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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME POOR PERFORMANCE IN NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS AMONG PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MERU CENTRAL DISTRICT, KENYA

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Abstract

In Kenya, performance at primary school level is ascertained after students sit the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) national examination at standard 8. This paper focuses on the strategies that have been put in place by public primary schools to improve performance based on a study of schools in Kibirichia Division in Meru Central District, Kenya. The study also sought suggestions from the residents on other strategies that could be put in place to improve performance in the area. The population of the study was 451 respondents. The population comprised standard 8 pupils, assistant teachers and head teachers. Purposive, stratified and random sampling techniques were used. A sample size of all 12 head teachers, 60 assistant teachers and 120 standard 8 pupils was used. Different questionnaires were used for the head teachers, assistant teachers and pupils for data collection. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The study found that a number of strategies have been put in place to improve performance by the schools in the area. The school management committees have PTA teachers. Pupils report early in school and schools and parents/guardians reward pupils who have done well. Many students like speaking in English in the absence of teachers. Students have story books and were punished for doing mistakes where teachers and the administration administer the punishments. There is a monitor for speaking vernacular and schools do Continuous Assessment tests in the middle of the term. Teachers have gone back to school to improve their academic qualifications and professionalism. Female teachers are more and are taking leadership roles. Teachers are opting for subject specialization because they are not comfortable with teaching all subjects. Parents like remedial teaching and students have a liking for the hard subjects. Students are informed on careers after completing their studies. The study recommends that the government employs more teachers, induct new head teachers; schools have a common library and subject specialization in primary schools. The study is expected to provide insight reference to policy makers, scholars and researchers on ways to improving performance in public primary schools in Kenya.

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Introduction

Education is the process of teaching, training and learning aimed at improving knowledge and developing skills (Olembo, Wanga & Kwagu, 1992). It is a life-long process. Education is the entire process of developing human abilities, potentialities and behavior. It is an organized and sustained instruction meant to transmit a variety of knowledge,

skills, understanding and attitudes necessary for daily activities of life. It is also a social process in which an individual attains social competence and growth (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994).

In the African traditional societies, there was education for a preparatory purpose (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994). Children were brought up to become useful members of the household, village and community and hence the ethnic group (Sifuna &

Otiende, 1994). The boys, for example, were brought up as future fathers while girls were to be future housewives and mothers. The education instilled accepted standards and beliefs governing correct behaviour and expressive goals aimed at creating unity and consensus. It emphasized social responsibility, job orientation and political participation, spiritual and moral values (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994).

Formal education was introduced in East Africa by the Holy Ghost Fathers who had built schools for freed slaves from the interior (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994). These elementary schools consisted of literacy classes in reading, writing, arithmetic, singing and catechism. They were highly religious and taught various trades and handicraft. However, in Kenya even before these schools were started by missionaries, there were Koranic schools which were started around 1333 AD (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994). These schools were also attended by Bantu who spoke Swahili languages. The missionary schools had the aim of making their followers literate so as to refresh their faith by reading the bible (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994).

When the country attained its independence in 1963, the Kenya government had to take control of education in the country (Ssekamwa & Lugumba, 2001). The first education commission led by Professor Ominde was formed in 1964 and set the educational objectives which, according to Mungai (2002), were:

- i. Serve to foster Nation unity
- ii. Serve the needs of development
- iii. To foster, develop and communicate the rich and varied cultures of Kenya
- iv. Prepare and equip the youth with expertise to play an effective role in the life of the nation
- v. To promote social justice and morality by instilling right attitudes
- vi. To foster positive attitudes towards other nations.

The above objectives were to guide the direction of education in independent Kenya. One of the important issues was to have educated personnel who could provide quality education. The commission placed a lot of emphasis on the need to provide universal primary education which was implemented in 1974 for standard 1-4. In 1976, the Gachathi Committee, referred to as National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies (RoK, 2003), emphasized on the structure and goals of formal education system and on issues relating to the quality and relevance of the school curriculum. The Mackay Report of 1981, in addition to starting the second

university in Kenya also recommended the change in the education system to the current 8-4-4. The Report also stressed the importance of quality education. It highlighted the importance of maintaining education standards through supervision and inspection. Kamunge Report of 1988 focused on among others quality and relevance of education and training programmes (RoK, 2003).

In January 2003, the government introduced free primary education so as to increase the enrolment in primary schools. It was also meant to reduce wastage thus increase quality. The Koech Report of 2000 which recommended a Totally Integrated Quality Education and Training should not be left out. The governments' vision for education was to have quality education and training for development (ROK, 1999). This performance is rated by doing a national examination, KCPE, which is done to evaluate how successfully the objectives have been met. Evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of data needed to make decisions. One of the decisions is to select those to move to the next level where the vacancies are few. Other reasons are to determine the effectiveness of the system, to provide information about services delivered that will be useful to the staff and other stakeholders and to enable the teachers to make changes that improve effectiveness (Mamta, 2004).

According to Bakhda (2004), planning is the use of time, resources and efforts towards realization of what we want to accomplish. A school, like any other organization, should strive to perform. The performance of the school can be measured in terms of attitude change of the learners, their ability to socialize, skills acquired, the level of literacy and the level of self reliance (Morrison, 1974). One way of testing is where a common exam is administered. KCPE test is a National examination given to primary school pupils at the end of the final year of primary education. The examination is administered by the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) which is recognized and accepted by the citizens. This examination is the one which acts as a yardstick of performance. Performance is as a result of input from the government, parents and the community. It is affected by other factors some of which include mother tongue interference, pupil teacher ratio, time management and motivation of teachers and pupils (Bakhda, 2004).

Mwango (1998) observes that the poor performance of English in public day primary schools as compared to boarding primary schools in Embu District has been due to low motivation by the government, heavy subject load for teachers, less learning hours and low economic status. Owiye (2005), in *Trends and Factors Affecting Wastage in Primary Schools*

Education in Siaya District, has found that poor performance in Siaya District was due to wastage. Owiye (ibid.) has further found that wastage in Siaya District is due to lack of fees, inadequate physical

facilities, attitude, illiteracy levels, family size and health.

The KCPE performance in Meru District has been below 250 marks out of 500 marks as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: KCPE Analysis – Meru District

Year	No. of Schools	Schools with over 250 marks	% of schools with over 250 marks	District mean score
2003	342	99	28.95	234.32
2004	348	106	30.46	235.63
2005	363	105	28.92	232.07
2006	373	118	31.64	233.49
2007	382	117	30.23	232.25

Source: Examinations office Meru Central District

Table 2: KCPE Analysis – Kibirichia Division

Year	Mean Score
2003	211.33
2004	216.26
2005	211.63
2006	209.82
2007	212.55

Source: Examinations Office – Meru Central District

The above results reveal that the performance of Meru District is below 250 marks out of 500 marks. The situation would have been worse were it not for private schools and public boarding schools.

Table 2 shows that the performance of Kibirichia Division was worse than that of Meru Central District. A school therefore being an organization should have objectives (Bakhda, 2004). One of the main objectives of any school is to produce results that are acceptable in the next level. Students go to the next level with little or no strain.

This evaluation measures performance which is the yardstick for admission to the next level. Vacancies in the national schools, provincial schools and district schools are filled as per performance. The government policy on transition from primary schools is 70% (GoK, 2005). This has increased the number of pupils going to secondary schools. The school should instill in each student the desire to learn and improve (Chapman & King, 2008). This implies that regions that perform poorer are disadvantaged by the above criteria. This becomes a set-back to equity. To achieve the desire to learn and improve there ought to be proper planning (Olembo, Wanga & Kwagu, 1992).

Statement of the Problem

Education is a necessary condition for development of individuals and nations. Educational performance of individuals is measured using their performance in national examinations. Performance in national examinations is also used to select students progressing to the next level of education and training. Performance across regions has, however, varied significantly with certain regions posting very good performance while others performed poorly. The government commissions have endeavoured to address this through recommendations, which are not supported by systematic studies and adequate data. Despite the persistent dismal performance in public primary schools in Kibirichia Division, no systematic studies have been done to assess and beef up strategies that have been adopted by schools to overcome the challenge of poor performance.

Poor Performance around the World

Education is one of the most important aspects of human resource development. Poor performance leads to a child having low esteem and causes significant stress to parents (Karande *et al.*, 2009). It has been found that poor primary school performance is a risk factor for low high-school and university graduation as well as poverty in later life (Tandon, 2006). Poor performance in public primary school has been a thorn in the flesh the world over. According to Bulana (1982), free primary school was

introduced in Nigeria in 1976. This led to increase in enrolment of pupils. It was later realized that performance in primary schools being measured through standardized examinations was poor. Bulana (1982) has also found that the factors leading to this poor performance are: the curriculum, quality of instruction, the examination procedures, school facilities, attitude of teachers and parents and the environmental conditions. Levin and Lockheed (1993) have found that some of the factors leading to poor performance in primary schools worldwide are un-proportional use of time where 50% of school time was being used in languages like English and mathematics, lack of enough instructional materials such as students' text books, teachers' guides and other software which also contribute to poor performance.

Instructional hours and unscheduled school closings, teachers and students absenteeism were other areas. The instructional hours for grades 1 to 6 is 900 hours per year. However, a country like Ghana has 610 hours per year for the learners. Another factor is unscheduled school closings, teachers and student's absenteeism and unplanned disruptions resulting in actual learning time being significantly less than the official time. The international standard calls for 180 days per year. Haiti, for example, has 162 days meaning 18 days less. Out of these days, schools begin late; teachers are absent most Tuesdays and Fridays because these are market days. They celebrated 48 public holidays making the learning to be left with a functional year of 70 days. Other factors include teachers' strikes, maternity leaves, effective teaching in subject matter where in most countries primary school teachers teach all subjects and the pedagogic practices.

According to Thomas (2004), poor performance in Middle East particularly the Arab states enrolment in primary schools is 85%, secondary schools is 50% and tertiary institutions is below 15%. This has been brought about by internal and external violence such as bombing of fast foods centres in 2002 and 2004 in Lebanon and bombing of Ankara and Istanbul in 2004. The wars, violence and social conflict seemed and seem to be the order of the day in Arab states. They include the conflict between Libya and Chad over the Aozou strip, the nullified elections of Algeria in 1991, Lebanon's horrendous 16 year civil war, Hezbollah's continued guerrilla fighting with Israel, territorial disputes between Iran and Iraq spurring the 8 years of war, Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990s, Israel Palestinian struggles and Internal social conflict in Yemen.

Poor performance should be seen as a symptom reflecting a larger underlying problem in children (*Daily Star*, 2009, February 7). It said that some of

the factors leading to the poor performance in primary schools are poor syllabus coverage where 50% is covered, lack of attention by teachers, students and parents. The other factor was the five years in primary school instead of eight. The qualification of teachers and the faulty examination were other contributing factors. Schufan *et al.* (2004), in their study of anthropometric measurement and clinical deficiencies, intelligence quotient and other tests of ability, socio-economic factors and the diet at a primary school near Santiago, have found that malnutrition and cultural deprivation are the main two of the underlying causes of poor performance in schools which is claimed to be the result of "poverty syndrome".

A report by IRIN (2009) from the department of primary education (DPE) in Bangladesh reveals that 70% of the primary school graduates are unable to read, write, or count properly. It is a pity because they do not have the command of English necessary for the day-to-day life engagements, like in business, higher studies and technical education. The situation is worse in the remote rural areas due to scarcity of English teachers and predominance of religious schools (madras) where English is not taught. Another factor is weak organizational and institutional framework and lack of proper physical environment in school. There is the issue of inadequate qualified teachers and lack of devotion from the teachers. There is also poor support and monitoring from the family. Most students are half fed especially lunch hence thirst for knowledge is replaced with hunger for food. The contacts hours are not enough. Grades 1 and 2 have 500 hours per year. Grades 3 to 5 have 700 hours per year as compared to the International standard of 900 hours per year. This is brought about by lack of classrooms resulting to double shifts. There is also the low teacher-student ratio which also reduces the contact hours. The many holidays like Eid (9 days), summer (15 days) and Ramadhan (20 days) also reduce the contact hours. Bangladesh has about 200,000 teachers to take care of 19 million students.

School Management

According to Boone and Kurtz (1992), management is the use of people and other resources for getting things done. In a school situation the head teacher's main duty is to manage the resources at his/her disposal to improve the performance of the learners. Olembo, Wanga and Kwagu (1992) say that in management success is continuous improvement. Good management is influenced by appropriate members of staff, physical facilities, structure and policies of education in the country. A good manager should possess among others the skills of planning,

organizing, leading, controlling and supervising. In planning, managers should set objectives, assess the future and develop courses of action to accomplish the objectives. In organizing the head teacher (H/T) should be able to arrange people and physical resources to carry out plans and accomplish organizational goals while in leading one should cause people to perform certain task intended to achieve specific objectives. With controlling the H/T continually analysis and measures the actual operations against established standards developed during the planning process. In supervising one has the direct responsibility to oversee the operations of employees in the completion of tasks carried out by teachers and other employees (Boone & Kurtz, 1992).

According to Estyn, Court and Keen (2001), effective management by head teachers is a key factor in providing high standards of pupils' achievements, school improvement and ultimately improve performance. Management ensures efficient administration and organization of the school. Good management with ineffective leadership can result in a school that runs effectively but lacks vision and purpose. Good management and good leadership create an effective and high performing school. Good schools managers and leaders put pupils learning at the top of their activities (Estyn *et al.*, 2001). Good managers have a good knowledge of their schools and a clear vision for their schools improvement. Good managers show personal drive and commitment, provide purposeful directions, adopt collegiate and collaborative approaches and delegate responsibility so that leadership is developed at every level in school. Managers should promote self evaluation in pursuit of self improvement.

Good management has high expectations. Good management concentrates on securing educational standards and strives for excellence by helping pupils to learn more than they would normally do (Blanskat & Gerhard, 2005). Good managers add value to what might have been achieved. Good management ensures that successes are shared and there is recognition and reward for effort and achievement. Good management create confidence, trust and mutual cooperation between staff, pupils, parents and the wider community as essentials for purposeful working (Estyn *et al.*, 2001). According to Bakhada (2005), good managers should act as role models in the institutions under their management. They should also influence the school curriculum. They should act as ambassadors of schools. They are the link between the school and the outside world. Managers of schools are the source of information to the pupils, teachers and the community. Managers are pacesetters. Their actions have a lot of influence on

the performance of pupils. The author wanted to determine if school management contributed to poor performance in Kibirichia Division.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study were lack of adequate data by some head teachers and assistant teachers, poor record keeping in schools which made the head teacher to give incorrect information. The teams in schools during time of data collection were different from the team which attained the poor results which were being investigated.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was carried out in Kibirichia Division. Kibirichia Division has 12 public primary schools. It is one of the five divisions in Meru Central District. The population of the study comprised 341 standard 8 pupils, 98 assistant teachers and 12 head teachers. This gave a total population of 451 for the study. Purposive sampling was used for head teachers. For the assistant teachers stratified sampling and random sampling methods were used. Teachers were grouped into males and females. To get the five teachers from every school they were then picked randomly. Stratified sampling and random sampling methods were used to get the students. The study sampled 12 head teachers 60 assistant teachers and 120 standard eight pupils making a total of 192 respondents.

The research instruments that were used for data collection were questionnaires. Data and information was collected by administering questionnaires to head teachers, teachers and standard eight pupils in the twelve public primary schools. The analysis of the data began by inspection of data collected in order to identify spelling mistakes, items that were wrongly responded to and any blank spaces left unfilled by the respondents. Data coding was done by assigning numerals to questions so that responses could be put into a limited number of categories (Kothari, 1996). The coded data was entered into the computer for analysis using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 11.5. Data was then analyzed by the use of descriptive statistics. Qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions was organized into categories and themes pertinent to the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategies to Overcome of Poor Performance

For poor performance to be reversed, strategies have to be adapted to overcome the challenge. All the stake holders have to play a part. These stakeholders include the teachers, the parents the children and the community. For teachers to improve students' performance they should be knowledgeable. They

need to read widely and go for further studies to get higher grades.

Table 3: Qualifications of Assistant Teachers

	Frequency	Percentage
Certificate	15	25.0
A.T.S	31	51.7
Diploma	9	15.0
Degree	5	8.3
Total	60	100.0

Table 4: Head Teachers and Assistant Teachers

Gender	Head teachers		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Male	11	91.7	9	15.0
Female	1	8.3	51	85.0
Total	12	100.0	60	100.0

Table 5: Catering for Lack of Teachers

Response	Frequency	Percentage
P.T.A Teachers	7	63.6
Overloading teachers	4	36.4
Total	11	100.0

Table 3 shows that only 2.5% of teachers are certificate holders. Teachers of A.T.S level were 51.7%, 15.0% were diploma holders and 8.3% were degree holders. Most of the teachers in the A.T.S level have got the grade after attending courses like special education diploma, degree holders had to go for external degree programmes to add value to the certificate courses they got at teacher training colleges.

The girl child and the boy child should be given equal chances of learning opportunities. Women should act as role models to encourage the girl child to work harder. The more models there are the more is the encouragement.

Table 4 shows that out of the 72 respondents 13.9% are males while 86.1% are female. Female head teachers were 8.3% while 91.7% were males. For the assistant teachers, 15% are males while 85% are females. Female teachers are more thus encouraging the girls. One head teacher is a female showing that ladies can head a school.

Lack of enough teachers can make the students not cover the expected amount of work as per the syllabus. It is the duty of the school management committees through the advice of the head teacher to address the problem. In some schools the parents employ PTA teachers. In other schools parents lack the will to employ additional teachers.

The deficit of teachers is countrywide from the time the government stopped the recruitment. Table 5 shows that 4 out of the 11 schools survived by overloading the teachers. Of all, 63.6% employed the PTA teachers. The management of those overloading teachers needs to make arrangements to employ PTA teachers. The government should also intervene and staff the schools adequately.

It is very relaxing and enjoyable when a teacher teaches a subject which one like and has enough knowledge of. Though in primary schools teachers are supposed to teach all subjects, some schools have their internal arrangements where teachers teach subjects they feel comfortable when teaching.

Another strategy that should be adopted to overcome the problem of poor performance is subject specialization. The results showed that 80% of the teachers were not comfortable with teaching all subjects and opted for subject specialization. This could be overcome by taking teachers for in-service training and to seminars on their subjects of choice. This would give teachers a sense of confidence. Specialization would give teachers more time for preparation and presentation of quality work.

There is never enough time to cover the syllabus and revise. This is because there are other activities like co curricular activities that disrupt the learning process. Consequently, due to this there is need for

remedial teaching to make up for the time lost. Of the respondents, shows that 86.7% of the parents do not like remedial teaching; 13.3% like remedial teaching. The dislike for remedial teaching is made worse because of payment of some money. Another strategy to be adapted is educating the students on the career choice and their requirements.

The more one likes a subject, the easier the subject becomes to him or her. Fear for mathematics and sciences. In the rural areas learners don't like English. Those schools where subjects have campaigned for the 'hard' subjects and the learners develop a liking for them, performance improves. The study showed that 45% of the students like Mathematics; 21.7% like Kiswahili, 20.8% like English, 10.0% like Science and 2.5% like social studies. Mostly people believe that subjects like social studies are simple and therefore most liked. Since the students like Mathematics more than other subjects then the possibility of general improvement of performance is high.

Students who have ambitions in life work harder than those who do not. Learners must be made aware of the different careers and what one needs to have attained in school to join the career he/she chooses. Choice of career can tell the effort the learner are ready to put in their studies. The study established that most of the student respondents (34.2%) would have liked to be doctors. Those who would have liked to be teachers were 18.3%, 14.2% lawyers and 12.5% pilots. Very few 5% would like to join the armed forces. They should be informed on the relationship between the careers they intend to take and the subjects they take.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the teachers were lady teachers. The stakeholders have built adequate classrooms which are in fair condition. The school management committees have PTA teachers. Pupils report early in school and schools and parents/guardians reward pupils who have done well. Many students like speaking in English in the absence of teachers. Students have story books and were punished for doing mistakes where teachers and the administration administer the punishments. There is a monitor for speaking vernacular and schools do continuous assessment tests in the middle of the term.

Teachers have gone back to school to improve their academic qualifications and professionalism. Female teachers are more and are taking leadership roles. Teachers are opting for subject specialization because they are not comfortable with teaching all subjects. Parents like remedial teaching and students have a liking for the hard subjects. Students are informed on careers after completing their studies.

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