cultural assimilation difficulties as significant socio-cultural challenges impacting international students, further reinforcing the need for inclusive educational policies^[5].

Across Africa, socio-cultural practices have been found to significantly impact students' academic performance. In Nigeria, Akitonye and Saliu established that factors such as gender roles, student attitudes, and parental education influence students' achievements, particularly in science subjects^[6]. Similarly, Liu et al.^[7] found that cultural context and the learning environment significantly influence students' academic achievement by shaping their self-efficacy and engagement in learning. Their findings suggest that educational practices and curricula should be culturally responsive and supportive of diverse learning environments to enhance students' academic outcomes^[7]. Additional studies pointed to socio-cultural factors, e.g., community and/or parents attitude, initiation rite of passage, outlawed sect, etc., as key elements of academic success in Kenya^[8]. In Morocco, Amiri and El Karfa emphasized the role of language in shaping students' academic outcomes, demonstrating that a social environment that integrates students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds positively influences learning^[9]. These studies collectively suggest that socio-cultural factors are deeply intertwined with academic performance and should be addressed within education systems to ensure effective learning outcomes.

In Tanzania, socio-cultural factors continue to present significant challenges to student achievement, particularly in rural areas. Mgalula identified early marriage, heavy domestic workloads, early pregnancies, and limited support for girls' education as major barriers to academic success in Nzega district^[10]. Similarly, Moroni and Mtilu examined socio-cultural influences on academic attainment in government schools in Tana River County, drawing parallels to Kisarawe^[11]. Their findings highlighted how home chores, parental education levels, and community responsibilities impact students' academic outcomes, reinforcing the importance of parental involvement in education. While the Tanzanian government has implemented several educational reforms, such as the Secondary Education Development Programme (SEDP) and the Big Results Now (BRN) initiative^[12], socio-cultural challenges persist. Odanga noted that student behavior, shaped by socio-cultural practices, remains a major determinant of academic success, underscoring the need for more targeted interventions^[13].

Despite these efforts, various socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder educational attainment in Kisarawe district. Khamsini identified early pregnancies, low parental income, long commuting distances to school, and inadequate parental education as significant obstacles to student achievement^[14]. Addressing these socio-cultural challenges is crucial for improving academic performance in the region. Given this context, the present study seeks to explore how socio-cultural practices influence academic outcomes in public secondary schools in Kisarawe district.

Specifically, this study was aimed at examining (i) the effect of social interaction on students' academic performance, and (ii) how the zone of proximal development can promote students' academic performance. By understanding these dynamics, this research aims to contribute to the development of more effective educational strategies that account for socio-cultural realities and ultimately enhance student performance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Review

Theoretical frameworks play a crucial role in shaping educational research by providing perspectives that explain learning processes. This study is guided by both socio-

cultural theory and systems theory, which together highlight the significance of social interactions, language, and structured environments in shaping students' academic performance. Socio-cultural theory, developed by Vygotsky, emphasizes that cognitive development is rooted in social interactions, with learning occurring within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where guidance from more knowledgeable individuals enhances a learner's abilities^[2,15]. Meanwhile, systems theory, introduced by Bertalanffy and Ogawa, views education as an interconnected system where students' learning is influenced by multiple environmental factors, including family, school, and broader societal structures^[16,17]. The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of both individual learning processes and systemic influences in academic performance.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory underscores the importance of social interactions in shaping a student's cognitive growth. He asserted that thinking originates from social contexts and that language acts as a tool for both communication and thought development^[18]. The learning process is facilitated when students interact with teachers, parents, and peers, allowing them to internalize knowledge and skills^[19]. The concept of the ZPD highlights the role of instructional support, where students progress from dependent learning to independent problem-solving through scaffolding^[20]. This idea aligns with the principles of systems theory, which suggests that multiple elements—such as teachers, parents, and educational resources—interact within a student's learning environment to create an adaptive and supportive framework for development^[21].

Systems theory expands on the idea that students do not learn in isolation but are influenced by the structures around them. Schools, like other open systems, interact dynamically with their environment, meaning that factors such as parental involvement, teacher engagement, and access to learning materials collectively shape academic outcomes^[22]. For example, when parents actively participate in their children's education by offering guidance and monitoring schoolwork, students are more likely to perform better^[23]. However, socio-cultural theory emphasizes that the effectiveness of parental support also depends on their ability to use language effectively in facilitating communication and learning^[24]. This interplay between systemic structures and social learning highlights the need for a collaborative approach in edu-

cation.

Despite their strengths, both theories have limitations. Socio-cultural theory is criticized for the vagueness in defining the ZPD, as individual learning zones vary widely and are difficult to measure^[25]. Similarly, systems theory requires that all stakeholders—including parents, teachers, and policymakers—share a unified vision, which may not always be feasible due to differing perspectives and constraints^[17]. Moreover, while socio-cultural theory stresses the importance of language in learning, it does not fully address the challenges posed when the language of instruction differs from students' native language, as seen in educational systems where English is mandated despite students' limited proficiency^[24].

Integrating socio-cultural and systems theories provides a holistic perspective on education by recognizing the combined impact of social interactions and systemic structures on student learning^[2,18]. Socio-cultural theory emphasizes the significance of interactions, language, and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in fostering cognitive development^[2,18], while systems theory underscores the role of external influences such as parental involvement, school organization, and educational resources in shaping academic performance^[16,22]. The combined insights from these theories highlight the need for collaborative learning environments where students receive both cognitive scaffolding and structural support^[15,21]. By considering both social and systemic factors, educators and policymakers can develop instructional strategies and educational policies that promote inclusive learning environments and enhance students' academic success.

2.2. Empirical Review

Social interaction plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic performance and learning experiences. Hurst et al. conducted a study in Europe, finding that students in highly interactive literacy teacher preparation courses reported enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills due to social interactions in the classroom^[26]. Wentzel further demonstrated that informal social interactions significantly affect students' behavior and academic achievement over time, particularly during adolescence^[27]. In Pakistan, Ryan found a statistically significant positive relationship between social interaction and educational performance^[28].

Juvonen et al. showed that peer presence and support significantly influence students' learning outcomes^[29]. Similarly, Eriksen et al. concluded that students' social behavior is strongly correlated with their academic success^[30].

Beyond the classroom, various factors influence social interactions and student performance. Bernard et al. carried out a meta-analysis of blended learning and technology use in higher education^[31]. Kalolo examined how social influences shape students' interest in science subjects^[32]. However, social interactions are not always beneficial. Adegboyega found that excessive social media usage negatively affected students' social behavior in Nigeria^[33]. In Kenya, Kinjaga and Oyoo emphasized the importance of student-student academic interactions in secondary schools^[34]. Similarly, in Tanzania, Koshuma found that frequent use of social networking sites correlated with lower academic performance among students in Zanzibar^[35].

The broader socio-cultural context also plays a significant role in shaping student engagement with social interactions. Boyden and Palmer and Pires highlighted the historical evolution of childhood education in Western societies^[36,37]. Wanka et al. argued that leisure activities and home responsibilities influence students' academic success^[38]. These findings suggest that while social interactions and responsibilities can provide valuable learning experiences, they must be balanced with academic commitments to maximize student success.

Community engagement is another critical aspect of social interaction that impacts students' academic and personal development. Kohlberg emphasized the role of community service in fostering social and civic growth^[39]. Rest and Narvaez supported this idea, highlighting that youth mentorship programs positively influence students by fostering leadership and ethical development^[40].

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a sequential explanatory design, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to provide deeper explanations of the quantitative results^[41]. A cross-sectional research design was adopted, allowing data to be collected at a single point in time to examine the influence of socio-cultural practices on girls'

learning experiences and academic performance in public secondary schools in Kisarawe district). A cross-sectional research design was adopted, allowing data to be collected at a single point in time to examine the influence of socio-cultural practices on girls' learning experiences and academic performance in public secondary schools in Kisarawe district. The main objective of the study was to examine how socio-cultural practices influence students' academic performance, with specific focus on the effects of social interaction and the role of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The study was guided by two research questions: (i) what are the effects of social interaction on students' academic performance, and (ii) how does the zone of proximal development promote students' academic performance?

The study involved a total of $N = 352$ participants drawn from public secondary schools in Kisarawe district. These included $N = 236$ students (67.0%), $N = 86$ teachers (24.4%), $N = 6$ head teachers (1.7%), and $N = 24$ parents (6.8%). The student participants were predominantly female students enrolled in Forms I–IV, with ages ranging approximately from 13 to 19 years. Teachers comprised both male and female educators with varying teaching experience, ranging from less than five years to over fifteen years. Head teachers were experienced school administrators, while parents represented diverse socio-economic backgrounds and were selected due to their direct involvement in their children's education.

Simple random sampling was used to select students and parents to ensure representativeness, while purposive sampling was employed to select teachers and head teachers based on their professional roles and experience. Data were collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interview schedules. Questionnaires were administered to students and teachers and consisted of closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questionnaires captured participants' perceptions of social interaction, language practices, and the zone of proximal development in relation to academic performance. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with head teachers and parents to gain in-depth insights into socio-cultural practices affecting girls' education, including parental involvement, cultural expectations, and school support mechanisms.

The data collection procedure followed several steps. First, permission to conduct the study was obtained from

the relevant educational authorities. The researcher then visited the selected schools to explain the purpose of the study and obtain informed consent from participants. Questionnaires were administered in person and collected upon completion. Interviews were conducted in quiet and convenient settings, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and rankings, were used to summarize participants' responses. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between socio-cultural practices and students' academic performance, and regression analysis was used to determine the relative influence of key variables such as social interaction, language practices, and the zone of proximal development. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The coding process was carried out manually and involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, and interpretation of patterns across participants' responses. Themes were developed inductively and aligned with the study objectives to support triangulation with the quantitative findings.

The validity of the research instruments was ensured through expert review by specialists in educational research, and a pilot study was conducted to test the clarity and reliability of the instruments prior to the main data collection. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the

research, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing responses and using the data solely for academic purposes. Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant institutional and educational authorities prior to data collection.

4. Results

4.1. The Effects of Social Interaction on Students' Academic Performance

The participants' responses regarding social interactions reveal several attributes that are closely linked to students' academic performance. As indicated in **Table 1**, motivation emerged as a significant social interaction factor, with a high mean score of 4.7. This finding underscores the crucial role of motivation in enhancing cognitive development. Motivation promotes higher-order thinking skills, including problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking. These cognitive skills are essential for students as they facilitate the development of autonomous learning strategies and self-determined study habits. Consequently, motivated students are more likely to put forth the effort needed to improve their academic performance. The study suggests that when students are motivated, they become more engaged in their learning processes and are better equipped to overcome academic challenges.

Table 1. The effects of social interaction on students' academic performance.

Variable	Scale					N	Mean	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5			
Motivation	10	12	-	130	200	352	4.7	1
Encouragement	20	31	1	125	175	352	4.26	2
Socialization	34	19	-	190	109	352	4.25	3
Self-disclosure	58	10	3	105	76	352	3.99	4
Feedback	80	45	5	167	55	352	3.15	5
Positive criticism	142	42	-	80	104	352	2.61	6

Note:

4.21–5.00 = Very high influential factor;

3.41–4.20 = High influential factor;

2.61–3.40 = Moderate influential factor;

1.81–2.60 = Less influential factor;

1.00–1.80 = Very little influential factor.

Source: Field data (2024).

Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of encouragement in improving academic performance. Encouragement, with a mean score of 4.26, was identified as a key

factor, with teachers being the primary source of encouragement, followed by parents. Effective encouragement can take various forms, such as providing achievable assignments and

offering constructive feedback. Teachers play a pivotal role by breaking down large assignments into manageable tasks, thereby making it easier for students to achieve high grades. This approach not only helps students manage their workload but also allows teachers to monitor students' progress and make necessary adjustments to their teaching strategies. Furthermore, teachers should employ experiential learning opportunities and create a classroom environment that supports peer collaboration through group work. Such an environment fosters a sense of community and support among students, further enhancing their academic performance.

Conversely, the study found that socialization has a positive impact on students' academic performance, with a mean score of 4.25. Socialization activities are beneficial as they help students develop essential skills through interaction and collaboration with their peers. This process of socialization encourages teamwork and helps students build interpersonal skills that are crucial for academic and personal success. Social interactions within educational settings can also enhance students' ability to work effectively in groups, thereby improving their overall academic performance.

The study also highlighted the significance of self-disclosure, which was reported to help students improve their performance, with a mean score of 3.99. Self-disclosure involves sharing personal experiences and challenges with others, which can lead to increased self-confidence, concentration, and effort. When students are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings, they are better able to set and achieve academic goals. This increased self-awareness and openness contribute to a more productive learning experience.

Meanwhile, feedback was identified as a crucial element in improving academic performance, with a mean

score of 3.15. Effective feedback allows students to recognize areas where they are performing well and areas needing improvement. This process is essential for helping students understand what is accurate and inaccurate about their work. Feedback facilitates the learning process by guiding students on how to make necessary adjustments and increase their effort to meet academic goals. The study also noted the role of positive criticism, which was ranked with a mean score of 2.61. Positive criticism, as a form of external feedback, provides students with valuable information to address performance issues and self-correct. It helps students take action to bridge the gap between their intentions and actual outcomes, thereby contributing to improved academic performance.

4.2. How Zone of Proximal Development Can Promote Students' Academic Performance

The study's findings on how the zone of proximal development (ZPD) can be utilized to boost student performance are detailed in **Table 2**. The results indicate that student assistance is crucial, with a high mean score of 4.41. This suggests that students should receive targeted support to focus on their studies and improve their academic outcomes through various academic forums and collaborations. Creating academic platforms such as dialogues and debates can help foster this support. Academic feedback is another vital tool for providing cognitive guidance to students, guiding them on where and how frequently they need to improve. This feedback should address gaps in academic performance within each student's ZPD. In practical terms, academic activities should be appropriately challenging—not too easy or too difficult—to help students acquire necessary knowledge and utilize available resources effectively to tackle academic problems.

Table 2. How zone of proximal development can promote students' academic.

Variable	Scale					N	Mean	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5			
Tangible assistance	34	8	-	80	230	352	4.41	1
Students collaboration	-	50	11	78	193	352	4.13	2
Teamwork on resolving problems	58	5	-	60	229	352	4.1	3
Receiving cognitive guidance	61	-	4	142	145	352	4.08	4
Receiving emotional support	77	15	-	134	126	352	3.7	5
Receiving advice	110	17	-	56	199	352	3.2	6
Intimacy at school	78	88	-	81	105	352	2.65	7
Agreed promises	102	75	-	77	98	352	2.48	8

Note:

4.21–5.00 = Very high influential factor.

3.41–4.20 = High influential factor.

2.61–3.40 = Moderate influential factor.

1.81–2.60 = Less influential factor.

1.00–1.80 = Very less influential factor.

Source: Field data (2024).

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of emotional support through academic collaborations, scoring a mean level of 4.13. Implementing collaborative projects and study groups can provide emotional support to students, particularly when they face academic challenges. Such collaborations not only promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills but also offer students the opportunity to gain new skills and academic experience from their peers. Collaborative efforts can enhance students' ability to resolve academic issues they might struggle with individually and help them build a supportive academic network with their classmates, which can be beneficial in the future.

The importance of teamwork in improving academic performance was also emphasized, with a mean score of 4.1. Teamwork helps students form relationships with their peers, fostering a positive and supportive learning environment. By working together on projects, students develop trust, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging, which can enhance their academic experience. This collaborative environment allows students to share perspectives and strategies for overcoming socio-cultural challenges affecting their academic activities, such as attendance and assignment completion.

Both parents and teachers play a significant role in providing cognitive guidance and emotional support, with mean scores of 4.08 and 3.7, respectively. Cognitive guidance helps students set academic goals, develop a growth mindset, and internalize academic motivation. This type of support is crucial for academic success, as it helps students connect with their school environment and persevere through challenges.

Additionally, providing academic advice helps students plan their responsibilities and study skills, contributing to their self-efficacy and academic performance. The need for academic advice scored a mean level of 3.2, reflecting its importance in guiding students toward achieving their goals.

Conversely, the study found that students' intimacy with their school community, scoring a mean level of 2.65, plays a less significant role in their academic performance. While intimacy can enhance presentation skills and foster positive teacher-student relationships, its direct impact on performance is less pronounced compared to other factors. Positive teacher-student relationships are important for regulating emotions and improving classroom participation, thereby contributing to better academic performance.

The concept of academic promises, with a mean level of 2.48, is also relevant. Agreements between students and academic advisors serve as milestones for students to gauge their efforts and progress. These promises can enhance student autonomy and motivation by providing assurance and reminders to stay committed to their academic goals.

The findings from **Figure 1** reveal a strong correlation between socio-cultural practices and students' academic performance. To further explore this relationship, the study employed regression analysis, which demonstrated that social interaction, language practices, and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) significantly impact academic outcomes. Specifically, social interaction was found to have a correlation coefficient of $\rho = 0.61$, language practices $\rho = 0.78$, and ZPD $\rho = 0.95$.

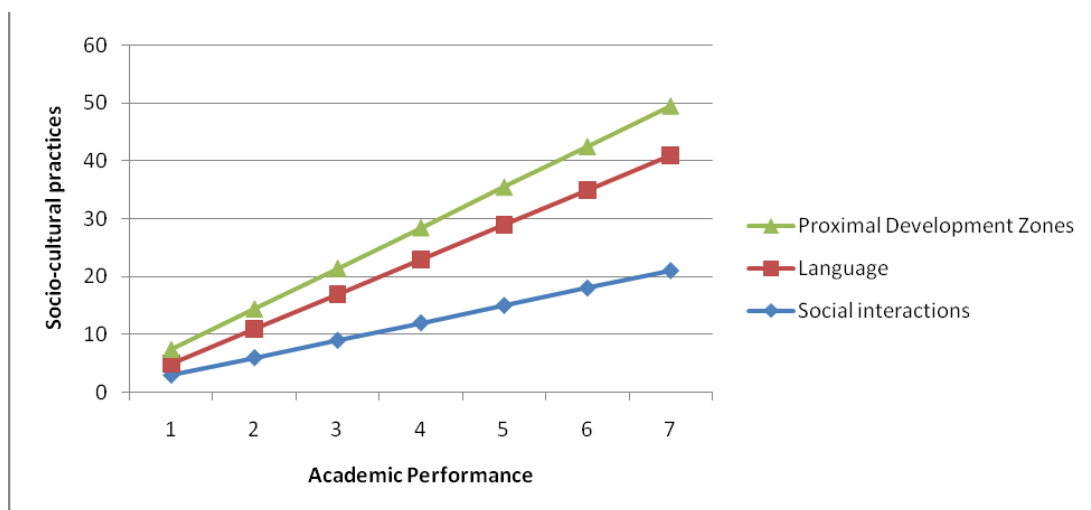


Figure 1. Socio-cultural practices on students' academic performance.

Source: Field data, 2024.

The analysis suggests that among the socio-cultural factors studied, social interaction has a relatively lower probability level of influence, ranking third with a coefficient of $\rho = 0.61$. The attributes of social interaction that are linked to academic performance include motivation, which ranked the highest with a mean score of 4.7, followed by encouragement with a mean score of 4.26. The study also found that socialization, with a mean score of 4.25, plays a significant role in improving academic performance. Other important aspects of social interaction include self-disclosure, with a mean of 3.99, feedback at 3.15, and positive criticism, which had the lowest influence with a mean score of 2.61.

The use of English for academic purposes emerged as the second most significant socio-cultural factor influencing students' academic performance. Data from the field revealed that many students struggle with understanding English spontaneously, which had the highest mean score of 4.58. This was followed by challenges in reading English comprehensively (mean score 4.00), writing English proficiently (mean score 3.9), and having proficient English conversations (mean score 4.8). The study noted that poor English proficiency contributes to higher dropout rates, particularly among female students, who often end up engaging in socio-cultural activities such as traditional dancing or early marriage.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) was identified as the most critical factor influencing students' academic performance. The study highlighted the need for teachers and parents to provide tangible support, including access to reading materials, rewards, and a supportive curriculum. According to **Table 2**, assistance to students was highly ranked with a mean score of 4.41, indicating the importance of helping students focus on their studies. This support should also extend to fostering academic collaborations (mean score 4.13) and promoting teamwork (mean score 4.1), which are crucial in helping students address socio-cultural issues that affect their academic activities, such as attendance and completing assignments. Additionally, providing cognitive guidance and emotional support, with mean scores of 4.08 and 3.7, respectively, is vital for mitigating the negative influence of socio-cultural factors on academic performance. Other aspects, such as academic advice, school intimacy, and keeping promises, though ranked lower with mean scores of 3.2, 2.65, and 2.48, respectively also play a role in promoting a

positive academic environment.

5. Discussion of the Results

The findings of this study are both supported and challenged by existing literature on the role of social interaction in academic performance. Hurst et al.^[26] present a contrasting perspective, reporting no significant direct relationship between students' social interaction and academic performance. Their study suggests that although social interaction enhances literacy development, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, its direct effect on academic outcomes may be less explicit. In contrast, Wentzel^[27] argued that informal social interactions play a crucial role in shaping students' study behaviors, which in turn leads to improved academic outcomes. They emphasize that positive behavioral changes arising from social interaction indirectly contribute to enhanced academic performance.

Consistent with the findings of the present study, Ryan^[28] demonstrated a significant relationship between social interaction and academic performance. Their study examined variables such as gender, relationships with friends and parents, satisfaction with interpersonal relationships, and meeting behavior, revealing that most of these variables were statistically significant predictors of academic performance. These findings reinforce the argument that social interaction is a critical determinant of educational outcomes. Similarly, different authors^[8,29] argues that collaborative learning approaches positively influence students' learning and performance. Kinjaga and Oyoo^[34] also reported a significant relationship between student-student academic interaction and academic achievement, emphasizing that such interactions shape both the learning environment and students' social behavior. These findings align with Smagorinsky^[20], who argued that students' social behavior has a direct impact on academic performance. However, Koshuma^[35] cautions that excessive engagement in online social networking may negatively affect academic performance, underscoring the need for a balanced and regulated approach to social interaction.

The theoretical implications of these findings suggest that social interaction plays a significant role in influencing students' academic performance. The results indicate a need to expand Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory^[2] to account for the evolving learning environment, including cognitive, af-

fective, and linguistic dimensions of interaction. Effective social interactions enhance cognitive development by fostering higher-order thinking skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. From a policy perspective, the findings imply that educational systems should deliberately leverage social interaction to improve academic performance. Policies should guide and regulate social interaction activities to maximize their cognitive, affective, and linguistic benefits, thereby enhancing learners' academic achievement.

Regarding the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the findings of this study both align with and diverge from previous research. Eriksen et al.^[30] argues that the ZPD primarily serves as a framework for determining students' readiness to learn rather than directly influencing academic performance. They emphasize that readiness is the key factor in mastering academic tasks such as Mathematics and English. Similarly, McLeod^[18] contend that the ZPD is useful for identifying the instructional resources teachers need, including peer collaboration and action research, to support learning.

Other studies, however, strongly support the role of the ZPD in improving academic performance. Amiri and El Karfa^[9] found that teaching English adverbs within learners' ZPD enhances learning when instruction is delivered in a cooperative and supportive environment. This position is supported by Dahms et al.^[19], who demonstrated that cooperative learning and corrective feedback within the ZPD significantly improve English language teaching and learning. These studies highlight the ZPD as a mechanism for promoting cooperative learning, strengthening social relationships among students, and enabling teachers to receive corrective feedback that improves instructional effectiveness.

Furthermore, Smagorinsky's^[20] arguments align closely with the findings of the present study, showing that ZPD-based instructional methods significantly improve students' academic performance. Bernard et al.^[31] describe the ZPD as a supportive framework for skill development embedded within educational programs, although they note that structural and contextual challenges within the Tanzanian education system may hinder its effective implementation.

The theoretical implications of these findings suggest the need to revisit and refine Vygotsky's ZPD theory^[2], to reflect dynamic changes in curriculum content and teaching methodologies. Instructional materials should be designed to align with learners' varying developmental levels, ensuring

optimal cognitive growth. The ZPD framework emphasizes the importance of presenting content that slightly exceeds students' current abilities, thereby challenging them while addressing learning gaps that hinder comprehension and performance.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that educational policies should explicitly integrate ZPD-based scaffolding strategies. These include promoting peer collaboration, designing instructional materials aligned with learners' developmental levels, and allowing students to work independently with appropriate guidance. Such scaffolding strategies can empower learners to improve their academic performance autonomously.

Finally, the findings align with broader research on socio-cultural influences on academic performance. Moroni and Mtilu^[11] observed that socio-cultural practices such as political activism and witchcraft negatively affected academic performance among students in Kisumu City. Similarly, Mgalula^[10] found that cultural practices, including early marriage, heavy domestic workloads, and lack of academic support adversely affected girls' academic performance in Kisarawe district. These studies confirm that socio-cultural barriers continue to undermine both investment in education and academic achievement among girls.

In response to these challenges, the Tanzanian government has implemented initiatives such as the Secondary Education Development Programme (SEDP) and the Big Results Now (BRN) initiative to improve academic performance through enhanced school inspection, leadership, and mentoring^[12]. The introduction of Competency-Based Teaching (CBT), which incorporates visual media and considers cultural and geographical contexts, also represents a significant step toward improving learning outcomes. However, the findings of this study indicate that more targeted interventions are required, particularly in strengthening social interaction, improving English language proficiency, and systematically implementing ZPD-based instructional practices.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the significant role of socio-cultural practices, particularly social interaction and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), in shaping students' academic performance in public secondary

schools. Key elements of social interaction, including motivation, encouragement, socialization, self-disclosure, and feedback, were found to positively influence academic outcomes. These results highlight the importance of supportive learning environments in which students actively engage with peers, teachers, and parents, thereby fostering both cognitive and emotional development. Furthermore, the ZPD framework emphasizes the value of collaborative learning and guided assistance, demonstrating that students perform better when instructional support is aligned with their developmental needs.

Based on these findings, educators and policymakers should prioritize the creation of learning environments that encourage positive social interaction and systematically integrate ZPD-based instructional practices. Teachers are encouraged to promote peer collaboration, provide timely and constructive feedback, and create classroom spaces that allow students to share ideas, challenges, and experiences. In addition, integrating emotional support and cognitive guidance through mentorship programs, group work, and project-based learning can help students navigate academic challenges and develop essential skills such as problem-solving, self-confidence, and independent learning. These practices are particularly important for addressing the needs of female students who are often disproportionately affected by socio-cultural constraints.

At the policy level, educational strategies should explicitly recognize the role of social interaction and the ZPD in enhancing academic performance. Schools should be supported to implement collaborative teaching approaches, strengthen language-supportive pedagogy, and provide resources that facilitate scaffolding and guided learning. Addressing socio-cultural barriers such as limited English language proficiency, early marriage, and heavy domestic workloads is critical to ensuring equitable access to quality education and improving academic outcomes for all students.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between socio-cultural practices and academic performance. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced response bias, as participants' perceptions may not fully reflect actual behaviors or academic outcomes. Third, the study was conducted in public secondary schools within a single district,

which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational contexts. Additionally, qualitative data were analyzed manually, which, although systematic, may be subject to researcher interpretation.

Future research should consider longitudinal designs to examine how socio-cultural practices and ZPD-based interventions influence academic performance over time. Studies involving multiple regions or comparative contexts would enhance the generalizability of findings and allow for cross-cultural analysis. Further research could also explore the use of qualitative data analysis software to strengthen the rigor of thematic analysis. Moreover, experimental or intervention-based studies examining the effectiveness of specific ZPD-informed teaching strategies, language-supportive pedagogy, and peer collaboration models would provide practical insights for improving educational practice and policy.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. Augustine University of Tanzania on 17th September, 2025.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

AI Use Statement

Artificial intelligence tools were not used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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