



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Does Peri Urban Location of School Affect the Performance of Pupils?

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Abstract:

The study investigates whether the peri-urban location of a school affects the performance of pupils using Nyamandlovu secondary school as a case study. The research is largely qualitative and uses primary data from interviews with the school administration, 3 focus group discussions with students, the teachers and School Development Committee, and observations of the systems of the school. Findings indicate that although there are other challenges, the peri-urban location of this school causes chronic staff absenteeism, high staff turnover, lack of constancy, lack of a school ethos and culture which breeds lack of commitment to duty and underperformance of pupils. We conclude that the peri-urban location of this school is largely responsible for its poor performance.

Keywords: peri-urban location, performance, absenteeism, staff turnover

1. Introduction

Schools located in peri-urban areas on average do not perform well when compared with other schools which are not located in peri-urban areas such as rural schools, boarding schools and urban schools. Douglas (2006) says that “a peri-urban area is a transition or interaction zone, where urban and rural activities are juxtaposed”. This definition shows that peri-urban areas are not strictly urban or rural in the traditional sense. Nyamandlovu Secondary school was chosen as a case study of how the location in a peri-urban area affects the performance of the school.

Nyamandlovu Secondary School is an Umguza Council school located 50 kilometres from the City of Bulawayo, which is the second largest city in Zimbabwe, is a large metropolitan area with a population of over half a million people. The school was established in January 2001. The school services a rural farming community which was resettled on surrounding Nyamandlovu farms previously owned by white farmers. It is also located 3 kilometres from Nyamandlovu Business Centre. The school enrolment in 2013 was 292 encompassing all classes from form 1 up to form 4 on a double stream in 2016 it had increased to 383 pupils. In 2016 the school had a staff complement of 16 teachers. The school offers a core curriculum of Mathematics, English, History, Ndebele, French, Integrated Science, Biology, Commerce, Geography as well as practical subjects which include Agriculture and Fashion and Fabrics. By the year 2012, eleven years after the establishment of this school not a single student had attained five ordinary level passes. Passing five subjects is the threshold for passing at Ordinary level for the General Certificate of Education in Zimbabwe. Pass rates at this school have since increased marginally for instance in 2013 the pass rate was 2, 4%, in 2014 6, 4% and in 2015 18, 4%.

The peri-urban location predisposes this school to perform poorly when compared with schools located elsewhere, because there is regular absenteeism of teachers as some commute to and from Bulawayo daily, arriving late in the morning and leaving early in the afternoon. Furthermore instead of teaching from Monday to Friday, most teachers at this school are at work on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. On Thursdays teachers will be preparing to go to Bulawayo for the weekend since most if not all, of them have families residing in Bulawayo.

Some teachers leave for the weekend on Thursday and some on Friday. This regular absenteeism by teachers affects the degree at which they apply themselves at work and as a result the performance of pupils suffer. This regular absenteeism is also symptomatic of the lack of adequate supervision by the school head over teachers, as well inadequate provision of oversight on the school head by the district education office.

The poor performance of pupils at this school is due to a myriad of challenges related to its peri-urban location, namely high staff turnover, lack of effective supervision by the district education officials, absenteeism and lack of motivation by teachers, poor attitude towards education by parents, low socio economic status of the parents and poverty of the community, inadequate learning resources, long distances to school, streaming of classes and negative labelling of pupils.

2. Literature Review

Existing studies, on school location and school type, and how they affect academic achievement focus on boarding schools, government urban schools, mission schools, Trust schools and day schools. Dambudzo (2013) in his study found that boarding schools appeared to offer a better learning environment than day schools. Nyagura and Riddell (1991) in a study that looked at the causes in differences in achievement in Zimbabwean secondary schools found that students who attended Trust schools, elite government urban schools and mission schools had better scores in Mathematics and English than students in less endowed government schools and council schools. While the findings of these studies offer significant and important insights into the education system of Zimbabwe in general, they however did not pay attention to peri -urban schools. Peri -urban schools seem to have unique circumstances which are determined by their location which affect the performance of pupils.

2.1. Problem Statement

Since its establishment in 2001 up to 2012, Nyamandlovu Secondary School had not produced a single student who attained at least five ordinary level passes and above for the General Certificate of Education. Since then pass rates have only been marginal. This poor performance of the school is odd given the fact that all the teachers at the school are qualified and although there are deficiencies in terms of resources, the school has reasonably good infrastructure. This poor performance is symptomatic of an underlying systemic problem which needs to be interrogated.

2.2. Objectives of the Study

- To identify and analyse the reasons for the poor performance of peri -urban schools.
- To suggest possible measures that can improve the performance of peri-urban schools.

2.3. Research questions

- Why do peri -urban schools have poor performance?
- What can be done to improve the performance of peri- urban schools?

3. Rationale

This research seeks to establish the reasons why peri -urban schools do not perform well in national examinations. Due to their proximity to urban centres, these schools have better infrastructure, qualified teaching staff and better resources in comparison with rural schools. Hence one would expect them to have relatively better examination results in comparison to their rural counterparts, but this is generally not the case. Nyamandlovu Secondary School has over the past twelve years consistently produced poor results, hence the need for such a study to identify the reasons for this poor record.

4. Conceptual framework

The performance of a school is greatly affected by variables such as leadership, management of the school and the general climate of the school. The study used the integrated Model of School effectiveness by Scheerens (1989) and the context input, process and product evaluation model (CIPP) model. This model depicts a multilevel framework which is useful in understanding how the school environment affects its performance. In this case study the environment of the school is determined by its peri- urban location. In this study the environmental context of the school namely its location is examined in terms of the commitment to duty by teachers, oversight by the district education officials, as the inputs and processes and their relationship to the results produced by the school as the outcomes.

5. Methodology

In this research qualitative research instruments were used. The researchers conducted interviews with the school administration on possible causes of poor performance. The school administration comprising the Acting Head of the school, Acting Deputy Head and Senior Master were interviewed. Oral interviews were chosen for the administrative group because it consisted of three people only. Focus group discussions with 14 school teachers, School Development Committee and 30 pupils were conducted. Focus group discussions were conducted only with selected pupils in Form three and Form four. These pupils were more mature and more articulate than those in lower forms. Focus groups were chosen as the data collection tool for these three groups because of the time constraints in doing the research. These three groups were separated for confidentiality, in order for the participants to respond as freely and as truthfully as possible. In addition the researchers used the observation method to gather data.

6. Findings and Discussion

The study established that this school has a very high staff turnover with the head teachers and some teachers changing every year. The table below shows the turnover of school heads at this school.

School head	Year appointed to head school	Year of leaving school	Number of years spent at school
S. Sibanda	2002	2005	4
E. Mahlahleni	2005	2007	2
T. Mhlanga	2007	2012	5
F. Shumba	2011	2013	2
C. Bango	2013	2015	2
P. Mudyazhizha	2016		

Table 1: Turnover of Head teachers at Nyamandlovu Secondary School

Since its establishment in 2001 to 2016 this school has had six schools heads. This high turnover impacts negatively on the performance of the school. According to Agezo (2010) and Zhang (1994) quoted in Dambudzo (2013) for a school head to be effective and set enduring systems they need to stay at the same school for a period of five to seven years. Dambudzo (2013) contends that “principal turnover impacts negatively on school culture development and student development”. The high turnover in the head of the school has resulted in the weak administrative capacity of the school, yet according to Edmonds (1979) strong administrative leadership is an essential ingredient for an effective school because the head sets the culture of the school which will determine the amount of time allocated to teaching, study, homework and extra curricula activities. The constant changing of the school head creates a void or vacuum which leads to the absence of a school ethos and culture. This high turnover has led to mistrust of the school administration by parents.

Furthermore the high turnover of staff leads to lack of commitment and attachment to the school not only by the head but the teachers as well. The teachers at this school regard themselves to be in transit to better schools and this has a bearing on the way they apply themselves at work. Lockheed and Komenan (1989 quoted in Bojuwoye) say that school characteristics have significant effects on academic achievement and that in many cases the effects of the school characteristics are greater than the effects of family background. Organisational constancy, which would imply minimal turnover of teachers is recognised as essential for a school to be effective.

In addition to the high turnover of administrative staff the teachers themselves cited lack of motivation as a reason for the poor performance of pupils. Because of the low socio economic status of the parents of this school, the teachers do not get any incentives from the school. Since this school is located in a peri urban resettlement area most parents are not gainfully employed. Teachers contend that they could work harder if they were given incentives. It would seem that the lack of additional incentives to complement their salary from government make these teachers have a poor attitude to work. The School Development Committee attributed the poor performance of the school to teachers who lacked commitment to their work. For this reason the parents did not find any logic in giving incentives to teachers who showed lack of professionalism and a cavalier attitude to work. The zero percentage pass rate of the school made parents not see the value for paying school fees. While it cannot be disputed that pay and incentives are the most important determinants of teacher motivation, it is evident that the behaviour of teachers at Nyamandlovu Secondary school has not warranted the provision of incentives from parents.

Furthermore the pupils themselves indicated that there was high absenteeism of teachers at this school. Due to their proximity to the city of Bulawayo, pupils indicated that some teachers commuted to and from the city daily and always arrived mid- morning and left early in the afternoon. Other teachers left the school on Thursday for the weekend only to come back to the school on Tuesday. This pattern of absenteeism impacted negatively on learning time. This behaviour also indicates that a lot of teachers at this school also avoid teaching and they actually manage to get away with this truant behaviour because of the absence of strong leadership and functional systems of accountability. In the Herald newspaper of 25 July 2016 it was reported that “the Auditor-General’s Office has unearthed massive absenteeism at schools after auditors found over 160 headmasters, deputy headmasters and teachers absent from their workplaces without leave”. This shows that absenteeism in schools in Zimbabwe is rampant. Studies by Suryadarma (2004) and Chaudry (2004) show that teacher absenteeism is related to lower student scores.

Pupils also indicated that the school had no fixed timetable. Teachers did not follow any timetable in their teaching. Pupils submitted that it was common for a teacher to walk into a class, even though it would not be his/her teaching period, and spend the whole morning in one class, yet in a school which follows a set timetable systematically, every hour is allocated to different subject.

Some of these teachers who would get into any class sometimes would just mind the class, wile up time and not teach. This created a chaotic atmosphere on the pupils’ learning at the school. This behaviour by teachers is symptomatic of the lack of oversight by the school administration. It would seem that different heads have allowed this pattern to obtain so that they can also be truant. On the accountability of teachers Bennell and Akyeampong(2007)state that “the degree to which teachers are properly accountable to their clients (children and parents) and their managers (head teachers and district and national level managers) has a powerful influence on teacher motivation levels. According to Anderson (2005), accountability includes adherence to professional norms as well as producing good results. It would seem that accountability at this school is seriously in doubt.

At Nyamandlovu Secondary School accountability is either very low or virtually non- existent, judging by the chronic absenteeism of teachers showing absence of professional conduct, poor results and the lack of power of the School Development Committee to exert its authority and take ownership and active involvement in school affairs.Pota (1995) argues that:-

→ even with the best educated teachers in a nation’s schools, it would be possible for teaching standards to drift without rigorous and effective systems in place to hold schools to account.

There is no sense of ownership of the school by the community. Teachers are seen as accountable to the government, which is why the School Development Committee said that the Head and teachers of this school were not being effectively supervised by Ministry officials and as such they were not teaching effectively. Bennell and Akyeamong (2007) contend that poor professional behaviour by teachers shown by lateness, absenteeism and laziness seriously compromises schooling quality and learning outcomes.

Furthermore the streaming of pupils according to ability at this school had a negative effect on the performance of pupils. Nyamandlovu Secondary School has two classes in each form. Pupils indicated that streaming affected their performance since the capable pupils were given more attention at the expense of the not so gifted pupils. This resulted in the dismal performance for the negatively labelled class. Abadzi (2009) writing on Instructional Time Loss in Developing Countries says that the neglect of lower scoring students is an emerging issue because “teachers may engage the class in the required learning activities but interact with only the few students who can do the work.” Paying less attention or no attention at all to failing students impacted negatively on the student’s self- concept and ultimately performance in class leading to “hidden drop out phenomenon.” Dambudzo (2013) argues that the “underestimation of the learners’ performance had detrimental effects on the learners’ self -concept of ability”, learning and motivation. To that effect Abadzi (2009) contends that it might not be enough that instruction is taking place, the percentage of students who are really involved must be ascertained. If the pupils themselves noted that there was neglect of the B stream students, then it clearly shows that streaming is a serious issue that affects the overall performance of the school.

Teachers take advantage of the fact they do not have performance based contracts. They have job security and pay is assured, even if their schools perform dismally, for this reason they get away with professional misconduct.

Teachers at Nyamandlovu Secondary School have a predetermined negativity about the ability of their pupils. Teachers maintain that this school attracts the weakest pupils from primary schools and hence does not enjoy the benefit of having high achievers. In their opinion these academically weak pupils lack motivation and have poor cognitive skills, hence to them it was not surprising that the school was not performing well. Ruge (1998 quoted in Considine and Zappala) contends that teachers at disadvantaged schools often hold low expectations of their students which often compound the low expectations that their parents may have. Even though it is true that this is a non -selective school which usually gets low achievers from primary school, it is undeniable that the teachers’ poor attitude to work is largely to blame for the poor performance of the school. That the teachers felt that they were not to blame for the poor performance of the school is a self -service effect which makes them attribute the poor performance of the schools on the weak potential of pupils, non -payment of fees and poverty of the parents and lack of incentives. In other words the teachers were not taking responsibility for the poor performance of the school. Teachers also did not understand that they are integral players in making this school have a good reputation. They looked to outsiders to provide solutions to the problems bedevilling the school.

The peri -urban nature of the school servicing resettled rural communities meant that a lot of pupils travelled long distances to school on foot. It was established that more than half of the pupils at the school live more than ten kilometres away from the school. The furthest place where some of these pupils stay is Redbank, which is 15 kilometres away from the school. The long distances travelled by pupils to and from school have a great impact on their performance. They wake up very early in the morning. When they dismiss from school in the afternoon they also travel long distances and they arrive home late into the night, only to wake up early in the morning for another trip to school. This is indeed a very strenuous routine which gives the pupils no time to study. This situation is compounded by the lack of adequate food for the pupils. Some pupils choose to become bush boarders and travel to their homes during weekends. These bush boarders suffer from many other challenges such as lack of parental care and hunger.

Compounding this issue is the poor attitude of the parents who are generally not willing to pay fees for their children. This is due to their negative attitude to education, poverty and the depressed economic climate. The total cost the school levy and fees is US \$45. A few children are sponsored by CAMFED, (Campaign for female education) which is a non -governmental organisation concerned with the education of the girl child. School fees and levies are the only reliable source of income for the school. It was established that in September 2016 the school only had US\$3000 in its account being money which was paid by CAMFED as school fees for the children they sponsor. The children whose fees were paid under BEAM (Basic Education Assistance Module funded by the government) had arrears because the government was not disbursing money due to funding constraints.

In addition parents are not keen to attend school functions such as Prize giving days and general school meetings. The parents attach a lower value to education and are therefore an unlikely source of inspiration and motivation to their children. Moreover during the farming season parents withdraw their children from school to assist them with their agricultural chores. Parents also condone the relationships of their daughters with working adults, thus negatively affecting the discipline of pupils, within the school. Teachers bemoaned the fact that government policy which outlawed corporal punishment made it difficult for teachers to enforce discipline without contravening the law.

7. Conclusion

This paper has shown that Nyamandlovu Secondary school faces a myriad of challenges. These challenges include the lack of adequate learning resources, long distances that many children have to walk to from school, the low socio economic status of the parents which make them not pay fees, parents’ poor attitude to education, lack of adequate oversight by the district education officials, teacher absenteeism and the absence of functional administrative systems in the school. While the challenges facing the school are many, it came out strongly that the peri- urban location of the school is the single most important cause of the poor performance of this school. The peri-urban location causes teacher absenteeism and high staff turnover, which leads to the lack of constancy and the development of a school ethos and culture which staff and pupils can be proud of.

In light of the stated challenges it is recommended that the relevant education officials at the district level should find ways of stopping the high staff turnover at the school so that there is stability at the school. Furthermore the district education office should provide more oversight and monitor the school to ensure that teachers are at the school for the complete week, as this would greatly increasing instructional and learning time at the school. It is heartening to note that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education is now implementing the results based management of schools and it is hoped that this might yield positive outcomes.

Furthermore, parents as stakeholders of the school, should be sensitised that children have a right to education and should make every effort to support the education of their children. To that effect, parents should pay fees for their children, provide all necessities which might be required and not overload them with household chores and farm work. The participation of parents in school functions where their presence is required should be encouraged, so that they are visible, active and interested stakeholders who will enhance teacher accountability. The local leadership comprising the Village head, Headman, Councillor, Member of Parliament and Senator of the area should assist in sensitising parents about the value of education. Finally the school should find ways of generating revenue, and concentrate on home grown solutions rather than always expecting assistance from outsiders.

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