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The Home-based Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District - Malawi

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the home-based factors contributing to poor academic performance in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi. There was limited empirical evidence on the home-based factors contributing to low academic performance and this prompted the researcher to focus on the students’ home environment and its impact on academic performance. The study employed a case study research design with qualitative approach whereby the sample of 125 respondents comprising 100 students and 25 teachers from public secondary schools in Mwanza District was used. Interview and questionnaire were used as tools for collecting primary data while documentary review was used to collect secondary data. The findings of the study revealed that inadequate parental support and civic education, long distances from home to school and cultural practices have contributed to poor academic performance in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi. Additionally, policymakers, school administrators and other educational stakeholders may utilize the study results to develop policies and programs that are aimed at addressing the identified problems and enhance academic performance in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District - Malawi.

Key Words: *Academic performance, Cultural & Religious Practice, District, Home environment; Parental support; Truancy, Educational stakeholders*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is an essential tool for personal and societal development and it is often considered as the key for eradication of poverty especially in developing countries like Malawi[1]. However, in Mwanza District, the academic performance of students in community day secondary schools is often poor with low pass rates. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), academic performance is the measurement of student achievement across various academic subjects and the attainment of their short term or long-term educational goals [2]. While there are many factors that contribute to poor academic performance, this study focused on the home-based factors contributing to poor academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi. The environment from which students operate to school has a greater role to play in the academic performance of secondary school students. For instance, home environment refers to the physical, psychological and circumstantial surrounding of the students’ life. These have an impact on their academic performance.

According to Mlangeni and Chiotha[3] there are home-based factors that do not effectively support the teaching and learning process among students in community secondary schools. Such factors indirectly contribute to poor academic performance of students in community secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi.

The statistics for the academic performance of community secondary schools in Mwanza District show that for the past six years it has been dismal contrary to peoples’ expectation. According to Malawi National Examinations Board [4] the district performance record for Mwanza District stipulates as follows: In 2017 – *The Home-based Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi*

54%, 2018 – 51%, 2019 – 48%, 2020 – 28%, 2021 – 38% and finally 2022 – 36%. These pass rates have caused public outcry among people of Mwanza District – Malawi.

The Government of Malawi made concerted effort to improve students’ academic performance in the country’s community day secondary schools as follows: A review process of the Education sector was initiated in 2009 to elaborate skills needed, the Malawi Secondary School Curriculum and Assessment Framework in 2015 and new secondary school curriculum in 2016 in order to enhance students’ performance at MSCE. The target of the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS III cycle) for 2017 – 2022 was: “*improved quality of secondary education*” and lastly the

Education Sector Implementation Plan (ESIP) for 2020 – 2025 geared to improve secondary education [5]. In spite of all these efforts, students' academic performance in community day secondary schools is still poor. A fortiori, the current study intended to investigate the home-based factors contributing to poor academic performance in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi.

2. General Objective

This study investigated the home-based factors contributing to poor academic performance in Community Day Secondary Schools in Mwanza District – Malawi.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed qualitative approach whereby the researcher used interview and questionnaire as tools of data collection. The sample of 125 people comprising students 100 (80%) as main respondents and teachers 25 (20%) from community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi.

4. STUDY FINDINGS

4.1 Inadequate parental support to students

The study revealed that there was lack of parental support which includes provision of school requirements and parental involvement in children's education through follow up on their progress and psychological support. All these elements are inextricably connected with students' academic performance in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District. According to Birch and Ladd [6] the student's parents have the responsibility to provide the facilities needed by the child and the resources needed for their academic pursuit like emotional support in the form of encouragement and assistance in homework. Most students 76 (76%) reported that they were sent back home at some point or another for failure to pay school fees. More often than not such students spent long time at home before resuming classes after payment of school fees. This period of absenteeism from school proved to be detrimental to the students' academic performance in community secondary schools in Mwanza District - Malawi.

Teachers 21(84%) also observed that most parents of students never made follow up on the academic progress of their children by visiting the secondary schools to meet and discuss with teachers. The students 74(74%) themselves confirmed that their parents never visited their schools neither to meet teachers nor follow up on their academic progress. This is related to the finding of Shahzad et al.[7] which revealed that, there is significant association between parental support and students' academic progress in that students showed higher academic performance whose parents were more supportive and involved in activities as compared to those whose parents were less supportive. Parental support and involvement in a child's education is so motivational that it boosts the child's self-esteem and morale for the attainment of higher academic performance. Yator[8], asserts this by saying that the rationale of parents' academic visits to children's school is based on the assumption that when a child is visited at school, it has psychological benefits in that the students becomes convinced of the parents' interest in their education and particularly their academic achievements.

The Home-based Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi

The researcher discovered that this scenario might have been perpetrated by the fact that a majority of students' parents 90(90%) of fathers and 87(87%) of mothers were semi-literate in that they did not go beyond the elementary or primary level of education. Thus, they did not find it worthwhile to invest in their children's education through paying their school fees in time, buying text books for them and making follow up on their academic progress. For instance, most teachers 22(88%) observed that more often than not, one text book would be shared by more than 20 students leading to poor academic performance. This finding is in tandem with the study by Trostel et al. [9], which revealed that there is need for government and parents to invest substantial portions of their resources in education, with the expectation that higher benefits accrue over time.

Therefore, it can safely be concluded that inadequate parental support has been an impediment to students' academic performance in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi. This calls for Government's effort to conduct civic education to students' parents on the significance of parental involvement in their children's academic affairs or education.

4.2 Impact of Cultural and Religious Beliefs and Practices

According to Sorensen et al. [10] cultural beliefs refer to particular conception on the way of life for a group of people which has traits that influence parenting styles as well as students' academic performance. Mwanza District in Malawi is dominantly occupied by the Ngoni people who form a matrilineal society. Most of the students 89 (89%) were Ngoni by tribe which means that all the children born in such a society belong to the mothers' side. A fortiori, the biological father to the child is often not concerned much about the provision of school necessities to his own children.

Teachers 9 (36%) who are Ngoni by tribe revealed that the maternal uncle of the children in a Ngoni society has more authority over the children than their own biological father. On the other hand, the children's mother has more say on the children's among the Ngoni than their father. As such, the biological father would in most cases not motivate, provide school needs and exert paternal authority on the children. Most students 89 (89%) were minimally monitored by their fathers in as far as their education was concerned. This led to poor academic performance due to students' truancy for failing to pay school fees in time and lack of school requirements that their father would ably provide if it were not for the matrilineal cultural belief. Study by Sorensen et al. [10] revealed that parental authoritative style yields better schooling outcomes than parental permissive practices that are bound to yield weaker results.

Most students 93 (93%) asserted that their school attendance was often disrupted due to lack of support especially when their maternal uncle was undergoing financial constraints and could not afford to pay as per the cultural expectation. This is confirmed by the finding of Bills and Klenow [11] that cultural beliefs and practices can interrupt the learning process of students and they can negatively impact on their academic performance.

Another respondent asserted that in summer (September – November) when school commences for first term of the academic year, is the time that young men (students) from different classes go camping for circumcision to pave way for fast healing due to warm and conducive weather conditions. However, it often took a minimum period of two months for a boy to heal and resume school attendance coupled with less concentration in studies due to incomplete healing. This cultural practice perpetrated many cases of male students' absenteeism leading to poor academic performance in terminal as well as national examinations (MSCE) in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that Ngoni people of Mwanza District value their cultural practice to the detriment of students' academic performance. This calls for the government's sensitization programs for the Ngoni people in order to facilitate mind set change so that both parents should feel responsible for the education of their children.

The Home-based Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi

Teachers 86 (86%) revealed that some students belong to religion whose religious beliefs and practices contribute to poor academic performance in the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE). According to Masmud and Baumrind [12] religious beliefs refer to various aspects of religious devotion, activity and religious involvement of members of a particular religion whose participation is positively associated with their own educational expectations. Female students highlighted that when a girl / student experiences the first menstruation period, she underwent religious initiation for a period of one month. Meanwhile, she would be officially excused from school attendance regardless of being in a national examination class like Form II and Form IV. She was bound to miss classes until the successful completion of the religious initiation process. This religious practice contributed to poor academic performance in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi.

Furthermore, teachers observed that most parents were happy that their child, through this religious initiation had become of age and that she could get married any time thereafter. Thus, they did not have any remorse for allowing the student not to attend classes for the whole month. On the other hand, from then on, most female students began engaging themselves in bogus relationship with men while convinced that they were grown up. This finding is congruent with the study by Fagon [13] which revealed that religious practices and values have impact on students' regularity and have great impact on student's academic achievement at secondary level. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that cultural and religious beliefs and practices are among the home-based factors that have contributed to students' poor academic performance in community secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi. This calls for policymakers to accommodate such cultural and religious beliefs and practices within the secondary school calendar. Where possible they can arrange that, students should be on holiday during the period of undertaking these practices.

4.3 Long Distances from Students' Home to School

The finding revealed that most students 83 (83%) in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi were operating from their respective homes to school on a daily basis, 11 (11%) had rented rooms and 6 (6%) were from private hostels. The students highlighted that; they were residing at home with parents because none of the community day secondary schools in the district had boarding facility. As such, the students could not afford to pay schools fees and to sustain themselves at a self-boarding facility close to the school. The finding further revealed that there were indeed more students 79 (79%) who were within their youthful age (10 – 18 years) who were operating from their homes. Most of them travelled long distances to school which has negative impact on their academic performance. They often reached school late and exhausted making it difficult for them to grasp what they were taught; in the end, the students succumbed to defeat in exams – hence poor academic performance.

Study by Oneya and Onyango [14] asserts that long distance travelled by students reduces teacher-student contact time, it leads to stomach ulcers, headaches and related issues which reduce school attendance and completion rates. On the other hand, most students were quite young so much so that they were mostly psychologically affected by stress and anxiety regarding their security and exhaustion while passing through bushy areas; on the paths that lead to their

respective schools. According to a survey by Talma[15] it was found that nearly 48% of Malawi's population was under 14 years of age, which placed enormous pressure on social services, and particularly on the education services. For instance, 79 (79%) of the students in the sample were aged between 10 – 18 years and they traveled long distances going to school from their respective homes. This school-home distance covered daily by students made them face enormous challenges such as fatigue, stress, anxiety, reduced time for teacher-student interaction and truancy due to lack of boarding facility in CDSSs. All these elements emanate from the long distances from home to school which have contributed to poor academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi.

Cohen and Soto [16] stipulated that educating and training citizens are investments in human capital that can lead to greater productivity and economic growth for any country. The fact that none of the CDSSs has hostels or boarding facility, posits the need for the Government, the community and other educational stakeholders to join

Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi hands and build dormitories or hostels. Such infrastructural development can help to curb the adverse effects on academic performance due to home – school distance travelled by students in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi.

5. Summary of the Study

The findings revealed that a majority of students who were operating from their homes to school had different challenges which hampered their school progress and consequently led to poor academic performance. The explored home-based factors for students' poor academic performance in community day secondary schools include: lack of parental support, cultural and religious beliefs and practices and long distances traveled by students from their respective homes to school on a daily basis. All these factors perpetrated poor concentration in studies which was brought about by insufficiency of parental support and motivation, experience of fatigue, stress, anxiety and truancy, poor study environment leading to poor academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi.

The results also indicated that most of the students' parents were semi-literate which probably made them not to put concerted effort to educate their children. The researcher discovered that this was the cause for lack of parental support to students. On the other hand, the study indicates that there was a fundamentalist mentality regarding cultural values and beliefs which hampers a mindset change for the Ngoni people of Mwanza District – Malawi. This is evident based on the finding that the biological father to a child often declined to provide the school requirements for his own child but expected the maternal uncle to the child to do everything regarding the child's academic affairs. As a result, most students were sent home for failure to pay school fees and they had meagre educational resources like text books and reference books all of which contribute to higher academic performance. A mind set change on cultural beliefs and practices among the Ngoni people can help to boost academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District Malawi. Lastly, day-scholars failed to concentrate on their studies. The study discovered that this was due to the failure of the policy makers, the community at large and the rest of the educational stakeholder to invest their resources in education by building students' hostels. Such investment would alleviate the problem of long distances covered by students to reach school which contributed towards poor academic performance in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District - Malawi.

6. CONCLUSION

Regarding the home-based factors for poor academic performance in community secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi, it can be concluded that there are various factors that contribute to poor academic performance in the district. These include lack of parental involvement (support) in their children's education due to poverty and civic education on the importance of education, lack of motivation, lack of boarding facilities and the parents prioritize cultural values instead of strategizing on how to curb the problem of poor academic performance in community day secondary schools. Suffice to say that these home-based factors for poor academic performance may not be exclusive to Mwanza District – Malawi, as can be observed in other districts in Malawi as well as other parts of the world. Therefore, the policy makers', educators' and educational stakeholders' concerted effort to address these issues is vital for creating a conducive environment for students to excel academically. This can be realized through sensitizing parents to untiringly support their children, provision of financial aid to families in need and creating civic education programs that promote a culture of learning and academic excellence so that the problem of poor academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi can be dealt with once and for all.

The Home-based Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi

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