

Preventing School Dropout in Rural Timor-Leste through Family, School, and Community Partnerships: A Qualitative Case Study of Retention Strategies in Lautem District

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ABSTRACT

School dropout remains a significant challenge in rural and disadvantaged communities, where poverty, geographical isolation, and unequal access to quality education continue to limit children's participation and completion of schooling. This study explores the factors contributing to school dropout and identifies strategies for strengthening student retention in a newly established rural school community in Lautem District, Timor-Leste.

Using a qualitative case study design, the study involved twelve purposively selected participants, including three teachers, three parents, and six adults who had previously discontinued primary education. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews supported by qualitative questionnaires. Interviews were conducted in Fataluku and Tetum to enable participants to express their experiences within their cultural contexts. Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach.

The findings indicate that school dropout results from interconnected social, economic, cultural, and educational factors, including poverty, geographical distance, limited transportation, food insecurity, family responsibilities, inadequate school facilities, and insufficient learning support. The study further demonstrates that preventing dropout requires stronger collaboration among families, schools, communities, government institutions, and development partners.

Based on the findings, the study proposes the KIER framework (Komunikasaun, Interasaun, Edukasaun no Relasaun) as a locally grounded approach for strengthening communication, early identification of educational risks, and shared responsibility for student retention. The study contributes contextual evidence for improving inclusive education, strengthening school–community partnerships, and supporting sustainable educational participation in rural Timor-Leste.

Keyword : School Dropout; Rural Education; Student Retention; Family–school Partnerships; Community Engagement

1. Introduction

Education is recognised as a fundamental human right and a key driver of human development, social inclusion, poverty reduction, and sustainable national progress. Despite global commitments to achieving inclusive and equitable quality education under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), many children continue to experience interrupted schooling or leave education before completing their studies. School dropout is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including poverty, household responsibilities, geographical isolation, disability, social inequality, limited access to essential services, and insufficient educational support, particularly among children living in vulnerable and rural communities (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021a).

In Timor-Leste, education is recognised as a fundamental right and a responsibility of the State under the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL, 2010). The National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2011–2030 identifies equitable access, improved educational quality, inclusive education, and strengthened education management as national priorities (Ministry of Education Timor-Leste, 2011). Although progress has been achieved in expanding access to schooling, children living in remote rural areas continue to experience significant barriers to completing education. These challenges include household poverty, long distances between homes and schools, limited transportation, inadequate infrastructure, shortages of learning materials, language differences, health-related difficulties, and limited family capacity to support children's learning (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

Contemporary research indicates that school dropout should not be understood simply as an individual decision or a lack of motivation. Rather, dropout often results from the accumulation of disadvantages affecting children, families, schools, and wider social environments. Students are more likely to disengage when education systems are unable to provide safe, inclusive, culturally responsive, and supportive learning environments that respond to their diverse needs (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2023). Therefore, preventing dropout requires approaches that address both school-related factors and broader social and economic conditions influencing children's educational participation and completion.

International evidence highlights several effective strategies for improving student retention, including early identification of students at risk, attendance monitoring systems, teacher professional development, inclusive and learner-centred teaching approaches, academic and social support services, improved learning environments, and stronger collaboration between schools, families, and communities (UNICEF, 2021a; UNESCO, 2021). Family and community partnerships are particularly important because meaningful engagement among parents, schools, and local stakeholders contributes to improved student attendance, motivation, belonging, and educational continuity (Epstein, 2018).

In rural and disadvantaged contexts, sustainable dropout prevention requires coordinated efforts among government institutions, schools, families, communities, churches, and development partners. This collaborative approach is especially relevant in Timor-Leste, where many rural communities maintain strong social relationships, cultural networks, and collective responsibilities that can contribute to children's educational participation. However, limited empirical research has examined how these local relationships can be strengthened to address school dropout in remote communities.

Although previous national studies and development reports have identified broad educational challenges in Timor-Leste, there remains limited research exploring the lived experiences of teachers, parents, and individuals who have discontinued schooling within specific rural contexts. Understanding these experiences is important because dropout is shaped by local realities, including

family conditions, cultural expectations, school environments, economic constraints, and community support systems.

This study addresses this research gap by examining the factors contributing to school dropout and identifying strategies for improving student retention in a newly established rural school community in Lautem District, Timor-Leste. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study explores the perspectives of teachers, parents, and adults with previous dropout experiences to understand barriers affecting educational continuity and opportunities for strengthening family–school–community partnerships.

The study contributes local evidence to the understanding of rural school dropout in Timor-Leste and introduces the KIER approach as an emerging locally grounded framework for strengthening communication, early identification of educational risks, and shared responsibility for student retention.

1.1 Educational Leadership and School Retention Strategies

Educational leadership plays an important role in improving student retention because schools influence not only academic achievement but also students' sense of belonging, safety, motivation, and engagement. Although school dropout is often associated with poverty and family circumstances, research demonstrates that effective educational leadership can reduce dropout risks by creating inclusive learning environments, strengthening teacher capacity, monitoring student participation, and developing responsive support systems (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2023).

Contemporary approaches to dropout prevention emphasise the importance of moving from reactive responses towards early identification and preventive intervention. School leaders have an important role in establishing attendance monitoring systems, supporting vulnerable students, promoting positive discipline, and strengthening collaboration with families and communities (UNICEF, 2021a). However, leadership effectiveness depends on the availability of adequate resources, trained teachers, and supportive education policies. Therefore, in resource-limited contexts such as rural Timor-Leste, educational leadership must extend beyond administrative responsibilities to include community engagement, advocacy, and mobilisation of support for children's educational participation.

Student-centred and inclusive pedagogies are also essential components of effective retention strategies. Students are more likely to remain engaged when they experience respectful relationships, meaningful learning opportunities, and recognition of their cultural identities. Effective schools therefore need to create learning environments where children feel valued, supported, and capable of achieving academically and socially (Zajda, 2021).

For rural schools in Timor-Leste, this perspective is particularly significant because teachers and school leaders frequently perform multiple roles beyond classroom instruction. They often act as educators, mentors, community connectors, and advocates for children's educational rights. Consequently, strengthening educational leadership is essential for developing sustainable approaches to preventing dropout and improving student retention.

1.2 Family, School, and Community Partnerships for Educational Development

Family, school, and community partnerships are increasingly recognised as essential components of effective dropout prevention, particularly in disadvantaged rural contexts. Research indicates that meaningful parental engagement, regular communication between schools and families, and

community participation contribute positively to student attendance, motivation, wellbeing, and learning outcomes (Epstein, 2018; UNESCO, 2020).

However, effective partnerships require recognition that families have different levels of capacity and opportunity to participate in education. In disadvantaged communities, parents may experience barriers such as limited literacy, financial constraints, distance from schools, household responsibilities, or limited confidence in communicating with educational institutions. Therefore, low parental participation should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of interest or commitment. Instead, schools should develop culturally responsive approaches that recognise families as important partners and provide appropriate opportunities for meaningful involvement (UNICEF, 2021a).

In rural Timor-Leste, family and community relationships are particularly significant because communities often maintain strong social networks, cultural traditions, and collective responsibilities. These relationships can provide important support mechanisms for children's educational participation. Development initiatives in Timor-Leste, including ALMA, HANDS, and HATUTAN, demonstrate that collaboration among communities, government institutions, and development partners can contribute to improved educational participation through mentoring, learning support, and nutrition-related interventions (UNICEF, 2020).

Nevertheless, sustainable dropout prevention requires more than short-term external interventions. Long-term improvement depends on strengthening local ownership, empowering communities, and developing partnerships where families and communities are active contributors to educational development rather than passive recipients of assistance.

This perspective supports the central argument of the present study that preventing school dropout requires shared responsibility among families, schools, and communities. Such partnerships provide the foundation for developing locally appropriate strategies, including the KIER approach proposed in this research.

1.3 Socio-Cultural, Economic, and Historical Factors Influencing School Dropout in Rural Timor-Leste

School dropout in rural Timor-Leste is influenced by interconnected economic, geographical, social, cultural, health, and educational factors. International research demonstrates that children from poor households and remote communities experience greater risks of educational exclusion because they often face multiple and overlapping disadvantages (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

In Timor-Leste, educational participation continues to be affected by household poverty, delayed school entry, grade repetition, limited school readiness, and unequal access to educational support. UNICEF (2020) identified these factors as important challenges affecting children's ability to participate consistently in education, particularly in vulnerable communities. Although national education policies have expanded access to schooling, increased enrolment does not always lead to successful completion because many children continue to experience barriers throughout their educational pathways.

Geographical isolation remains one of the most significant challenges affecting rural education. Children living in remote areas may travel long distances to reach schools, often without reliable transportation or safe travel conditions. These challenges can contribute to irregular attendance and increase the likelihood of disengagement. Furthermore, inadequate school infrastructure, limited learning resources, and insufficient water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities may negatively influence students' participation and learning experiences (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

Language is another important factor influencing educational participation. In multilingual contexts such as Timor-Leste, children may experience learning difficulties when the language used in schools differs from their home language. Research on multilingual education highlights that recognising children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds can improve comprehension, inclusion, and engagement (Taylor-Leech, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). Therefore, incorporating local languages, including Fataluku in Lautem District, is important for developing culturally responsive educational environments.

These challenges demonstrate that dropout prevention cannot be addressed through educational interventions alone. Sustainable solutions require integrated approaches that combine improvements in school quality with broader support addressing poverty, nutrition, health, transportation, family engagement, and community participation.

1.4 Strategic Educational Approaches for Preventing School Dropout and Improving Student Retention

Research indicates that effective dropout prevention requires comprehensive strategies addressing both immediate educational barriers and underlying structural conditions. Successful retention approaches commonly include early identification of students at risk, inclusive teaching practices, student support systems, improved learning environments, and strong collaboration among educational stakeholders (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021a).

Early warning systems are increasingly recognised as valuable mechanisms for identifying students experiencing attendance difficulties, academic challenges, or social vulnerabilities. However, identification alone is insufficient unless schools have appropriate resources, referral mechanisms, and support systems to respond effectively to students' needs (OECD, 2023). Therefore, successful retention strategies require both early recognition of risks and timely intervention.

Teacher quality is another critical factor influencing student retention. Teachers require continuous professional development in inclusive education, differentiated instruction, classroom management, child protection, and culturally responsive teaching. Positive teacher–student relationships are particularly important because students are more likely to remain engaged when they experience encouragement, respect, and a sense of belonging within the school environment (UNESCO, 2021). For rural communities, improving school infrastructure, providing school nutrition programmes, strengthening health support, improving sanitation facilities, and increasing access to learning resources remain essential components of retention strategies (World Bank, 2022). These interventions are particularly important for children experiencing barriers related to poverty, disability, geographical distance, or limited family resources.

Ultimately, sustainable dropout prevention requires collaborative leadership involving schools, families, communities, government institutions, churches, and development organisations. Each stakeholder contributes different forms of knowledge and support: families understand children's circumstances, teachers provide educational guidance, communities strengthen social responsibility, and governments establish policies and resources.

For newly established rural schools such as the school examined in Lautem District, strong partnerships provide an opportunity to develop inclusive learning environments where children are supported academically, socially, and culturally. Therefore, locally grounded approaches are necessary to respond effectively to rural educational challenges. This literature foundation supports the development of the KIER approach as an emerging framework for strengthening communication, interaction, educational support, and relationships among schools, families, and communities.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the factors contributing to school dropout and identify strategies for improving student retention in a rural community in Lautem District, Timor-Leste. A qualitative approach was selected because school dropout is a complex social and educational phenomenon influenced by interconnected individual, family, school, and community factors. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities related to educational participation.

The study was guided by an interpretivist perspective, which recognises that educational experiences are shaped by participants' social, cultural, economic, and personal contexts (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). This perspective was appropriate because the study sought to understand how teachers, parents, and adults with previous dropout experiences interpreted educational barriers and identified possible strategies for strengthening school retention.

A qualitative case study approach was adopted because the research focused on a specific rural educational context in Lautem District. This approach allowed the researcher to examine how family circumstances, school environments, and community relationships interact to influence children's educational pathways (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to children's risk of dropping out of school in the rural community of Lautem District?
2. What strategies can support children at risk of dropping out and improve school retention?
3. How can schools, families, and communities collaborate to prevent school dropout?

The KIER approach emerged from the thematic analysis as a locally grounded framework reflecting participants' perspectives regarding the importance of communication, interaction, educational support, and relationships in preventing school dropout.

2.2 Research Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they possessed direct knowledge and experiences related to school participation, dropout, and educational support within the local context. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when participants are selected based on their ability to provide rich and meaningful information about a particular phenomenon (Campbell et al., 2020).

The study involved twelve participants from a rural community in Lautem District, consisting of:

- Three teachers;
- Three parents; and
- Six adults who had discontinued primary education.

The inclusion of different participant groups enabled the study to examine school dropout from multiple perspectives. Teachers provided insights into school conditions, teaching practices, and student support mechanisms. Parents contributed perspectives regarding family circumstances, educational expectations, and challenges affecting children's participation. Former students provided personal experiences regarding the factors influencing their decision to discontinue schooling.

This multi-perspective approach recognises that school dropout is not simply an individual decision but a process influenced by interconnected social, economic, family, and educational conditions (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020).

The sample size was considered appropriate because qualitative case studies prioritise depth of understanding, contextual interpretation, and exploration of participants' experiences rather than statistical generalisation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

2.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews supported by guiding questions. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed participants to describe their experiences, perceptions, and recommendations regarding school dropout and retention strategies in their own words.

The use of multiple participant groups strengthened methodological triangulation by allowing comparison of perspectives among teachers, parents, and adults with previous dropout experiences (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2020).

The interviews explored participants' experiences and perceptions regarding:

- Barriers to school participation;
- Family responsibilities and educational support;
- School environment and teaching conditions;
- Health and wellbeing challenges;
- Community involvement; and
- Strategies for preventing school dropout.

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages, including Fataluku and Tetum, to ensure meaningful communication and allow participants to express their experiences within their cultural contexts.

With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. The translation process was carefully reviewed to preserve the meaning, cultural context, and intended interpretation of participants' responses.

2.4 Data Analysis Method

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic method for identifying patterns, interpreting meanings, and developing themes from qualitative data.

The analysis process involved:

1. Familiarisation with interview transcripts through repeated reading;
2. Generation of initial codes related to educational barriers and retention strategies;
3. Identification of patterns and relationships across participant responses;
4. Development and review of potential themes;
5. Definition and naming of final themes; and
6. Interpretation of themes in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

The analysis generated six major themes:

1. Poverty, inequality, and barriers to school participation;
2. Family responsibilities and educational support;

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3. School environment, teacher capacity, and learning quality;
 4. Health, nutrition, and child wellbeing;
 5. School–family–community collaboration; and
 6. Community engagement and shared responsibility for education.

These themes demonstrate that school dropout results from interconnected social, economic, cultural, and educational influences rather than a single cause.

The KIER approach emerged from these themes as an integrated framework highlighting four interconnected dimensions: communication, interaction, educational support, and relationships among schools, families, and communities.

2.5 Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical principles were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, research procedures, confidentiality arrangements, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without negative consequences.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews were conducted. Participants' identities were protected through the use of participant codes, and all information collected was used exclusively for research purposes.

The trustworthiness of the study was strengthened through several strategies, including:

- Methodological triangulation through multiple participant groups;
- Purposive selection of participants with relevant experiences;
- Use of local languages to support authentic communication;
- Careful transcription and translation procedures;
- Systematic thematic analysis; and
- Researcher reflexivity throughout the research process.

These strategies enhanced the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

3. Results and Discussions

The findings demonstrate that school dropout in rural Lautem District is a complex and multidimensional process influenced by interconnected economic, social, cultural, educational, and community-related factors. Participants' experiences indicate that dropout should not be understood as an individual failure or lack of motivation but rather as the outcome of multiple barriers affecting children's ability to access, participate in, and complete education.

The thematic analysis identified six interconnected themes:

1. Poverty, inequality, and barriers to school participation;
2. Family responsibilities and educational support;
3. School environment, teacher capacity, and learning quality;
4. Health, nutrition, and child wellbeing;
5. School–family–community collaboration; and
6. Community engagement and shared responsibility for education.

These themes illustrate that school dropout results from cumulative disadvantages affecting children, families, schools, and communities. This interpretation is consistent with international evidence showing that educational exclusion is often produced through the interaction of socioeconomic

vulnerability, limited educational resources, and unequal opportunities (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021a).

3.1 Poverty, Inequality, and Barriers to School Participation

Economic hardship emerged as one of the strongest factors influencing children's educational continuity. Participants explained that many families experience difficulties meeting essential educational needs, including transportation costs, school materials, uniforms, and daily food requirements.

Former students indicated that leaving school was often not related to a lack of interest in education but was connected to household economic pressures, family responsibilities, and limited ability to continue attending school. "Sometimes children want to continue studying, but families cannot provide transportation, food, or other school needs." (Former Student 1 (FS1), interview, 7 March 2022)

Geographical isolation further intensified these challenges. Participants described situations where children travelled long distances to reach school, often without reliable transportation or adequate support. "Some students have to walk very far to come to school, and this affects their attendance, especially during difficult weather conditions." (Parent 2 (P2), interview, 7 March 2022)

These findings demonstrate that educational participation in rural communities depends not only on the availability of schools but also on families' capacity to support regular attendance. The findings align with previous research showing that poverty, geographical disadvantage, and unequal access to resources remain significant barriers to educational completion in vulnerable communities (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

3.2 Family Responsibilities and Educational Support

Family circumstances significantly influenced children's ability to remain in education. Although participants recognised the importance of schooling, they identified several challenges affecting family support, including poverty, limited parental educational backgrounds, household responsibilities, and competing economic demands.

The findings suggest that limited parental involvement should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of commitment to education. Instead, some families experience structural barriers that restrict their ability to provide consistent educational support. "Parents want their children to study, but sometimes they face difficulties because of economic conditions and family responsibilities." (Parent 1 (P1), interview, 7 March 2022)

Teachers also emphasised the importance of communication between schools and families. Regular interaction was considered essential for identifying difficulties early and providing appropriate support before children become disconnected from education. "When teachers and parents communicate regularly, it becomes easier to understand students' problems and provide support." (Teacher 1 (T1), interview, 7 February 2022)

These findings highlight that effective retention strategies require schools to develop supportive partnerships with families rather than placing responsibility solely on parents. This supports Epstein's (2018) argument that meaningful school-family partnerships contribute to stronger student engagement, attendance, and educational continuity.

3.3 School Environment, Teacher Capacity, and Learning Quality

The quality of the school environment emerged as another important factor affecting student engagement and retention. Participants identified challenges related to school facilities, learning materials, sanitation conditions, and the need for stronger teacher professional support.

Teachers emphasised that creating a supportive classroom environment was essential for maintaining students' motivation, confidence, and sense of belonging. "Teachers need to understand students' situations and create a classroom where children feel respected and encouraged to learn." (Teacher 2 (T2), interview, 7 February 2022)

Participants also highlighted the importance of positive teacher–student relationships. Respectful communication, encouragement, and supportive teaching practices were viewed as important factors influencing students' willingness to remain engaged with learning.

The findings indicate that retention depends not only on children's access to schools but also on whether schools provide meaningful, inclusive, and supportive learning experiences. This finding is consistent with international research emphasising that teacher quality, inclusive pedagogy, and positive learning environments are critical factors supporting student participation and retention (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2023).

3.4 Health, Nutrition, and Child Wellbeing

Health, nutrition, and wellbeing emerged as important factors influencing educational participation. Participants reported that hunger, illness, limited access to health services, and inadequate water and sanitation facilities affected children's attendance, concentration, and ability to participate effectively in classroom activities. "When children come to school without enough food or when they are sick, it becomes difficult for them to concentrate on learning." (Teacher 3 (T3), interview, 7 February 2022)

The findings suggest that improving educational retention requires integrated support systems addressing children's physical, emotional, and social wellbeing. In rural communities, schools frequently become important spaces not only for academic learning but also for supporting children's broader development.

This finding corresponds with international evidence demonstrating the relationship between child wellbeing, nutrition, health support, and educational participation, particularly among vulnerable populations (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).

3.5 School–Family–Community Collaboration

Participants consistently emphasised that dropout prevention cannot be achieved by schools alone. Effective retention requires cooperation among teachers, families, community leaders, government institutions, churches, and development partners.

Teachers identified communication with families and community involvement as essential mechanisms for identifying children at risk and providing timely support. "The school cannot solve dropout problems alone. We need families and communities to work together." (T1, interview, 7 February 2022)

The findings demonstrate that partnerships create opportunities for shared responsibility. Families contribute knowledge about children's circumstances, schools provide educational guidance and support, while communities strengthen social networks and collective responsibility.

The experiences of participants highlight four important elements underlying dropout prevention:

- Communication;
- Interaction;
- Educational support; and
- Relationships.

These elements became the foundation for the development of the KIER approach.

3.6 Community Engagement and Shared Responsibility for Education

The establishment of the new school in Lautem represents more than the creation of educational infrastructure. Participants viewed the school as a potential centre for community development, social connection, and long-term educational improvement.

Community engagement was considered essential for strengthening local ownership and ensuring that education responds to community needs and cultural realities. "The community must feel that the school belongs to everyone, because children's education is everyone's responsibility." (Community Representative 1 (CR1), interview, 7 March 2022)

Based on participants' perspectives across the six themes, the study developed the emerging KIER approach.

The KIER approach represents four interconnected principles:

Component	Meaning	Practical implication
<i>Komunikasaun</i>	Communication	Strengthening dialogue between schools, families, and communities
<i>Interasaun</i>	Interaction	Creating continuous engagement and cooperation among stakeholders
<i>Edukasaun</i>	Education	Supporting learning, guidance, and educational awareness
<i>Relasaun</i>	Relationships	Building trust, belonging, and shared responsibility

The findings suggest that strengthening these relationships may support early identification of educational risks, improve collaboration among stakeholders, and contribute to sustainable student retention in rural Timor-Leste.

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that school dropout in rural Timor-Leste is a complex and cumulative process shaped by the interaction of economic, social, cultural, geographical, and educational factors. The findings indicate that dropout should not be interpreted as an individual decision but as the consequence of multiple disadvantages affecting children, families, schools, and communities. This finding supports international evidence that educational disengagement often results from accumulated barriers rather than a single cause and requires comprehensive responses involving multiple stakeholders (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021a).

Economic vulnerability emerged as a significant factor influencing educational continuity in rural Lautem. Although families expressed positive attitudes towards education, many experienced difficulties providing essential resources such as transportation, learning materials, uniforms, and food. These findings suggest that educational participation is closely connected with broader socioeconomic conditions. Therefore, improving school retention requires interventions that address

both educational provision and the economic barriers that prevent children from attending school consistently (World Bank, 2022).

The findings also highlight that geographical isolation continues to influence educational opportunities in rural communities. Long distances between homes and schools, limited transportation options, and challenging environmental conditions create additional burdens for children and families. This reflects wider evidence that children living in remote areas often experience unequal access to quality education because physical distance interacts with poverty, infrastructure limitations, and limited support services (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). In the context of rural Timor-Leste, addressing these barriers requires locally appropriate solutions involving schools, communities, and government support systems.

A major contribution of this study is the emphasis on family, school, and community relationships as central elements in preventing dropout. The findings show that families generally value education; however, their ability to support children is often restricted by economic pressures, educational background, and household responsibilities. This suggests that low parental participation should not be understood as a lack of interest but as a reflection of structural challenges affecting family capacity. This interpretation is consistent with Epstein's (2018) argument that effective partnerships require schools to actively engage families and create supportive conditions for participation.

The study further demonstrates the importance of communication between schools and families as an early prevention mechanism. Regular interaction allows teachers and parents to identify attendance problems, learning difficulties, and social challenges before they become reasons for permanent withdrawal from education. This finding supports international research emphasising that successful retention strategies depend on early identification, continuous support, and coordinated responses among educational stakeholders (UNICEF, 2021a; UNESCO, 2021).

The findings regarding school environment and teacher capacity reinforce the importance of educational quality in preventing dropout. While access to schooling is essential, remaining in school depends on whether children experience meaningful, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. Participants highlighted that teacher encouragement, respectful relationships, and supportive classroom practices influence students' motivation and sense of belonging. This supports previous research showing that teacher quality, inclusive pedagogy, and positive teacher-student relationships are important protective factors against educational disengagement (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2023).

These findings have important implications for teacher education institutions, particularly the Instituto Católico para a Formação de Professores (ICFP), Baucau. Preparing teachers for rural contexts requires more than subject knowledge and instructional skills. Teacher education programmes should strengthen competencies in inclusive education, culturally responsive teaching, positive discipline, child protection, student wellbeing, and community engagement. In remote communities, teachers frequently serve multiple roles as educators, mentors, community connectors, and advocates for children's educational participation.

The study also highlights the importance of considering health, nutrition, and wellbeing as interconnected elements of school retention. Participants described how hunger, illness, and limited access to basic services affected children's attendance and concentration. These findings reinforce the understanding that education outcomes cannot be separated from children's broader wellbeing. Integrated approaches connecting education with nutrition, health, sanitation, and child protection are particularly important in disadvantaged rural contexts (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).

A key contribution of this research is the emergence of the KIER approach as a locally grounded framework for understanding dropout prevention. Unlike externally developed intervention models, the KIER approach emerged from participants' experiences and reflects local perspectives regarding the importance of communication, interaction, educational support, and relationships. The framework provides a practical way of organising collaborative actions among schools, families, and communities

However, because this study was conducted as a qualitative case study within one rural community, the KIER approach should be considered an emerging framework rather than a tested intervention model. Further research is needed to examine its implementation, effectiveness, and potential application in other rural contexts in Timor-Leste. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that locally grounded approaches based on community relationships may provide valuable foundations for strengthening educational participation.

The study also contributes to the broader understanding of rural schools as more than physical spaces for instruction. In disadvantaged communities, schools can function as centres for social connection, community engagement, child support, and lifelong learning. This perspective is particularly relevant in rural Timor-Leste, where educational challenges are closely connected with wider social and economic conditions.

Overall, this study contributes local evidence demonstrating that sustainable dropout prevention requires a holistic approach combining educational quality improvement, family engagement, community participation, and support systems for vulnerable children. Preventing school dropout should therefore be understood as a shared responsibility involving schools, families, communities, government institutions, and development partners.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that school dropout in rural Timor-Leste is a complex and multidimensional issue influenced by interconnected economic, geographical, social, cultural, health, and educational factors. The findings indicate that children's continuation in school depends not only on individual motivation but also on the availability of support from families, schools, and communities. Therefore, improving student retention requires a holistic approach that promotes inclusive, supportive, and equitable learning environments rather than focusing only on expanding access to education (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021a).

The study highlights that sustainable dropout prevention requires coordinated collaboration among schools, families, communities, government institutions, and development partners. The emerging KIER approach provides a locally grounded framework that emphasises communication, interaction, educational support, and relationships as important foundations for identifying educational risks early and strengthening shared responsibility for children's educational continuity. This finding supports evidence that effective retention strategies depend on meaningful school-family partnerships and community participation (Epstein, 2018; UNESCO, 2021).

The findings also emphasise the important role of teacher preparation institutions, particularly the Instituto Católico para a Formação de Professores (ICFP), Baucau, in preparing teachers for rural educational contexts. Teacher education programmes should strengthen competencies in inclusive education, student-centred pedagogy, positive discipline, child protection, culturally responsive teaching, and community engagement. In rural communities, teachers contribute not only to academic learning but also to children's wellbeing, confidence, and sense of belonging (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2023).

Based on the findings, schools should strengthen preventive retention strategies through regular communication with families, community engagement, home visits, and early identification of students experiencing attendance, learning, economic, or social difficulties. Early intervention is essential because supporting vulnerable children before disengagement occurs is more effective than responding after dropout has already taken place (UNICEF, 2021a; UNESCO, 2023).

Furthermore, improving retention in rural Timor-Leste requires continued investment in inclusive education, school nutrition, health support, safe infrastructure, learning resources, and targeted assistance for vulnerable children. Addressing barriers related to poverty, disability, geographical distance, and limited family resources remains essential for achieving equitable educational opportunities (World Bank, 2022).

In conclusion, preventing school dropout requires collective responsibility and sustained commitment. Rural schools should be strengthened as inclusive community learning centres where children experience belonging, families participate as educational partners, and communities contribute actively to educational development. Although further research is needed to examine the implementation and effectiveness of the KIER approach, this study provides locally grounded evidence that strengthening relationships among schools, families, and communities can contribute to improving student retention in rural Timor-Leste.

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