

Analysis of Factors Influencing Academic Performance in Primary School National Examination in Tanzania: A Case of Kilosa District

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the factors influencing academic performance in primary schools in Kilosa district, Mrogoro region in Tanzania. The study employed a qualitative research approach through a cross-sectional research design. About 106 participants were involved including five (5) head teachers (from five schools), one (1) district education officer, one (1) ward education officer, 30 primary school teachers, and 69 students from the five selected primary schools. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions. The collected data were qualitatively analyzed. The study shows that poor academic performance in primary schools in the Kilosa district was first, contributed by a learning environment characterized by the poor quality of school infrastructures, long distance to schools, few desks, and poor teachers' houses. The second was a lack of motivation and the last one was a lack of parental involvement. The findings of this study add to the body of literature on academic performance and learning environment. It also underlines the importance of creating favourable working conditions for both teachers and students that fosters high morale among workers and students. This study also broadens our understanding of the importance of government intervention as part of the strategies for improving teaching and learning environments to improve academic performance.

Keywords: *Academic performance, primary school, primary school examination, national examination*

INTRODUCTION

The world has recently faced various challenges in meeting its economic, social, and political developmental goals. In this process, education is central to achieving such goals. Worldwide, students' academic performance is measured by examination and continuous assessment. *Academic performance* can be defined as the level of expertise attained in the academic work in the school (Kohl, 1975). Stephen (1966) argued that educational growth affects children's scholarly output in school. Different countries have realized that students' performance is the heart of the educational process and that if the performance is poor; all innovations in education are doomed to failure (Nyipir, 2010). Past research indicates that despite the initiatives taken by various countries to improve academic performance, yet, many students' performance remains poor (Nyirenda, 2013). This situation has been highlighted by studies conducted in countries such as United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United Kingdom (UK). Such performance has been attributed to many reasons. For instance, the study by Naimi (2010) found that 15% to 30% of students in the UAE performed poorly. In the United Kingdom, Nyapir (2010) found that the performance of Somali students was affected by overcrowded classrooms. Other scholars (Kundu & Tadoo, 2000; Mugisha, 1991) hold that children's attitudes and home background are the most significant primary factors influencing school performance.

Rono (2013) researched the factors affecting students' performance in public primary schools in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education Examination (KCPE) in the Nandi district. Rono found that inadequate playgrounds, classes, and other resources likely affected primary school academic performance. Similarly, Ahmed (2015) researched the poor performance cases in Kenya's public primary schools. He argued that students performed poorly in Wajir areas due to deficiencies in the teaching and learning activities, lack of access to learning activities, financial constraints, and regional disparity. Regardless of the great importance placed on education, it faces several challenges including poor students' academic performance, shortage of resources (teachers and infrastructure, teaching and learning resources), poor teaching and learning environment, and teachers' conditions (Nyipir, 2010). Such situations compel the government of Tanzania to initiate and adopt strategies such as Big Result

Now (BRN) and Primary School Development Programme (PEDP) to curb the problem. Following the continued decline of primary school performance in Tanzania yearly, the government took a robust measure by adopting such strategies as a part of the government’s effort to uplift the country into a middle-income economy. The government further introduced new methods of working under a specified time frame for delivery of the step-change required to improve the quality of education and improve the primary school leaving examination (PSLE) performance(URT, 2013; Nyirenda, 2013). This step was taken due to the continued decline of PSLE performance. For instance, in 2012, only 30.7% of the students who sat for the PSLE passed, while 69.3% failed (URT, 2013). The deterioration in pass rates among primary school leavers in Tanzania compelled the government to launch a student-teacher enrichment program (STEP). STEP was among the BRN strategies and intervention measures for increasing primary school examination performance which was implemented under the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT) in collaboration with the Prime Minister’s office(URT, 2013). It was introduced because teachers’ quality is crucial to enhance students’ performance (Umeasiegbu,1991; Adeyemi,2014). Despite the launch of such educational strategies to increase students’ pass rates, poor performance in primary schools remains a key problem in the Kilosa district (Kumburu, 2011). For example, the primary school national examination performance in the Kilosa district between 2012 and 2018 shows that most schools performed poorly in the national examinations, as it is shown for some schools in table 1.

Table 1: The PSLE from 2012 to 2018 in Kilosa District

School	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
School “A”	0	0	7	11	14	14	19
School “B”	0	0	14	0	3	3	38
School “C”	0	0	19	8	16	16	15
School “D”	0	0	13	0	0	0	0
School “E”	0	63	19	22	64	12	42

Source: URT (2019)

additionally, There is also a call for research into the interrelationship between the different dimensions of learning environments such as spaces, pedagogy, and learning (Acton 2018; McNeil & Borg 2018). The studies reviewed did not delve into the relevant strategies to improve academic performance in the studied areas. Therefore, the current paper addresses factors that can influence academic performance in selected schools. The current research responds to the question: What are the factors influencing academic performance in Primary School National Examinations in Tanzania? With this research question, the study delved into the factors influencing academic performance in the Primary School National Examination in the selected schools in the Kilosa district, Tanzania.

Methodology

The study was conducted in the Morogoro region, Kilosa district, covering all primary schools in the Magubike ward. Kilosa district was chosen due to poor academic performance for several years. For example, in 2017, the district performed poorly and became the last district in the performance ranking at the regional level (NECTA, 2018). The study employed a cross-sectional research design using purposive sampling and simple random sampling techniques to select participants. This study involved 106 participants including five (5) head teachers (from five schools), one (1) district education officer, one (1) ward education officer, 30 primary school teachers, and 69 students from five primary schools. Data from head teachers, District Education Officer and Ward Education Officer were collected through individual interviews. Data from primary school teachers and students were collected through Focus Group Discussions. The data were analyzed through content analysis. The data from interviews and Focus Group Discussions were transcribed from voice to text. Transcription was followed by breaking the recorded information into meaningful units of information, subjects, and tendencies. Then, researchers identified and coded the major themes and subthemes. While analyzing the data, researchers used a constant comparative method to compare the codes against each other. The process involved going back and forth between coded scripts and themes. This back-and-forth process helped the researchers trim out all recurring themes and merge subthemes into a manageable number. The reliability of the findings was ensured by crosschecking the themes between the two independent coders, and

frequently communicating to have a shared understanding and maintain uniformity throughout the analysis. Additionally, a third person was given the document to review and comment on what should be removed and maintained. After the exchange and crosschecking of the document, writing and presentation of the findings started for both qualitative and quantitative.

Results and Discussion

This paper examined the factors influencing academic performance in the primary School National Examination in the selected primary schools in Kilosa, Tanzania. The findings of this study aligned the factors influencing performance into three main themes. The first theme focused on the learning environment, the second one focused on parental involvement and the third one focused on teachers' motivation. These factors are discussed hereafter.

The Learning Environment and Students' Performance

The District Education Officer (DEO), teachers and head teachers were asked about the causes of poor academic performance in schools. One of the mentioned factors connected to students' academic performance was the learning environment. A poor learning environment puts students in an uncomfortable position and causes them to lose motivation to learn. As a result, some students escaped from school or were absent from school and studies, unnecessarily. Consequently, their performance becomes poor. One of the respondents had this to say:

In my opinion, many factors influence recent students' performance. Good school infrastructure is one of the factors that can make students perform better. Unfortunately, in many of our schools, infrastructure is very poor and is marked by inadequate desks and chairs. Instead of concentrating on the lesson, students concentrate on how to sit and hold their items, which reduces concentration and hence poor performance.

The poor learning environment was also characterized by the shortage of desks which affects lower-class students and teachers, especially in writing and classroom organization. This condition leads to poor handwriting. Teachers fail to assist students as they cannot move within the classrooms to observe and support how students do the exercises. One teacher commented:

In the school I teach, there are insufficient desks and classrooms to accommodate all students at the required ratio. Classes are overcrowded, and hence not easy to reach every child in 40/80 minutes. Such a condition affects performance, primarily when you cannot concentrate on teaching those who lag behind others.

The head teachers also reported that poor infrastructure, shortage of teaching and learning materials, as well as the distance to schools from teachers' houses, contributed to poor performance. A good number of teachers rented houses far away from schools; therefore, they usually came to school late. This interfered with the school timetable, as teachers taught few periods – less than the allocated number in the timetable. As a result, even the coverage of the syllabi sometimes became difficult. In sum, findings indicate that the learning environment has a role to play in enhancing students' performance in primary schools. The following emerged as the major factors which create an uncondusive learning environment and hence poor performance. These are *poor school infrastructure characterized by a shortage of desks; shortage of teaching and learning materials, long distance to schools for both teachers and students and absenteeism*. In one way or another, this causes teachers to teach a few periods and thus be unable to cover the syllabus; hence poor students performance. It is argued here that poor working conditions faced by teachers presented in this study contribute to students' poor performance in the PLSE. The findings of this study are supported by Dhanapala (2021) who found that the learning environment affects students' academic success in achieving a second language.

Lizzio, Wilson and Simons (2002) argued that the learning environment can be categorized into three broad aspects; the academic environment, the physical environment and the psychological environment; and all these affect overall academic success. Moreover, Morumba (2006) confirmed that absenteeism of students from the schools and lack of facilities could also be the major factors affecting primary school examination performance in Kenya. Kitonyi (2017) concurs with our findings in the sense that, a lack of teaching and learning resources, a lack of adequate physical facilities, very high teacher-pupil ratio (TPR) creates an uncondusive learning environment. This situation contributes to poor performance. Galabawa (2001), noted that academic performance in schools is very much dependent upon teachers who are the main instrument for improving learning activities. This implies that their condition affects their functioning and hence contributes to a poor learning environment and hence poor

performance. Along the same line, the finding about the shortage of teachers' houses around schools is supported by Nannyonjo (2017) and Anderson (1991) who asserted that long distances to schools for teachers and students lead to lessons untimely attendance, and hence reduce the number of periods to be covered. This affects academic performance.

Parental Involvement and Students Performance

It was further revealed that a lack of parental involvement in school activities contributed to poor performance. The participants reported that parents were not well informed and were not involved in school activities in most schools. Some parents would not contribute ideas and efforts even if they were given chance to do so. Failure to contribute declines government efforts and sets back school programmes such as Big Results Now (BRN). One of the teachers had this to say:

Parental involvement in students' academic affairs is minimal. In our district, many parents do not contribute their effort to run school activities. For instance, they do not have ideas and cooperate to supervise students at home, which is crucial in facilitating learning. The reason is that, for children to learn better it requires cooperation between parents and teachers.

Another teacher added:

Students' performance is affected by a combination of factors not only environmental but also by parents' involvement. That is if parents are not involved they will not be able to assist their children at home. Helping students go beyond providing their needs such as food and other material things needed for them to go to school. It includes involvement and devoting time to help children in doing their school activities, understanding and putting efforts to foster government initiatives. Children who are not assisted as required fail to achieve their academic goals in terms of performance.

It is clear in this study that parental involvement contributes to students' academic performance. Thus, it is argued here that poor performance in the selected schools could be partly contributed by poor parental involvement. This finding concurs with Miedel and Reynolds (1999) and Hill and Craft (2003) whose findings indicated that parental involvement practices at home or school influence children's academic performance. A similar view was also observed by other scholars such as Barnard (2004), Christenson et al.(1992), Singh et al.(1995) and Miedel and Reynolds (1999). Thus, we

argue that parents' involvement in their children's education is one of the important factors which assists in improving students' achievements regardless of the level of education.

Teachers' Motivation and Students' Performance

In this study, it was indicated that teachers' motivation contributed to students' performance. Usually, motivated teachers work hard under minimum supervision, as compared to demotivated teachers. It is clear in this study that many teachers were not motivated to work because of the low salaries they were paid and poor housing. One of the teachers commented:

I think poorly motivated teachers and students highly affect performance. Many teachers are poorly paid, and some live in poor houses. This demoralizes teachers and reduces their work spirit, resulting in poor performance.

On the same line, another participant added:

Our living environment is not conducive at all. You can imagine, coming from a poor house which is made up of mud and roofed with grasses. So, when the rain starts, you cannot concentrate on teaching students while your house is getting wet. If it rains overnight, you also get wet and things inside get wet as well.

Another group added that,

In my place, houses are expensive, and you are forced to find cheap houses which fit your financial capacity. So, it demotivating to stay in such a bad house and then go and teach students by heart. In this kind of environment, even the performance is low. It is because we spend some extra time to find extra income by doing other business. Thus, we reduce time spent in the classroom. So to speak, I struggle a lot to get extra income.

Literature suggests that motivation is a viable factor for the growth and development of education worldwide (Ofoegbu, 2004). High motivation enhances teachers' commitment to pedagogical and management roles; it enhances classroom effectiveness and ultimately improves school academic performance. In this study, the teacher's motivation was seen as a key to students' performance. In most poorly performing schools, most teachers

were demotivated and put less effort into teaching. This is in connection with Sumra (2004), who posits that a lack of teachers' motivation highly contributes to poor academic performance. It is noted here that highly motivated teachers put maximum effort into their job (Mruma, 2013). Therefore, teachers' salaries and other incentives such as accommodation should be offered to increase students' performance.

Conclusion

This paper examined factors influencing academic performance in Primary School National Examination in Tanzania. There is a combination of factors affecting students' performance. The major factors include poor learning environment, lack of teachers' motivation and lack of parental involvement. The findings of this study suggest the importance of improving the learning environment, teachers' motivation and parental involvement in improving academic performance. This, in turn, encourages students and employees and raises their morale – leading to a high commitment to improving teaching and learning, and hence high performance.

Practical Implications

This paper has two practical implications. First, if the identified challenges are addressed, and the government invests enough in the learning environment and teachers' motivation, it may create a conducive working and learning environment, which in turn promotes positive feelings to both teachers and students. The government need to design mechanisms under which support for teachers may be possible, particularly by minimizing encountered challenges and empowering schools and school leaders. Such a condition may create a sense of commitment and a safe working and learning environment. This in turn may enable children to work hard and achieve their goals. Second, parents if involved and made aware of their responsibilities, will support the government's efforts to improve students' academic performance.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the findings discussed, this study has some limitations. First, the research design was developed to minimize common method bias. That is,

the emphasis was put on the freedom of participants to decide to drop out within the data collection stage, and the anonymity treatment of their participation (Malingumu et al., 2016). However, such a condition cannot be ruled out completely. The reason is that the data were collected from a single source and with only a qualitative method. Thus, future research could reduce common method bias by collecting data from different sources (Podsakoff et al., 2003) and using a mixed-methods research approach or quantitative method to cover a large sample. Second, the study was single phased conducted in one region of Tanzania's mainland alone and used a cross-section survey to collect information. The sample and context cannot be used to generalize the findings all over Tanzania. As a result, future research should expand the sample by adding other regions of Tanzania (including Zanzibar Island); longitudinal data using two phases may be collected. Third, the current paper focused on the factors influencing the performance of students in the Primary School Leaving Examination; further studies have to look at the influence of parental involvement on primary school students' performance. This will assist in finding out the role of parents in education performance because parents play a crucial role in enhancing performance in schools.

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