

The Impact of Ward Education Officers on Improving Primary School Students' Academic Performance in Lushoto, Tanzania

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Abstract

The study explored the impact of Ward Education Officers on improving primary school students' academic performance in Lushoto District in Tanzania. A qualitative research approach based on a case study design was employed. Three categories of respondents namely, One District primary education officer, four ward education officers and five heads of schools were interviewed. The respondents were purposively selected from five wards in the respective District. The obtained content based analyzed data revealed that WEOs perform several tasks including conducting regular school visits to inspect documents; compile, verify and submit education statistics to high authorities; manage released school finance; provide administrative assistance to heads of schools; help to solve indiscipline cases; and mobilize parents to take their responsibilities. All tasks performed have impacts on students' academic performance. On contrary, the study found that WEOs fail to achieve their targets due to lack of enough funds for their daily tasks, uncommitted heads of schools, environmental challenges, political influences and interferences of the working timetable by high authorities. The study recommends the government to review the tasks of WEOs and diminish the challenges encountered by WEOs for improved students' academic performance.

Key words: Ward Education Officers, Primary school, Academic performance, Lushoto, Tanzania

Introduction

Poor examination performance in primary schools hinders access to secondary education which is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2030 (MasterCard Foundation, 2020). The failure of the students at the primary level of schooling as the focus of this study has been a worldwide problem that is mostly affecting poor countries. For example, in Bangladesh, the primary education annual sector performance report of 2019 reveals that the overall pass rate for students in 2018 primary education completion examination (PECE) was 97.59% with a difference pass rate in Upazilas/Thanas in which the results show that, out of 509 Upazilas/Thanas, the vast majority of them achieved pass rates near or above 97% while Shariakandi Upazila under Bogura district had the lowest pass rate of 72.75% indicating poor students' performance of 28.25% in PECE (Bangladesh Education Report, 2019).

While that is the case in Asia, the situation in Africa is much more the same, if not alarming; particularly in Sub-Saharan Countries. According to Tiruneh, Hoddinott, Rolleston, Sabates and Woldehanna (2021), the learning outcomes for many primary school children in Ethiopia have not yet reached the minimum expected standards set by the Ministry of Education. For example, children's average composite achievement in the previous five successive national learning assessments (NLAs) at Grades 4 and 8 were far below the 50% expected minimum standards set by the Ministry of Education. In Botswana, the Botswana Examination Council [BEC] (2021) reports that a total number of 46063 candidates sat for PSLE in 2020, only 73.15% passed the examination with grades A to C while in the year 2021, a total of 46984 candidates sat for PSLE, only 71.99% candidates passed with grades A to C. The results indicate the presence of poor students' performance of 26.85% and 28.01% in the years 2020 and 2021 respectively. In Malawi, MINEDUC (2021) also reports that a total number of 251,906 candidates (136,830 girls and 115,076 boys) who sat for national primary examinations in the year 2021, only 82.50% passed the national

examinations while 17.50% of pupils who sat for the examination performed poorly.

In Tanzania, HakiElimu (2009) comments that the education sector in the country experiences poor performance including poor primary school leaving examination (PSLE) results across regions. Eliezer (2017) stresses that Tanzania like other nations suffers from worse academic results at the primary level in different regions. Taking Tanga as a region of focus, the education sector analysis report by URT (2019) shows that the average performance of Tanga in 2016 was 65.4%, while in 2017 was 69.04% and 2018 was 71.98%. The table below summarizes the average performance of all district councils in Tanga region from 2016 to 2019.

Table 1: Average PSLE Performance of each District Council of Tanga Region 2016-2019

Name of District Council	Percentage (%) Per Year			
	2016	2017	2018	2019
Bumbuli	66.8	67.32	71.36	76.92
Handeni DC	62.4	72.78	80.74	87.67
Handeni TC	75.7	77.73	72.81	85.38
Kilindi DC	70.8	71.80	67.99	68.48
Korogwe TC	69.7	83.70	86.91	88.77
Korogwe DC	67.7	71.29	72.42	79.86
Lushoto DC	56.3	52.14	53.14	54.39
Mkinga DC	44.2	74.82	81.46	77.16
Muheza DC	58.2	65.18	74.49	78.66
Tanga CC	64.3	80.56	83.30	94.24
Pangani DC	69.6	67.79	73.32	82.14

Source: URT (2019).

Specifically, according to LDC (2022), the average performance of Lushoto District Council as one of the district councils in Tanga region is more affected by poor performance in PSLE compared to all other district councils in the same region as shown in the following table

Table 2: Percentage (%) of Students in PSLE in Lushoto District Council

Year	Percentage (%) of students who sat for PSLE	
	Passed	Failed
2016	56.03	43.07
2017	52.14	47.86
2018	53.14	46.86
2019	54.39	45.61
2020	38.08	61.92
2021	49.83	50.17

Source: LDC education report (2021)

Various efforts to improve primary education in the country have been undertaken by the government including improving school infrastructure, releasing capitation grants on time and in full, and placing greater emphasis on schools' quality assurance (URT, 2019). Of the most interesting is the appointment of Ward Education Officers (WEOs) to oversee the overall educational development, particularly at the ward level (URT, 2014). Besides, in recent years, the government of Tanzania in collaboration with donor agencies has

sought to bolster the role of the ward education officer by providing them with resources, training, and a central role in education programming. Part of the rationale for shifting resources and responsibilities to WEOs is the belief that these front-line workers have the relationships, information, and credibility necessary to affect change at the school level (Cilliers and Oza, 2020).

With regards to the qualities of WEOs, MoEST (2017) states that the appointment of WEOs should consider a person with the following desirable qualities: trained at a recognized teaching college with not less than five years of working experience. Further qualities include; a person who is ready to manage and implement education policy effectively has at least a first degree, ability to communicate effectively in Kiswahili and English both written and spoken. Additionally, WEO must be good in report writing, involve and integrate different stakeholders, have a deep understanding and awareness of the area that he/she works for, and must be well-behaved and commands respect from all community members.

With all these qualifications, in presence of WEOs, the government and community at large expected to see students' good academic performance in the ward schools in the country. However, there is still a persistence of poor students' academic performance in primary school leaving examination (PSLE) in some districts of Tanzania, Lushoto district included. This study was thus needed to understand the impact of WEOs' activities on improving the primary school students' academic performance in Lushoto district so as to disclose their strengths and weaknesses, and afterward to make suggestions for an upgrading of primary education in the district.

Objective Of The Study

The main objective of the study was to explore the impact of Ward Education Officers on improving the primary school students' academic performance. Specifically, the study explored the daily activities of Ward Education Officers and the challenges they encounter in implementing their daily tasks.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach based on a case study design. The target population was the primary education stakeholders in Lushoto District. The sample was comprised of 10 respondents which included 7 males and 3 females. They were the district education officer, four ward education officers and five heads of primary schools who were purposively selected based on their working experience and readiness to participate in the study. The study used an in-depth interview and documentary review to gather in-depth information about the phenomenon. The collected data were then analysed using content and thematic techniques.

Results and Discussion

Daily responsibilities of WEOs in Lushoto District Council

The responses obtained during the interview with respondents found that WEOs perform the following tasks:

School Visits

All respondents declared that WEOs conduct school visits to inspect prepared academic and administrative documents. One respondent recorded that:

WEOs' main duty is to visit the schools and ensure effective implementation of curriculum in collaboration with heads of schools.

The researcher of this study sees visiting the schools to be an important task that WEOs should keep on doing for improving pupils' academic performance. HakiElimu (2009) argues that effective teaching and learning largely take place when education officers are present in schools for inspection and supervision. In that case, when WEOs conduct school visiting influence effective teaching and learning which in turn results into improved students' academic performance.

However, Black and William (2001) argue that school inspection practice that tends to ignore classroom observation may not effectively be able to give proper guidelines to improve teaching and learning. Moreover, Coombe, Kelly, and Carr-Hill (2006) argue that teaching and learning are what ultimately make a difference in the minds of the pupils and affect their knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are meaningful to society. For this to be practical, then, classroom observation in the classroom setting has to receive special attention from the school inspectors rather than relying on professional documents. From the statements above, WEOs should make classroom observation during school visiting.

Administrative Assistance to Heads of Schools

WEOs assist the heads of schools to prepare whole school development plans, seeking for community support, enhancing daily students' attendance to schools by dealing with truants, to shape teachers' discipline and provide guidelines for the implementation of different administrative tasks.

The researcher of this study appreciates the responsibility of WEOs as the success or failure of schools is in the hands of the heads of schools. When the heads of schools are aware of their responsibilities together with the administrative assistance provided by WEOs, the students' academic performance will automatically raise.

Financial Management

WEOs manage the grants released to schools by ensuring proper expenditure and record keeping. When visiting the schools, WEOs inspect the financial records to check whether the records are kept as narrated by one respondent that:

WEO allows or rejects the payments to be done and inspects financial records. All payment must be approved and passed by WEOs.

Mpolokeng (2011) argues that, the management of funds in education institutions refers to the distribution and use of money to provide and produce quality graduates. Cementing on the same point, the United Republic of Tanzania (2014) instructed the schools to spend funds effectively and efficiently to ensure that the amount of money allocated is appropriately spent for the intended purpose. This implies that, WEOs task of managing the funds is important for ensuring they are spent correctly for the academic purposes.

Solving Conflicts and Indiscipline Cases

The results of the study indicate that WEOs solve conflicts and indiscipline cases reported by heads of schools, teachers, parents, students and leaders. The finding concurs with that of Pettersson et al. (2015) who found that the supervision role of WEOs includes providing academic support to teachers, support to school leaders, disciplinary actions against teachers' absenteeism, dealing with students' absenteeism, and community reports of difficulties at the school. The findings mean that, conflicts and indiscipline cases exist and solving them is a normal task of WEOs. Solving conflicts and indiscipline cases is very important in raising students' academic performance since when there is no conflicts and indiscipline cases teachers use much time in teaching and learning rather than engaging in conflicts or solving indiscipline cases.

Collect, Verify, Compile and Submit Required Education Statistics

This task is stated by all respondents. For example, one respondent said that:

WEOs visit the schools to collect, verify and compile required educational data regarding teachers, students and infrastructures and submit them to district level or high authorities as directed.

This implies that the task is a daily practice performed by WEOs in Lushoto district council. All statistics required from the schools include the number of students, toilet pits, classrooms, desks, teachers, number of students getting lunch, teachers' houses and others are collected, compiled, verified and submitted by WEOs. During the school census in April each year, they verify the submitted education statistics by heads of schools through School Information System (SIS). The researcher of this study finds it to be important for the educational planning and development of schools. The allocation of capitation for different school needs and development grants for infrastructures like classrooms, toilets, teachers' houses and water infrastructures depend on the submitted statistics. The posting of new teachers also depends on the submitted number of students and teachers currently available in schools. All these have effects on students' academic performance.

Mobilize Parents to Take their Responsibilities

WEOs mobilize parents to take their responsibilities over their children specifically to buy school needs, ensure pupils daily attendance to school and get lunch as noted from one respondent that:

WEOs influence the parents to take their responsibilities as parents over their pupils such as provision of lunch and daily attendance.

In the light of the above views, it is found that WEOs persuade the parents and community at large to involve in school programs especially the provision of lunch to pupils. Romero & Lee (2007) *found that* students who attend school regularly have been shown to achieve at higher levels than students who do not have regular attendance. On the other hand, Rongen et al (2019) on the pupils' lunch found that lunch is an important part of a healthy diet, which is essential for the development, growth and academic performance of school-aged children.

From the studies above, the researcher of this study supports the task and realizes it to be crucial in ensuring high students' academic performance.

The Challenges WEOs Face in Implementing their Responsibilities

From the findings of the study, Ward Education Officers face the following challenges during the implementation of their daily responsibilities.

Lack of Enough Funds

This challenge is reported by all ten respondents interviewed as quoted from one respondent.

WEOs do not have enough funds to service their motorbikes, to buy the fuels and office requirements and even some WEOs have no offices to work comfortable.

The study by Arthur et al. (2020) and Cilliers and Oza (2020) argued that WEOs often lack the resources they need to visit schools although almost all WEOs in Tanzania have received a motorbike to visit schools, the majority still do not have sufficient budget for fuel and maintenance.

The researcher of this study argues that lack of enough funds hinders the WEOs from making regular visits where some visit once per month while others visit twice. Their visits require good transport and fuel which in turn both require enough funds.

Presence of Uncommitted Heads of Schools

From the interview with respondents, it found that some heads of schools are not committed in their responsibilities which in turn affect the learners' academic performance. The quoted statement below supports this point:

The challenges facing WEOs in implementing their duties include lack of commitment of some heads of schools which results into poor school supervision and delaying in submission of required information.

WEOs are external supervisors of education in their wards. They work closely with heads of schools (who are internal and daily supervisors of education in schools). As daily supervisors of schools, heads of schools need to be committed to achieve learning goals. Improvement of students' academic performance and attainment of quality education in today's global world demands a higher level of commitment. Thus, the success or failure of schools is highly in the hands of heads of schools. According to Abdul Wahab et al., (2014), school's academic success is very dependent on school leader. This implies that the presence of any uncommitted head of school leads to a decline in teachers' performance which in turn affects learners' academic performance.

Timetable Interference

One of the WEOs interviewed recorded that:

WEO's plans and timetables sometimes are affected by orders from the high authorities. For example, the regular meetings of WEOs with high authorities affects the implementation of our duties.

The statement above shows that, WEOs tasks are affected by the orders from their leaders from the ward level as reported also in the study by Cilliers and Oza (2020) who found that, WEOs spend the majority of their time (55 percent) visiting schools, a fact which highlights their pivotal role as frontline monitors. WEOs also spend a considerable fraction of their time writing reports (17 percent), attending meetings (17 percent), and participating in trainings (9 percent).

Pitkoff (1993) argued that many government servants' fail to attend and coordinate 47 schools regularly because of other public responsibilities that entrusted them public activities hence out of schools or working place. This implies that, the interference of WEOs timetable is a common practice in public servant. The researcher opines the high authorities to prepare the annual schedules of meetings that will guide the WEOs in preparing their working timetable.

Political Influences

From the interview with respondents, it is identified that WEOs daily tasks are affected by the politicians' influences. For instance, one respondent commented that.

The other challenges include politicians influence and lack of support from the community.

The above view indicates that political influences is among the challenges facing some WEOs. Some politicians fall into conflicts with WEOs which in turn affect their daily tasks. Some WEOs are not motivated due to politicians' actions especially those within the wards. Ludovick (2015) found among the challenges facing WEOs to be inadequate and appropriate offices and political influences. In the light of that, the researcher of this study comments that, in some wards the environments are not conducive for WEO's daily responsibilities which discourages the performance of WEOs. The results of both problems are poor implementation of WEOs tasks which can lead to poor students' academic performance.

Lack of Training

Some WEOs lack training for their daily tasks especially after the appointment as recorded from one respondent that:

No seminars or training are conducted by the district when new WEOs are appointed.

This finding concurs with the findings of Thomas (2015) who assessed the skills of WECs effectiveness in supervising secondary schools in Rombo district and found that, WECs lack supervisory skills and leadership training. Similarly, Arthur et al. (2020) that, WEOs face the challenges of lack of commitment and awareness; inferiority complex, large classes, poor follow-up of schools, unprofessionalism, poor transport, negative attitudes towards school supervision, and inadequate funding. The findings imply that lack of training is a long-term and normal challenge that WEOs in different areas encounter.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussion, it is obvious that WEOs daily activities are important in improving primary school students' academic performance in Lushoto district. Although, WEOs face a number of challenges on undertaking their activities, the findings of this study revealed that their duty performance seems not to be adequately attained yet. On this, there is an obligation for all education stakeholders in Lushoto district in particular and in Tanzania at large to play their roles effectively so as to address all problems which hinder the students' academic performance.

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