

Factors Influencing Poor Performance of Learners in the Grade Seven Examinations: A Case of Umguza District

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to investigate the factors influencing the poor performance of grade seven learners in public examinations in uMguza District. A descriptive research design was used for this study. The findings on the study were that majority of respondents in the student category indicated that their parents do not help them with their school homework. Most of the students indicated that they would work in the fields in the morning before going to school. The recommendations were that parent education should be encouraged. That would educate parents the importance of helping their children with school homework as to motivate their children to do well at school. The Ministry of Education in conjunction with the schools should implement programmes to facilitate teacher skills development programmes and make them mandatory so as to improve on teaching skills that the teachers have. It is recommended that the government in collaboration with parastatals and NGOs, be involved in the funding and sponsoring the schools. It is also recommended that Information Communication Technology gadgets like computers should be adequately budgeted for as these will aid students in their education.

Key words: Education, Academic, Performance, Teacher, Pupil, School

Introduction

Education is a basic right for every child in Zimbabwe and it is enshrined the constitution. When a child completes primary education, a Grade Seven certificate is awarded by Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC). The Grade seven results are used by secondary schools to screen potential candidates for enrolment into Form one. For several successive years, the pass rate in Matabeleland North, which includes Umguza district, has been very low. Newspapers often publish the best performing schools at grade seven levels. Schools from Umguza district hardly feature in published lists of the best one hundred primary schools. The study, therefore, sought to establish factors which contributed to the perennial poor performance by grade seven learners in Umguza district.

The success of children in public examinations is a crucial indicator of whether schools serve the purpose for which they are established. In Zimbabwe, primary school grade seven examination results are monitored to ascertain whether candidates are ready to proceed to secondary school. Grade seven public examinations are administered by the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC), itself established by an Act of Parliament. The supervision of instruction is an important activity in promoting effective teaching in schools. In Zimbabwe heads of schools usually carry out most supervision. This study also gathered data on the frequency and quality of supervision in the schools understudy, to determine whether supervision is a factor in performance. Some schools have become known for non-performance yet there are heads there and even personnel from outside the school often access teachers.

Another variable for scrutiny is the availability of materials, resources such as infrastructure and equipment. This study sought to find out whether classrooms, textbooks and stationery are of adequate quantities to support effective learning in the opinion of teachers and school heads.

Statement of the problem

There is a significantly high rate of poor performance in the grade seven examinations in Matabeleland North Province. Umguza district is among those districts that has not been spared by this alarming rate of failure

Research objectives

- To investigate how home environment contribute to learner performance in public examinations
- To establish how school environment contribute to learner performance in public examinations.
- To ascertain what other contributing factors influence learner performance in public examinations

Literature review

Home environment as a contributor to learner performance

The history of research relating to poor academic performance of learners at primary schools, is an international problem, which has been linked to the low socio-economic background of learners. The marital status of being either single, married, divorced, or widow, the parents' social class in terms of their income categories of lower, middle or upper income class all impact on self-concept and the learning process of learners. A stigma is often attached to separation and divorce, affecting the learner's academic performance negatively (Adell, 2002). The uncertainty in the status of parents' marital status results in undue anxiety among young people. Discussion of family problems between parents and their children reduces such uncertainty, and they eventually adapt to the situation. However, it is taboo to talk to children

about reasons why their father did not marry or divorce their mother in an African culture, particularly in Zimbabwe. The anxiety triggers emotional problems and long-term distress resulting in academic underachievement. Internal processes such as perception, memory, motivation, attitude, level of ability, and emotions should be taken into account when issues relating to the academic performance of learners are being dealt with. If a learner is an orphan or his/her parent is terminally ill, the learner will have a problem coping with schoolwork, thus resulting in poor academic performance due to her/his emotional state (Karande and Kulkarni, 2005).

The influence of a family's educational climate is defined by the amount and the style of help that learners receive from family. This is determined by elements of the family context such as the dynamic communication and relationships and attitudes towards values and expectations. Similarly, parental expectations have a notable influence on their children's academic results even when the socio-economic status is not that favorable. There is an indirect relationship with performance from the learner's perception of how much importance his/her parents assign to their children's studies at home (Marchesi & Martin, 2002). Another study (June, 2003) found that parents' expectations encourage their children to pursue goals with hard work, enhance self efficacy and nurture good study habits. However, high parental expectations and unwillingness to accommodate alternatives could result in counterproductive anxiety in their children (June 2003).

Educational resources at home

The learner's background relating to availability of educational resources at home like books, electronic resources such as television and computer, study desk for their own use and general academic support at home are crucial. Learners who have access to such resources are at an advantage compared to those from poor families because they will be more informed about the latest developments around them, thus assisting them to improve their performance at school while those from poor families with no resources still have to write the same examination paper.

Thus, the learners' non-exposure to educational resources from poor families will affect their performance compared to those who have access to such resources. Despite exposure to programmes that should not be viewed by learners, there is a lot of educational information that can be accessed through Television. Computers that are connected to the Internet would assist learners to source information for school assignments and projects.

Marchesi and Martin, (2002) found that the relationship between the learner and educator are some of the factors that determine academic performance. Characteristics of the educator are considered as key elements for the learner's personal and academic development. Hence, it is crucial that educators should be role models to be emulated by the learners. There is a positive relationship between the educator's motivation and that of the learner, while educator-learner relationships are also mediated by the educator's attribution of poor performance to the

learner in terms of academic performance. The socio-metric status of the learner affects performance both directly and indirectly, since it is influenced by intelligence (Georgiou, 2002).

Research Methodology

The study adopted the mixed methods research approach. This method combines both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. However, it should be stated at this stage that the qualitative method was the most used due to the overall nature of the research that has a social setting and orientation.

Research design

This study adopted a descriptive and explanatory research design. Kothari (2004) points out that descriptive studies are primarily concerned with finding out "what is." Descriptive research involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection process. When in-depth, narrative descriptions of small numbers of cases are involved, the research uses description as a tool to organize data into patterns that emerge during analysis.

Population and sample size

In this study the target population comprised of 426 pupils, 25 teachers and 10 School Administrators from Umguza District as depicted on Table 1 below.

Table 1 showing categories, target population and sample size

| Category | Target population | Sample size | Research instrument |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Pupils | 426 | 42 | Questionnaire |
| Teachers | 25 | 20 | Questionnaire |
| School Administrators | 10 | 5 | Face to face interview |
| Total | 461 | 67 | |

The convenience sampling technique became ideal because the research occurred at the time when schools were operational and lessons were running, hence teachers and School Heads were busy attending to their daily duties in their classes as the research was being conducted. In this study sample size was determined based on a 10% minimum sample size threshold as suggested Creswell (2004). In the current study a sample size of 67 units comprising of 42 pupils, 20 teachers and 5 School administrators were selected as depicted on Table 1 above. In this study the data gathering tools that were found to be ideal were questionnaires and face to face interviews.

Data presentation and analysis

A total of 62 questionnaires were administered to the two categories of respondents, 42 pupils and 20 teachers. The questionnaire had a mix of open ended questions and close ended questions. This was done to encourage respondents to actively participate in the survey as too many questions or open ended questions would have very negatively affected the response rate by the respondents.

In this study 10 (62.5%) of the respondents in the teacher category were qualified teachers and this was followed by 4 (25%) of the respondents were on probation and the remaining 2 (12.5%) were temporary teachers. These respondents were asked to indicate on how much experience they have in their teaching fields. The highest percentage 6 (37.5%) has 6- to 10 years' experience, 4 (25%) of the respondents had 2 to 5 years teaching experience, 3 (18.7%) had over 10 years experience in this field and 3 (18.7%) had less than 2 years' experience as teachers. When asked about their highest qualification 10(62.5%) stated that held a diploma. This was followed by 4 (25%) of the respondents who were A' Level holders and the remaining percentage 2 (12.5%) went only as far as O' level. From the 42 respondents in the pupils category 19 (52.7%) were females and the remaining 17 (47.2%) were males. It was also ascertained in the study that 30 (83.4%) pupil respondents were between the ages of 12 to 13 years and the remaining percentage 6 (16.6%) were above 13 years of age. None of the respondents were below 12 years.

In order to ascertain if home environment contributes to learner performance the following was established. The highest percentage of respondents in the students category 14 (39%), stated that their parents were single, secondly 10 (28%) of the respondents stated that their parents were married. This was followed by 8 (22%) of the respondents who stated that their parents were divorced. The remaining 4 (11%) minority indicated that their parents were widowed.

6 (37.5%) of the teacher respondents in this study strongly agreed that a child who stays with both parents has a better performance and the same percentage 6 (37.5%) however, indicated that they were not sure. This was followed by 4(25%) of the respondents who agreed with the above mentioned notion. These respondents were further asked to explain their answer and it was noted from the responses that "children with parental issues are often in bad emotional state and do not cope or interact well with others". According to Adell (2002), the marital status of being either single, married, divorced, or widow, the parents' social class in terms of their income categories of lower, middle or upper income class all impact on self-concept and the learning process of learners. A stigma is often attached to separation and divorce, affecting the learner's academic performance negatively.

Respondents in the teacher category were further asked if the parents got involved in their children's school work and the majority of respondents 11 (69%) indicated that they did not, while 3 (19%) of the respondents indicated that parents get involved in their children's school work especially home-work. The remainder 2 (12%) was not sure. On whether the income status of family greatly affects a child's performance, virtually all teacher respondents indicated

that the income status of family greatly affects a child's performance. 5 (31%) of the respondents agreed to this notion and 11(69%) strongly agreed.

The respondents in the pupils' category were asked to indicate their family source of livelihood. 20 (56%) of the respondents stated that their parents were self-employed, 8(22%) said their parents were employed. The other 8(22%) indicated that farming was their family's main source of livelihood. The other variable in the student category sought to establish whether parents assist respondents with homework. 12 (33%) indicated that their parents sometimes assist them with homework and 10 (28%) of the respondents indicated that their parents rarely assist them with their homework. 9 (25%) of the respondents who indicated that their parents never assist them with homework, while 5 (14%) stated that their parents always assist them with homework. Homework is an important instructional tool whose purpose includes providing additional practice, increasing the amount of time students are actively engaged in learning, extending time on task, developing skills, increasing understanding and developing application (Grouws 2001). During the interview, school administrators agreed that use of homework is to teachers for monitoring pupils' learning and identifying their learning difficulties and it gives teachers feedback about pupils' learning and their ability to work on their own. Besides, the marking or assessment of homework also gives feedback to the learner which is a very important aspect of teaching. 27 (80%) of the respondents in the students category indicated that that they do not have text books to read when they are at home. Only 7(20%) of the respondents said they have enough text books to read at home. Castejon & Perez (1998) allude that the learner's background relating to availability of educational resources at home like books, study desk and table for their own use and general academic support at home are crucial. One of the reasons for poor performance could be that the pupils go to work in the fields before going to school in the morning. There were 27 (75%) respondents who agreed with the fact that they help their parents in the fields every morning before they come to school. 9 (25%) of the respondents indicated that they never work in the fields before coming to school.

It was also established in this study whether opportunities are offered to practicing teachers to develop new skills. The 7(44%) of the respondents in the teacher category strongly disagreed with the notion that opportunities are offered to practicing to develop new skills. 4(25%) of the respondents disagreed to the above notion. There were 3(19%) of the respondents who showed that they were 'Not Sure' of the above assertion. However, 2 (12%) agreed with the above notion. Opportunities offered to practicing teachers to develop new knowledge, skills, approaches and dispositions improve their effectiveness in their classrooms (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love and Stiles, 1998).

It was also determined whether poor teaching methods by the teachers contribute towards poor learner performance. 5 (31%) of the respondents in the teachers' category strongly agreed that poor teaching methods by teachers contributes towards poor learner performance and

4(25%) of the respondents agreed with this fact whilst 6(37%) indicated that they were not sure. However the remaining 1(7%) disagreed with the above notion. Teachers were also asked whether lack of necessary resources contributes towards poor learner performance. 5 (31%) of the respondents strongly agreed that lack of necessary resources contributes towards poor learner performance and 4(25%) of the respondents agreed with this fact whilst 6 (37%) indicated that they were not sure. However the remaining 1(7%) disagreed with the above notion.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:-

It is recommended that parent education should be enacted, that would educate parents the importance of helping their children with school homework as to motivate their children to do well at school. Also parents and teachers should possess the same mind set and collaborate in offering help and support to those children coming from disadvantaged families.

It is recommended that the government in collaboration with parastatals and NGOs, be involved in the funding and sponsoring the schools. It is also recommended that Information Communication Technology gadgets like computers should be adequately budgeted for as is the norm with all the other subjects school requirements so as to source enough technological gadgets like computers, as these will aid students in their education

The Ministry of Education in conjunction with the schools should implement programmes to facilitate teacher skills development programmes and make them mandatory so as to improve on teaching skills that the teachers have.

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