

ENHANCING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN A RURAL PRIVATE PRIMARY SCHOOL: ADDRESSING COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS AND LONG-TERM CHALLENGES

Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the trends in academic performance, establish the possible causes of the poor academic performance, and explore and implement some mitigation strategies for 5 years. After observing a sharp decline in the Grade seven national examination pass rate at one rural Private Primary School, the Department of Education committed itself to work in collaboration with the school administrators and teachers to improve the pass rate. Several trips were made to the Primary school to establish rapport, assess their needs, and establish the contributing causes of the sharp decline in the pass rates. In-depth interviews were carried out with key informants. The major factors identified to be contributing to the decline in pass rates were low motivation among both students and teachers. In addition, inadequate resources; particularly educational materials and basic needs for teachers such as water and food were also identified. A strategic plan was formulated with goals projected for the coming 4 years. Regular visits to the school were made by the department of Education at least once every school term. Special training programs were done in the third term of each year in preparation for writing final exams. The teachers and students were incentivized by provision of basic needs such as water and food and other basic commodities. Other motivational promises were made, such as prizes for the best-performing students and teachers. The results were recorded and compared every year. After the first year of implementing the strategies, there was a noticeable change in the academic performance. The pass rates were beginning to rise when Covid -19 pandemic broke out. The overall pass rate dropped from 42 % to 15% during the Covid 19 pandemic era. However, after the Covid 19 Pandemic the intervention strategies continued. Despite experiencing the drastic negative effects of the Covid -19 pandemic, the graph of academic performance rose, there was a sharp rise from 33% in 2022 to 52% in 2023. The study recommends that a detailed longitudinal study be carried out to investigate the impact of other strategies (such as encouraging parental involvement). If these strategies carried out in this study are implemented coupled with other strategies such as parental involvement, this may result in marked improvements in academic performance of the learners and very high pass rates.

Keywords: academic performance, educational improvement, intervention program, motivation

Introduction

The main goal of all academic institutions is to produce graduates with high quality academic grades. This will lead them to careers that equip them for employment and a successful future. This is in tandem with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) which stresses ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all learners. To achieve this goal there is a need to provide quality teaching and learning materials: the availability to teachers of adequate good quality instructional materials, and learners of sufficient, good quality educational supplies and materials, including textbooks. In addition, the ability to meet the teachers'

basic needs such as food and drinking water is pivotal to teacher satisfaction and motivation, which will consequently improve educational outcomes (McCowan, 2019; Rasli, et al, 2022). Unfortunately, the school has been experiencing a high turnover of teachers as they seek greener pastures in urban schools or in South Africa. This in turn cascades down to the learners who end up with poor academic performance. When there is high turnover, some of the classes become too big for one teacher to manage. According to a study by Bakasa, (2011), class size is among the major contributing factors that may negatively influence teacher effectiveness and student achievement. It should be appreciated that the pass rate is one of the indicators of quality education and failure by the school to post good results could be indicating multiple of problems that need to be addressed. The problems could be both regarding human resources as well as in material resources. For human resources, some of the problems could be emanating from low motivation. Motivation has been shown to positively influence study strategy, academic performance and well-being in studies (Vanstienkiste et al 2005). As an innate phenomenon, motivation is influenced by the four factors of context, temper, goal, and instruments for achieving the goal. If these are met, people are stimulated to complete an assignment, achieving a goal (Mohammadi 2006).

Literature Review

Generally schools located in the rural areas experience negative effects of poverty because most of the parents may be unemployed. In the case of those students who are employed in foreign countries it may take long before they receive the money for purchasing learning materials from their parents. Studies indicate that poverty and socioeconomic status may contribute to academic performance (Perry and McConney, 2010). The socioeconomic status may also contribute negatively or positively to academic performance depending on the situation.

When student academic performance drops it raises the eyebrows of all key stakeholders. These include the Ministry of Education, other institutions of higher learning, High school & primary school administrators and parents. The case of declining pass-rates, is worrisome, it hurts the school. If this trend of declining results continues, there are high teacher turn-over and learners will continue to be short-changed. The low passrates may imply that most of the candidates will be exiting the primary school without a good foundation for future academic work and they end up frustrated. This may cause some or most of them not to proceed to secondary school. Without adequate guidance and counseling, some may become school

drop-outs before completion of primary school if both the learners and their parents and guardians do not see the expected benefits of schooling (Chireshe, 2011). The desire to find out the possible causes of poor academic performance as well as come up with possible strategies to improving academic performance is what motivated the researchers to embark on this study. The major aim was to analyze the trends in academic performance, establish the possible causes of poor academic performance, suggest possible mitigation strategies and implement these strategies for 5 years. On, very little can be achieved.

Studies (Odongo & Koskei, 2024; Mzuza, et al.(2014) indicated that apart from basic needs, the other factors perceived by teachers to strongly influence pass rates in primary school are lack of teaching and learning materials, lack of motivation due to poor salaries, and lack of decent teacher accommodation, lack of parental support and, lack of role models. Mzuza, et al, 2014 posit that almost every teacher in Malawi mentioned lack of motivation from the government since teachers in Malawi are among the lowest-paid civil servants and most of them lack proper accommodation and basic requirements. Other motivational factors that influence teacher performance are the provision of rewards and incentives as recognition and compensation (Shikalepo, 2020). The interaction of these factors not only frustrates the teachers, but they also cascade down to some students, thus leading to high primary school dropout rates, early marriages, and teen pregnancies.

According to Kruijer (2010), the other contributing factor to poor primary school academic performances is the high numbers of pupils per class and lack of basic resources for teaching. Kruijer asserts that the high pupil-teacher ratio creates frustration and lack of motivation among teachers so that they cannot fully discharge their duties. Poor working condition for teachers can affect the quality of education in terms of student examination passing rate (Kruijer, 2010).

In case the trend of declining results continues, learners will continue to be short-changed. The low pass rates may imply that most of the candidates may exit the primary school without a good foundation for future academic work. This may cause some or most of them not to proceed to secondary school. In some cases, we may even have drop-outs before completion of primary school if both the learners and their parents and guardians do not see the expected benefits of schooling.

This study is underpinned by Maslow's theory of Hierarchy of needs. According to Abraham Maslow, when people's basic physiological needs such as the availability of food, water etc then they feel to motivated work. In the case of students, they may not seek actualization needs such as academic performance before their basic physiological needs are met (Maslow, 1998). Given the issues in the foregoing paragraphs, it would seem there is a need for intervention strategies. These intervention strategies need to focus on meeting the unmet needs. Both the school teachers and students seem to have developed low motivation. Hence, intervention strategies should focus on meeting the basic physiological needs first. The school administrators seem to be disengaged. So, the bottom line is that school leadership, teachers and students all need to be motivated so that they work together as a team asto achieve the major goal of improving academic performance.

Research Setting

Ntenjane Primary school is a Seventh Day Adventist institution located about 39 kilometres west of Bulawayo . This school is an annex of Solusi Primary, It is located 10 kilometres from Solusi University along the Solusi University -Bulawayo. It is situated in a rural area spanned by farms. Quite a number of parents for most of the learners are in South Africa or have relatives working there. This positions it to do very well academically and in other areas. Because of its proximity to South Africa, some of the teachers get tempted to leave their low paying job of teaching so as to go and get better paying jobs in South Africa. In addition, since most of the parents also are abroad their children (students) lack adequate motivation to study. From its geographical location, Ntenjani Primary school regularly experiences a crisis of availability of potable water, especially during the dry season. Hence, both the teachers and students face the problem of lack of adequate clean potable water, electricity and decent accommodation.

Ntenjane primary school has over the recent years been experiencing a decline in the grade 7 national examination pass rate. This can be seen from the results the school obtained from the years 2017 to 2023. In 2017, the school had a pass rate of 44% against a national pass rate of 44.76%. Another example is the year 2018 when the school posted a result of 44% against a national average of 52.87% which gives a deficit of minus 8.87%. The lowest results were observed in the year 2020 when the school posted a mere 15% pass rate. During this year, the national average pass rate was 37.11%. The statistics just highlighted show that the school performance is not at its best as it seems to fall in the category below the national average. It

should be appreciated that Ntenjane is not located in a very remote place to justify the low results.

Statement of the problem

Ntenjane primary school has over the recent years been experiencing a decline in the grade 7 national examination pass rate. This can be seen from the results the school obtained from the years 2017 to 2022. In 2017, the school had a pass rate of 44% against a national pass rate of 44.76%. Another example is the year 2018 where the school posted a result of 44% against a national average of 52.87% which gives a deficit of minus 8.87%. The lowest results were observed in the year 2020 where the school posted a mere 15% pass rate. During this year, the national average pass rate was 37.11%. The statistics highlight that the school performance is not at its best as compared to other Primary schools it seems to be declining, falling in the category below the national average. It should be appreciated that Ntenjane is not located at a very remote place to justify the low results. Hence, there is need to carry out this study. The main aim of the study is to analyze the trends in academic performance, establish the possible causes of the poor academic performance, suggest possible mitigation strategies and implement these strategies.

Research Objectives

1. Establish the pass rate trends at Ntanjane Primary School for the past 7 years
2. Determine the possible causes of the noticeable drop in the Grade seven national examination pass rates.
3. Identify intervention measures that could be adopted to improve pass rate
4. Establish the extent the intervention measures impact on the effectiveness of the pass rate

Research Questions

1. How is the pass rate trend at Ntanjane Primary School for the past 6 years?
2. What are the major factors contributing to the decline in the Grade seven national examination pass rates?
3. What intervention strategies could be adopted to improve overall pass rate on a rural based primary school?

4. To what extent do the intervention measures impact on the effectiveness of the pass rate?

Methodology

Solusi University Department of Education through the Ministry of Education decided to conduct intervention measures as part of 5.0 (Community outreach a requirement by Ministry of Higher Education in Zimbabwe). A qualitative descriptive case study was carried out with key informants, comprising 5 Teachers and 3 School Administrators.. The authors used pseudonyms instead of the actual names of school and participants. A case study research method is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (Yin,1984), A Case study method enables a researcher to examine the data within a specific context closely(Cresswell, 2018; Bryman, 2016) A case study may be a cross-sectional or longitudinal study (Zaidah Zainal, 2007). This study was a longitudinal study carried out for 6 years.The following intervention measures were carried out:

1. The first step was a needs assessment by interviewing the school administrators and the five teachers on the possible causes of the decline in the Grade seven examination pass rates for 2 consecutive years (2018 and 2019).

- 2.The next step was to meet with all the teachers and grade 7 pupils. The aim was to encourage them to read hard. If they achieved a higher pass rate, a big party would be held, and prizes would be given to the highest-performing students and best teachers.As an incentive, each pupil was given writing pens and other reading materials essential for exam preparation.

In addition, the teachers attended a 3-week workshop on how to improve teaching and academic performance of pupils. This training was done by expert, seasoned grade 7 teachers from the best Primary School. Further, these experts worked in collaboration with the newly trained teachers to coach the pupils on tips to successfully write a national examination.

The teachers and students were also motivated by the provision of a clean portable supply of water. In addition, teaching resources are in the form of boxes of assorted chalk and writing pens, markers, and manila sheets. Regular visits were made every term for smooth collaboration.

Results

Research Question One:

How is the pass rate trend at Ntenjane Primary School for the past 7 years

Table 1. Pass-rate at Ntenjane for the past 7 years

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
BY UNIT	44%	41.2%	42%	15%	44%	33%	52%
BY SUBJECT	29.6%	23.5%	3.6%	5%	20%	14.3%	23.8%

From Table 1, the trends show that the pass rate of the grade seven National Examinations declined from 44% in 2017 to 41.2% in 2018. Then it rose a little in 2019 but had a sharp decline in 2020, probably due to Covid 19 Pandemic. In 2021, after Covid 19, the results showed a sharp rise to (44%), followed by a slight decline (33%) in 20122 then there was marked rise to 52% in 2023. Probably this may be attributed to the intervention strategies being implemented.

What are the major factors contributing to the decline in the Grade seven national examination pass rates.

Based on the in-depth interviews with the school administrators, The major contributing factors to the decline in pass rates is the lack of motivation among the teachers. Considering the dire living conditions in the rural areas, most of them are always waiting for an opportunity to transfer to an urban school. According to the teachers, *I feel demotivated because of unviability of basic needs such as water, food, electricity and poor accommodation, we hardly have clean drinking water* (Teacher 1) Apart from the poor living conditions, the teachers are not provided with adequate teaching resources. The school head indicated that *“The school does not receive much assistance from the Government, so they mainly depend on the little tuition paid by the students or donations from well-wishers”*(Headmaster). Further, the students sometimes arrive late to school having walked long distances.. Another demotivating factor is that some of the students seem too hungry and fatigued to concentrate in class. *“Most of the students also walk long distances to attend*

school since this is a day school and there are no boarding facilities, sometimes they spend the whole day without eating much”(Teacher 3).

Research Question two: What intervention strategies could be adopted to improve overall pass rate on a rural based primary school?

What the researchers gathered from both the needs assessment interviews with the administrators and Focus Group Discussion of the teachers is that both the school administrators and teachers seem demotivated because of the high turnover and the lack of basic physiological needs such as water, food, electricity and poor accommodation. In the case of students, they also walk long distances to attend school since this is a day school and there are no boarding facilities. In addition, most students feel demotivated due to lack of basic physiological needs such as water and food. Others also feel the stigma of having to walk on bare feet to school without a decent school uniform. One teacher made the following observation; *The school cannot afford to provide us with basic teaching resources for teaching. I feel like moving to greener pastures.* (Teacher 5). Further, most of them struggle to buy stationery and other learning materials needed. These problems are exacerbated during the third term, which is the dry hot season when water is scarce yet that is when they are supposed to be writing their final national examinations.

Therefore the best intervention strategies that may mitigate against the challenges should be focused on providing the basic physiological needs to the school administrators, the teachers and the learners. In addition, Provision of the needed teaching materials to teachers and learning materials to the learners would help alleviate the problems faced by both the teachers and students.

Research Question Three: To what extent do the intervention measures impact on the effectiveness of the pass rate?

The intervention strategies were implemented as the Solusi University Department of Education worked in collaboration with the school administrators and teachers at Ntenjane primary school. The results of the grade seven national examinations for each year were captured and recorded accordingly. An analysis of the trend was carried out. Table 2 shows a summary of these results. The results reflect the observed pass rates from 2017 to 2023

Table 2: Summary of Grade Seven National Examination Pass- rate Results (2017-2023)

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
PASS RATE							
BY UNIT	44%	41.2%	42%	15%	44%	33%	52%
BY SUBJECT	29.6%	23.5%	3.6%	5%	20%	14.3%	23.8%

In 2017 the pass rate percentage was at its peak both by Units and by subject. Then in 2018 and 2019 there was a slight decline in the pass rate by subject. In 2020, the lowest pass rate was registered. Probably due to the impact of Covid 19 pandemic. Despite the pandemic experience the decline did not fall down to 0%. Actually, in the following year 2021 the pass rate rose to 44%.. The decline in the overall pass rate in 2022 could be due the increase in the number of subjects from 4 to 7 subjects.

Table 3: Grade Seven National Examination Pass- rate Results (Subject by Subject)

SUBJECT	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
ENGLISH	41%	47%	14%	25%	36%
MATHEMATICS	37%	35%	14%	15%	38.8%
NDEBELE	81%	81%	86%	85%	62.2%
GENERAL PAPER	44%	41%	14%	18%	

Discussion

The study sought to analyze the trends and improve academic performance of Ntenjani Primary school through the implementation of various intervention strategies. Academic goals were set and both the teachers and learners felt motivated by the incentives given and the rising academic performance realized in the 2 years (2018 & 2019) prior to the Covid -19 pandemic. These strategies are in tandem with studies that confirm that academic performance is influenced by academic goals and motivational patterns (Altinyelken & Hoeksma, 2021; Rodríguez and Guzmán, 2019).

Despite the predicted and expected setbacks (such as financial challenges, health issues and loss of learning time) as the major effects of Covid -19 pandemic (World Bank Group, 2020; Moe & Katz, 2022; Sabates, Carter and Stern, 2020; Oraif, & Elyas, 2021) the intervention strategies implemented at Ntenjane Primary school seemed to prove to be fruitful. While Covid -19 pandemic had its toll in 2021, leaving the aftermath impacts on academic performance of students at Ntenjani Primary School. The 10% improvement in the academic performance in Grade seven is greatly appreciated considering that these learners were affected by Covid -19 pandemic during the prime years (grade 5 and Grade 6).

Since teacher motivation is positively correlated to student academic performance (Masood et al, 2018; Sivrikaya, 2019), it is projected that if intensive intervention strategies such as provision of more basic physiological needs throughout the year, buying more educational materials, engaging in intensive examination preparation activities using workbooks and provision of adequate stationery are implemented this trajectory of rising academic performance will continue to escalate and achieve the desired goals. This is well supported by other studies that have improved pass rates in other countries (Kruijer, 2010; Altinyelken & Hoeksm. 2021).

While the study was ongoing, Covid 19 Pandemic hit the world. This had a drastic impact on the progress that was underway. From January to March 2021, school reopening in Zimbabwe was suspended again due to the re-emergence of COVID-19. The long-term impact of school closures is profound: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) predicted that a 4-month learning disruption would conservatively cost nations 1.5% GDP, equivalent to US\$504 billions. Other studies observed that in Africa alone, since it comprises several Lower-Middle Income Countries (LMICs,) there is an urgent need for an equity-based approach to mitigate the loss of schooling, which risks further driving inequity, and creating a lifelong impact on health, well-being and human capital (Hanushek & Woessman, 2020); The Lancet Public Health, 2020; Armitage & Nellums, 2020).

Conclusion

The results of this seven-year study indicate that implementing motivation strategies has a great impact of improving the academic performance of students at Ntenjani Primary School. The use of extrinsic motivation incentives such as the provision of basic physiological needs

for both students and teachers and, the provision of adequate quality learning materials seemed to work in motivating the teachers and students. Studies indicate when teachers are motivated they teach with enthusiasm and this in turn motivates the learners (Masood, et al, 2018) and leads to better academic performance and higher pass rates (Moe, & Katz, 2022). Consequently, this will positively impact the teachers' self-efficacy and further improve the students' academic performance

Despite experiencing the drastic negative effects of the Covid -19 pandemic, the graph of academic performance continued to rise. It is anticipated that if the strategic plan is improved as per the recommendations of the school administrators, the academic performance may continue to rise till the grade 7 national examination pass rate reaches 100%. The researchers believe that other strategies (such as encouraging parental involvement) may also be implemented to continue to improve the academic performance of the learners.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Option 1:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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