

LEARNER PERFORMANCE IN BOTSWANA AND BEYOND: A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

This article reflects on concerns about poor performance of learners in schools in Botswana and internationally by exploring research on learner performance locally, regionally, and abroad. It reports on factors that contribute to low academic achievement including lack of parental involvement, poor support to the teachers, and poor school leadership and management skills. It also presents intervention strategies used in Botswana including the provision of trained and qualified teachers, implementation of performance reforms such as performance management system (PMS), school-based professional development activities and parental involvement in learning and teaching. The study further avers that there may be other possible interventions such as classroom interaction and learner-centeredness. The study is based on a critical assessment of the diverse perspectives observed in the literature and seeks to problematize poor learner performance and presents it as an issue that needs concerted examination. It is hoped that policy makers, educators, curriculum developers and other relevant stakeholders in the education fraternity would take note of concerning student performance and make relevant, practical recommendations to improve the situation.

Keywords: learner performance, school, teachers, learners, teaching and learning strategies

1.0 Introduction

In recent years, academic performance in schools has been adversely affected by COVID-19 globally (Worldbank, 2021). The first wave of COVID-19 induced lockdowns and school closures beginning in March 2020 (Psacharopoulos et al., 2021)- Prolonged school closures threatened to erase developmental education gains achieved over decades, especially for girls and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Worldbank, 2021). Early reviews of the first wave of lockdowns and school closures suggested significant learning losses. These losses translated to poor academic performance (Agostinelli et al., 2022). School closures mandated online teaching which relied heavily on access to and use of technology in teaching and learning. The switch from traditional methods of teaching to remote instruction had a serious impact on learners' performance. Globally, efforts were made to try and remedy the situation.

For example, many teacher training programs offered either as in-service or pre-service were conducted to ameliorate the learner performance worldwide (Islam & Abiona, 2023).

Learners' performance is directly linked to the social and economic development of any country. Good academic performance can produce quality graduates who would become human resource for the country (Maganga, 2016). Learners get selected to good secondary schools, better courses of study, and eventually better jobs on the basis of high academic performance. Academic performance has become a yardstick of self-worth and success; therefore, academic performance is a vital factor for social and economic development in every country (Maganga, 2016). This is supported by Tenibiaje (2014) who affirmed that high academic performance has become a great task to be accomplished by learners. Despite several educational reforms which intend to improve academic achievement, a major challenge in many developing and developed countries is the persistently low academic performance. Botswana as a developing country is no exception. This issue has been discussed in Botswana conferences and workshops and has been written about in reports for public attention. Regardless of efforts made to remedy the situation, there has not been a significant improvement in learners' academic performance in Botswana; no formal study on this pitfall has been done to identify the root causes of the problem and to ascertain what could be radically done to resolve it, thus the keenness to conduct this reflection. Proper solutions to poor learner performance depends on knowing the causes. This paper seeks to reflect on concerns regarding learner performance in Botswana and beyond.

2.0 Background

School as a learning environment plays an important role in motivating and engaging learners. Learners who feel a sense of control and belonging in the classroom become more engaged and active in the learning process. Creating and maintaining positive teacher-learner instructional atmosphere can be academically motivating and engaging and can produce good performance (Pervin et al., 2021). Jerome and Pianta (2014) argue that poor working relationships between teachers and learners lead to poor academic performance, further that teachers are likely to have negative interactions with learners who are less successful in academics (Jerome & Pianta, 2014). Positive teacher-student instructional interactions (TSII) enhance positive attitude towards teachers and achieves positive academic outcomes (Murray & Malmgren, 2013). Learners who have positive relationships with their teachers are more likely to enjoy schools and are more likely to develop a sense of belongingness within the school environment. On the contrary, conflicted teacher-learner relationships can increase poor academic grades, can produce rebellious attitudes towards the school system, and can build mistrust towards teachers (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2016).

3.0 Concerns for poor academic performance internationally

Academic performance is a topical issue worldwide. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), COVID-19 caused significant disruption to the global education system. The pandemic led to school closures around the world, leading to loss of learning, which resulted in low performance globally,

especially in low-income countries. There has been concerns by different countries regarding this issue. For instance, Amin et al. (2021) reported that secondary school girls' literacy and numeracy scores declined by more than 6% in Bangladesh. In India, Grade 3 children in government schools who could perform simple arithmetic decreased from 24% in 2018 to 16% in 2020, and the children who could read a Grade 2 level text decreased from 19% in 2018 to 10% in 2020 (Annual Status of Education Reports Pakistan – ASER, 2021). ASER (2021) revealed that in Pakistan, the number of children in classes 1-5 who could read a story declined from 24% in 2019 to 22% in 2021. Poor academic performance among learners has been reported in one college in Sri Lanka (Sayeejan & Nithlavarnan, 2018). In Uganda, the percentage of learners rated proficient in literacy in English and numeracy in 2021 dropped by 5% and 13% respectively from that of 2018 (National Assessment of Educational Progress - NAEP, 2021). Georgia Policy Labs (2021) alluded that in Canada, reading assessments by Grade 2 and Grade 3 learners declined by 4 to 5 points. In the Republic of Korea, there was a significant decrease in scores for medical school learners (Kim et al., 2021). In Pakistan, low academic performance resulted in low self-esteem and a feeling of disturbance and shock which resulted in drop out of the education system (Chohan, 2018).

Several studies have been done worldwide to determine causes of poor academic performance among learners in secondary schools. One of the critical barriers to academic success is substance use. A cross-sectional study in the United States of America (USA) among high school seniors showed that substance users were absent from school more frequently and consequently had lower grades compared to other students (Bugbee et al., 2019). Similarly, a descriptive survey among primary school learners in Jordan indicated that smoking affects children's physical and mental development and reduces academic achievement. Smoking was considered a barrier to optimal learning (Kawafha, 2014). A cross-sectional study among university learners in Wolaita Sodo found that substance use: smoking, khat chewing, drinking alcohol, and having an intimate friend who uses substances, was significantly and negatively associated with learners' academic performance (Mekonen et al., 2017). Asikhia (2014) found that the reasons for learners' poor performance in Britain are a lack of learning support, principal teachers' dissatisfaction with the in-career training of teachers in mathematics, and learners taught by teachers who have not participated in career professional development. Parker (2013) showed that in Mexico, the distance to a secondary school had a detrimental effect on the performance of learners in secondary schools.

Glewwe et al. (2014) assessed the impact of giving free eyeglasses to learners in Western China. Learners who benefited from the program for one year increased their test scores from 0.15 to 0.22 standard deviation (SDs) on average. This means that learners who were given glasses improved their academic performance. A cross-sectional study in Malaysia in higher learning institutions reported that an increasing number of learners still do not graduate on time, suggesting that they did not perform well in their studies (Razak, et al., 2019).

4.0 Concerns for poor academic performance in Africa

In Africa cases of low performance have been reported in countries such as South Ethiopia. A correlational study in Arba Minch University, South Ethiopia, reported that the trend of graduating learners is not proportional to the trend of enrolled learners and more learners undergo re-admission due to poor academic performance (Yigermal, 2017). In South Africa, the results of Grade 9 mathematics performance achieved by the respective schools in Kwagga West Circuit indicate that in 2016, the overall performance of learners in the subject in school A was 25%, B was 31.3% and C was 36.2% respectively. The 2017 results showed only a slight improvement when compared to 2016. For instance, in 2017 school A achieved 31.5% while school B achieved 31.8%. In 2018, the average for school A was 46.2% and for B it was 50.1%, while C obtained 50.9%. The results showed that performance in mathematics remains poor and is not stable and the schools have not yet reached the target of the circuit, which is 70%. These underperforming schools are cause for concern (Mabena et al., 2021).

The scenario is not different in Kenya. For example, in 2011, of the 357,488 candidates who sat for their Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), only 27% obtained mean grade of C+ and above, which is considered the minimum university entry mark (Kigotho, 2013). Performance in 2013 remained relatively like that in 2011, where only 27.46% of the 123,365 candidates obtained the minimum university entry qualification of C+ in 2013 compared to 28.36% of the candidates in 2012. Overall, it can be concluded that more than half of the learners who sat for their KCSE in the period 2011-2014 failed to score a minimum of C+ (Kenya, 2016).

One of the major problems facing the educational system in Nigeria is the abysmal failure of learners in public examinations, particularly at the secondary level of education. The situation is so worse that stakeholders keep on wondering why this level of education has persistently failed to meet the yearnings and aspirations of the society (Saad et al., 2014). Western Africa Examination Council (WAEC) results from 2009-2014 revealed that secondary school learners' performance in core subjects was very poor. Specifically, in 2009, only 25.99% of the learners had five credits and above, and in 2010 the percentage dropped to 23.36%. In 2011, the percentage of learners with five credits rose to 30.9% and continued to rise to 38.81% in 2012. Unfortunately, in 2013 the performance declined to 36.57%, and dropped further down to 31.28% in 2014 (Saad et al., 2014).

According to the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC), a learner is considered to have passed O' Level if they obtain C grade or better in at least five subjects (Ndoro, 2014). Learners who pass four or less subjects cannot proceed to Advanced Level, neither can they join tertiary institutions for professional training (Mujaji, 2013). Several rural secondary schools fail to produce a single learner with a full certificate. For example, in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe, in 2012, out of a total of 70 secondary schools, 19 recorded a 0% pass rate and Kwekwe, Mberengwa, Gokwe North and Gokwe South rural districts had the highest concentration of schools with 0% pass rate (Shumba, 2013). To improve the poor academic performance in the first ten years of independence, Zimbabwe committed to

rectifying the social inequities brought by the former colonial regimes. Secondary schools increased from a paltry 197 in 1980 to 1502 by 1989, a sharp increase of 62%. Despite the noble idea of availing secondary school education to most rural learners who needed it, there is still widespread outcry across the country about the low performance of pupils from these schools at Ordinary Level Examinations. Most of these schools produce 0% pass rates year-in and year-out (Ncube & Tshabalala, 2014).

Deficient performance of learners has also been a concern in other parts of Africa. Research conducted by Cascio (2015) in South Africa reported that educators play a significant role in learners' performance; for example, if the educator lacks experience or passion in teaching, learners might not develop interest in the subject. He argued that if the educator does not have effective classroom management skills, the classroom environment might hinder fruitful class discussions and collaborative learning. Karue and Amukowa (2014) argued that home environmental factors, family backgrounds and lack of parental involvement in the education of their children were the main causes of poor performance in mathematics in Kenya. A study in Lesotho on learner performance in mathematics found that some teachers had majored in disciplines other than mathematics but were employed to teach mathematics. This meant that most of the mathematics teachers did not have enough mathematics knowledge and skills, which affected their teaching (methods) and could have led to learners' deficient performance in mathematics (Mogari et al., cited in Mampane, 2018). Quality and appropriate learning and teaching resources, in addition to teacher and learner factors, remains a major concern in almost all countries. The textbook is the resource that is used more often than any other resources (Michael, 2017).

Evans et al. (2013) found that free uniform provision in Busia, Kenya, reduced absenteeism by 44% for the average learner and 62% for learners who did not previously own a uniform. The program also increased test scores by .25 SDs after a year for children who received the free uniforms. In Kenya, research was conducted to examine different factors affecting the academic performance of secondary school pupils. A descriptive survey design was used for the study. The results showed that academic performance of pupils was the product of socio-economic, psychological, and environmental factors (Rach et al., 2012). Similar research in Nigeria found that children with high expectations for success on the task usually persist at it longer and perform better than children with low expectations (Tella, 2012). In KwaZulu Natal, factors that hinder learner academic performance were related to lack of clearly delineated goals, institutional policies and ineffective communication between educators and learners (Ndimande, 2012).

5.0 Low academic performance in Botswana

Molefe et al. (2016) suggested that one phenomenon that confronts Botswana's education system is a low standard of achievement as revealed by assessments at the end of the three cycles of education that is primary, junior, and senior. Bulawa (2017) argued that poor performance in examination results in Botswana has now become a matter of grave concern to the nation. Mudongo (2018) revealed that since 2008 there has been a decline in performance

with the lowest performance recorded in 2014 at an overall of 23.2%. The then Assistant Minister of Education and skills Development, Honourable Moiserale Master Goya, quoted in *Botswana Daily News*, stated that “the aim of the Ministry was to engage parents, teachers and learners to address the rising issue of poor academic performance in government schools” (Goya, 2016). Bulawa (2013) expressed concern about learners’ performance in 2012 Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE), Junior Certificate Examinations (JCE) and Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE). Botswana Examination Council (BEC), the section of the Ministry of Education (MoE) that releases both the national and international results, also revealed that junior secondary school results for the year 2013 were below average and required urgent intervention measures (Mudongo, 2018). An understanding of these consistent failures within the education system in Botswana is essential if we are to provide an appropriate solution for low performing learners.

There are several possible factors which contribute to learners’ poor academic performance. One of such factors is the generic school management policies like language policy (Pansiri, 2011). Botswana is a multi-lingual country, and in this setting, learners bring along with them different languages. All these various learners speak different indigenous languages which bring with them a wide range of cultural traditions that could be of value to their learning if they were incorporated in the education system (Jotia & Pansiri, 2013; Nyathi-Saleshando, 2011). Even though this is the case, their mother tongues have not been used as a medium of instruction in both public and private schools in Botswana (Nyathi-Saleshando, 2011). This impedes and has impeded their academic learning resulting in poor performance. As pointed out by Khan (2014, p. 1), “language has a central position in all situations involving human beings”. Another factor that is being cited as a possible factor contributing to low performance in Botswana is the curriculum (Pansiri, 2011). According to Pansiri (2011) curricular materials incorporate foreign issues and cultures and ignore those at home. For example, while it may be necessary to teach the history of the French Revolution to Botswana children, it is also essential to teach them their own history. Pansiri (2011) further revealed that low performance in Botswana is caused by the nature of generic school calendars. School calendars reduce the headteacher’s power of autonomy. Headteachers have limited opportunities to tailor the school calendar to the contexts and uniqueness of their localities. This limitation negatively impacts on the levels of creativity of the headteachers. According to Mphale and Mhlauli (2017), poor study habits could be another factor contributing to the poor learners’ performance. Learners’ lack of study skills and negative attitude toward schoolwork have a negative impact on academic performance. Absenteeism, reluctance to learn and lack of readiness for tests and examinations also contribute to poor performance. Other related factors that determine learners’ academic achievements include intelligence, socio-economic status, and lack of resources. The deficiency in the above means low learners’ academic performance. Regardless of these efforts/ research which have investigated on and reported on potential problems, there has not been significant improvement in learners’ performance in Botswana. The Government of Botswana has been alert and responsive to this issue and has embarked on initiatives and policies to address the problem of learners’ low performance.

6.0 Interventions engaged to ameliorate low academic performance in schools.

Education in Botswana has been guided by several influential policies and international bodies like the UNESCO, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), now officially United Nations Children's Fund, and donor agencies in an effort to improve academic performance. Since independence, the Government of Botswana embedded various innovations and reforms in the educational policies. Botswana's first educational policy, Education for *Kagisano* (Social Harmony) which was anchored on four national principles of democracy, development, self-reliance and unity, provided a framework for the development of education in the country from 1977 to 1993. In its philosophical framework of self-reliance, it argues that “communities and parents must accept their responsibility for the education and training of the young” (Republic of Botswana, Education for kagisano: Report of the National Commission on Education , 1977, p. 29). This commitment to formal education and self-reliant was further strengthened when the commission stressed that it was the responsibility of the entire generation of adults to participate in the upbringing of children. The commission emphasized the need for government to provide moral and material support to communities that started schools, training, and courses with self-help. On the responsibility of parents as a collective, the commission implored parents to “give time to school matters through parent-teacher associations and to contribute to the physical upkeep and maintenance of the premises...” (Republic of Botswana, Education for kagisano: Report of the National Commission on Education , 1977, p. 56). Parents are therefore required to make sure that children go to school on time, feed adequately, are not burdened with home chores over schoolwork, visit school and discuss the learning progress of their children with teachers. This was the first educational policy on parental involvement in formal education in Botswana.

After fifteen years, there was a concern regarding learners' low academic performance. According to Pansiri and Bulawa (2013), parents, teachers and educationist called for the restructuring of the education system in Botswana so as to meet the needs of every Motswana. The government then appointed a National Commission on Education in 1992 which produced the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 which will be in force until 2029 (Makwinja, 2017). The Revised National Policy on Education reinforced educational policy by stating that, “the government of Botswana should intensify the efforts to encourage the establishment of parents-teachers associations” (PTAs) (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p. 52). This second education policy legalised PTAs to “provide an effective forum for schools to keep in close contact with the communities that they serve and therefore ensure that parents take an interest in and contribute to the education of their children” (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p. 16). It posits that “PTAs should be encouraged to add... for example in the provision of computers and library books, in order to enrich the curriculum of the primary schools (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p. 16). PTAs are therefore given the mandate to participate and contribute in the school and educational development. The Revised National Policy on Education (1994) emphasises that the use of in-service education and training is a means towards teachers' professional development. It states that “a structured national in-service programme should be developed to guide in-service activities, starting from an orientation of a newly appointed

teacher at the school level to the training of newly appointed headteacher” (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p. 47).

In response to the policy recommendation, teachers’ professional development is now re-organized to be more school based (Mphale, 2014). According to Mphale (2014) professional development has now become an integral part of the overall school plan. Schools have established staff development committees which organize development activities for all members of staff. The committees are mandated to pull experts from within and outside schools to deliver knowledge and skills required by staff. The schools are expected to develop annual school development plans that entail activities the school intends to undertake. Amongst those activities, the school must outline the kinds of programmes that are tentatively meant for teacher development. The objectives set by schools regarding teachers’ professional development should be clearly stipulated. The development activities should be included when making budget estimates for funds to be allocated to schools. The school-based teacher professional development initiatives under investigation are induction, teacher appraisal, peer observation, team teaching, action research, collaboration, cluster subject panels workshops, common scheming, and seminars for panel discussions (Mphale, 2014).

In 1999 the government of Botswana introduced the performance management system (PMS) into the entire government system including the education sector to improve performance in the public service (Bulawa, 2012; Hacker & Washington, 2004; Republic of Botswana, 2002). The main aim of introducing the PMS was to ensure that the public service deliver on set and agreed standards to improve and sustain productivity at all levels of the public service. Furthermore, it was aimed at inculcating a culture of performance and accountability in the public service (Bulawa, 2012). The government also believed that PMS would facilitate and encourage teamwork at all levels of the public service to achieve goals and objectives within their organisations. This was to be achieved by ensuring that public officers were provided with some skills. These include skills in team building and management, and problem-solving techniques (Republic of Botswana, 2002). According to Bulawa (2012) the performance management system was not the first reform ever implemented in schools in Botswana to improve performance. Other reforms include the annual confidential reports, the job evaluation for teachers, the teacher performance appraisal scheme, the secondary schools’ management development project and the pastoral care system (Monyatsi, 2005). The annual confidential reports, the job evaluation for teachers, and the teacher performance appraisal scheme, are teacher performance related reforms. The annual confidential reports linked teachers’ promotion and annual increment to performance. The job evaluation for teachers emphasised the significance of an assessment of teachers on a continuous basis, and the confidential reports linked teachers’ performance to pay and promotion (Monyatsi, 2005). Monyatsi (2005) revealed that a new reform, the teacher performance appraisal scheme, was introduced in schools in 1992. This scheme was intended to assess the performance of teachers objectively with the data contributing to the pay and promotion process. It also offered teachers the opportunity to learn from their own assessment.

According to Monyatsi (2005), the school's schools management development project and the pastoral care system were introduced as school management performance reforms and was financed by the government of Botswana and the British government. One of the aims of the project was to raise the standards of management in secondary schools through the provision of training to school heads and other members of the school senior management team. The second reform was the pastoral care system which was introduced in schools towards the end of 2000. Key performance areas, namely, learners' academic performance, improved school discipline, leadership, management (including the improvement of resource management), and stakeholder involvement, that is, the rate at which stakeholders such as learners, staff, and parents were involved, were used to monitor the effectiveness of the pastoral system. This reform is currently operational in the schools and running with the PMS (Republic of Botswana, 2007). From this brief exposition of a selection of research focusing on learners' performance, it is obvious that more systematic studies or documentations on learners' performance within junior secondary school are relevant and desired.

7.0 Conclusion

The significance that research holds is usually articulated in terms of its contribution to improving practice, informing policy, or enriching the knowledge based on the topic or issue being investigated (Belcher et al., 2022; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). This article argues that research on learner performance need to always be kept at the forefront and topical because it has potential to positively contribute to the improvement of practice in learning and teaching. The findings of research usually inform policy in case there is need to develop new polices or review those which are in existence. Evidence by a study conducted in Botswana by Makwinja (2017) showed that policy makers used research findings to review several reforms which were intended to improve academic performance in primary school. Successful education, learning and teaching is all encompassing and goes beyond teacher-student instructional interactions to ascertain that learning has and is actually taking place and that skills and knowledge are being successfully imparted to the learner.

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