**Examining Novice Teacher Performance Through Support Structures: Insights from Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory in Tanzania**

**Abstract**

Teachers' preparation in Tanzania has long been affected by systemic challenges, particularly within initial teachers' education institutions. At the same time, the growing student population has intensified the demand for qualified educators, placing considerable strain on existing training systems. This study investigates the influence of support services on novice teachers’ performance in public secondary schools in Njombe Town Council, Tanzania, through the lens of Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory. The study employed a quantitative research design whereby data were collected from 62 novice teachers across 14 purposively selected schools. In this study, descriptive statistics, reliability testing and multiple regression analysis were used to examine the impact of various supports construct More Knowledgeable Others (MKO), Scaffolding (S), Social Interaction (SI), Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as well as Cultural and Institutional Context (CIC) on teachers’ performance. Structured questionnaires were used to collect quantifiable data, which clearly led to actively achieving the study’s objective. Results in this study, especially when MKO, S and SI are applied, revealed that scaffolding, mentoring and collegial collaboration significantly enhance performance, and that scaffolding is the most influential predictor. However, ZPD and CIC did not demonstrate statistically significant effects, indicating that novice teachers play a more indirect or context-dependent role. It was found that broader constructs like ZPD and CIC were not statistically significant predictors of performance, suggesting that theoretical support frameworks need practical translation to yield tangible results. The study concludes that structured school-level support mechanisms are critical in bridging the theory-practice gap among early-career teachers. The study recommends the institutionalisation of mentorship programs, consistent in-service training and collaborative learning environments to enhance novice teacher performance and retention. These findings offer actionable insights for education policymakers aiming to improve teaching quality, especially in secondary education.

**Keywords:** NoviceTeachers, Support Services, Teacher Performance, Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, Public Secondary Schools, Tanzania

**Introduction**

The zone of proximal development (ZPD), as defined by Vygotsky, was designed with the development of children in mind. It depicts how children's cognitive development progresses. Vygotsky stated that, rather than utilising a static measure such as an IQ score to determine a student’s educational aptitude, a developmental measure was required. In this case, as the student gains proficiency, the expert gradually withdraws assistance until the student can complete the task on his or her own (Raslan, 2024).

Vygotsky in 1978 proposed the interactionist theory that explains how social interaction is crucial to a child’s cognitive development. The theory’s emphasis on learner-centeredness may significantly empower language teachers if implemented wisely into the L2 Curriculum (Alharbi & Jamilah, 2023). Similarly, the concept behind the ‘knowledgeable other’ is drawn from the work on Actor-Network Theory and Connectivism. The knowledge, in this sense, does not exist in any individual’s head or in the technology, but it is entangled within the social and material context in which the knowledge is obtained. Instead, the individual constructs a ‘mental map’ of the route in locating the knowledge they seek. Each ‘knowledgeable other’ is a connection point to a much wider network of trusted ‘knowledgeable others’ (Barry, 2022).

Teachers' preparation in Tanzania has long been affected by systemic challenges, particularly within initial teachers' education institutions (Mosenda, 2024). At the same time, the growing student population has intensified the demand for qualified educators, placing considerable strain on existing training systems. As noted by TanzaniaInvest (2024), high enrollment and a shortage of qualified trainers have resulted in the graduation of inadequately prepared teachers. Compounding the problem, budgetary limitations have curtailed essential practical training, leaving many novice teachers ill-equipped for real classroom environments (Hardman et al., 2021 and Saleem et al., 2020). To address the challenge of teacher shortage in secondary and other levels of education, the government always employs novice teachers from time to time to minimise the gap. However, the effectiveness of these teachers is said to be affected by poor support mechanisms (Mosenda, 2024; TanzaniaInvest, 2024), as it is explained that novice teachers require structured guidance to bridge the theory-practice gap (Pogodzinski, 2017). In supporting this reality, Hardman et al. (2021) and Taylor (2023) justify that early-career teachers in Tanzania often face a range of difficulties upon deployment, especially on the questions of classroom management, curriculum delivery, community engagement, lack of institutional mentorship and highly unstructured induction programs.

In educational institutions, teachers are a core part of the management team. The implementation of the main task of a teacher cannot be separated from the ability of a teacher to master knowledge, skills, and attitudes in carrying out their duties as professional educators (Hermawan et al., 2023). However, in the absence of systemic support, many newly employed teachers are left to navigate these demands independently, leading to professional isolation and reduced morale. This situation is not witnessed in Tanzania only, it is explained that the same environment face novice teachers in almost all the sub-sahara African countries, whereby it has been confirmed that teacher development is in insufficient condition as professional support and poorly coordinated situations are common (Haßler et al., 2021; Junaid, 2015).

Despite growing awareness of the need to support early-career teachers, Tanzanian public schools often lack institutional frameworks to provide mentorship, emotional support and in-service pedagogical training (Mng’ong’o, 2016). This neglect has been linked to high levels of burnout and attrition, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Hardman et al., 2021; Mng’ong’o, 2016 and Soko, 2014). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) in Tanzania stood at 1:57 in 2023, except in five regions only including Njombe, whose PTR ranged about 1:45. This favourable ratio positions Njombe as a relevant site for studying novice teachers’ performance in relatively optimal staffing conditions (Mosenda, 2024).

Besides these significances, research in the district shows that novice teachers face housing shortages, salary delays, lack of in-service training, lack of accommodation assistance and professional seminars, which negatively affect their morale and teaching efficacy at large (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011 and Mng’ong’o, 2016). These findings align with broader evidence that structured induction, mentorship and support mechanisms enhance teacher retention and student outcomes (Kutsyuruba et al., 2013; Saleem et al., 2020). Given its relatively favourable PTR and observable outcomes from informal support practices, Njombe provides a compelling case for examining how institutionalised support could further improve novice teachers’ performance across Tanzania. This study aimed to investigate the influence of support services on novice teachers’ performance in public secondary schools in Njombe Town Council, Tanzania, through the lens of Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory.

**Methodology**

To examine the influence of support services on novice teachers’ performance, the study used a quantitative research approach. A total of 14 public secondary schools from Njombe District, with a target population of 62 purposefully sampled teachers, were respondents in this study, based on the presence of novice teachers meeting as a specific study's sampling criteria. These were teachers with five years of teaching experience or less. The time experience criteria were specifically selected based on the OECD (2018). The idea that novice teachers are those with five years of experience or less, exhibit a strong sense of social commitment and openness to innovation, making them especially responsive to well-structured support programs and professional development opportunities. The respondents' selection process was facilitated through the Njombe District Secondary Education Officer (DSEO), who officially communicated with school heads to identify eligible teachers. This targeted sampling procedure actively ensured that data were collected from suitable teachers, hence valid data for reliable findings. On the one hand, of method of data collection, structured questionnaires were used to collect quantifiable data, which clearly led to actively achieving the study’s objective.

**Results**

Table 1 summarises the respondent profile of the 62 respondents. The table shows that the majority of the respondents were female, whose number reached 33 (53.2%), while males made up 29 (46.8%). Regarding education level, 35 (56.5%) respondents had undergraduate degrees while 27 (43.5%) had diplomas. About working experience, 22 (35.5%) had 1–2 years, 12 (19.4%) had 5 years, 15 (24.2%) had less than 1 year, and 13 (21.0%) had 3–4 years of teaching experience.

**Table 1: Profile of the Respondents**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **Frequency (n)** | **Percentage (%)** |
| *Sex* |  |  |
| Male | 29 | 46.8 |
| Female | 33 | 53.2 |
| ***Education*** |  |  |
| Diploma | 27 | 43.5 |
| Undergraduate | 35 | 56.5 |
| ***Experience*** |  |  |
| Less than 1 year | 15 | 24.2 |
| 1-2 years | 22 | 35.5 |
| 3-4 years | 13 | 21.0 |
| 5 years | 12 | 19.4 |

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients and normality test results for the key variables in the study. The mean values for the variables ranged from 2.47 to 3.48, indicating that, on average, novice teachers moderately agreed with statements regarding support services and their impact on performance. The highest mean score was observed for MKO at 3.48 (SD = 0.4974). This signifies that participants strongly acknowledged the presence and influence of mentors and experienced colleagues in their teaching practice. According to the table, CIC had the lowest mean of 2.47 (SD = 0.3985), reflecting lower levels of satisfaction with institutional-level support such as district follow-up, salary delivery and professional development policies. In terms of internal consistency, all variables demonstrated acceptable to high reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from 0.765 to 0.878. On the side of the reliability coefficient, the table suggests that the highest reliability was noted for PITP with an alpha of 0.878, confirming strong coherence among the items measuring this construct. In this category, the lowest reliability was found in CIC at 0.765. The Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, the table indicates that all variables were approximately normally distributed, with p-values greater than 0.05, ranging from p = 0.065 (S) to p = 0.264 (SI). These results confirm that the assumption of normality was met, justifying the use of parametric statistical tests, including regression analysis, in subsequent sections of the study.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics, Reliability and Normality Tests**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Mean | Std. Deviation | Cronbach alpha | Shapiro-Wilk test |
| MKO | 3.4758 | 0.4974 | 0.814 | 0.981(p=0.231) |
| ZPD | 2.7379 | 0.5209 | 0.802 | 0.977(p=0.163) |
| S | 2.8484 | 0.4881 | 0.843 | 0.969(p=0.065) |
| SI | 3.2016 | 0.5017 | 0.790 | 0.982(p=0.264) |
| CIC | 2.4677 | 0.3985 | 0.765 | 0.975(p=0.138) |
| PITP | 2.7484 | 0.5645 | 0.878 | 0.973(p=0.097) |

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis assessing the influence of various support services on novice teachers’ performance. Results showed that the regression model was statistically significant, F(5, 56) = 24.17, p < 0.001, indicating that the combined predictors reliably explain variation in novice teacher performance. The model accounts for 63.7% of the variance in performance (R² = 0.637) with an adjusted R² of 0.614, suggesting strong explanatory power.

It is also found that the Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.78 indicates no autocorrelation in the residuals, affirming the validity of the regression estimates. Multicollinearity diagnostics further confirmed the reliability of the model, with tolerance values ranging from 0.618 to 0.728 and VIF values between 1.373 and 1.617—all within acceptable limits, signifying no multicollinearity among predictors.

On the other hand of More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), it was revealed that among the predictors showed a positive and significant effect on performance (B = 0.284, t = 3.23, p = 0.002). This amount indicates that mentoring support and guidance from experienced colleagues enhance novice teachers’ effectiveness. Also, it was found that Scaffolding (S) emerged as the strongest predictor (B = 0.352, t = 4.46, p < 0.001), emphasising the importance of structured school-level interventions such as in-service training and access to teaching materials.

Based on the Social Interaction (SI), findings showed that it significantly contributes to performance (B = 0.201, t = 2.64, p = 0.011), underlining the value of collegial collaboration and professional inclusion. In contrast, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), though conceptually relevant, did not significantly predict performance in this model (B = -0.161, t = -0.149, p = 0.263), suggesting its indirect or context-dependent influence. Similarly, Cultural and Institutional Context (CIC) showed no significant contribution (B = 0.165, t = 0.15, p = 0.056), possibly due to the limited direct impact of broader policy structures on immediate teaching practices.

**Table 3: Regression coefficients of the Influence of Support Services on Novice Teachers’ Performance**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Predictor | B | Std.Error | T | P | Tolerance | VIF |
| (Constant) | 1.232 | 0.281 | 4.38 | p<0.001 | - | - |
| MKO | 0.284 | 0.088 | 3.23 | P=0.002 | 0.702 | 1.425 |
| ZPD | -0.161 | 0.143 | -0.149 | P=0.263 | 0.675 | 1.481 |
| S | 0.352 | 0.079 | 4.46 | p<0.001 | 0.618 | 1.617 |
| SI | 0.201 | 0.076 | 2.64 | P=0.011 | 0.728 | 1.373 |
| CIC | 0.165 | 1.114 | 0.15 | P=0.056 | 0.681 | 1.468 |
|  | Adjusted | | F (5,57 =24.17, P<0.001, Durbin Watson=1.78 | | | |

**Discussion**

To a large extent, findings in this study correspond with other studies conducted in other parts of the World. The study revealed that mentoring, represented by the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), significantly predicts improved teaching performance. This result strongly relates to the study of Ingersoll & Strong (2011), who discovered that induction and mentoring programs have a substantial positive impact on novice teachers' performance and retention.

The results that scaffolding is the strongest predictor of novice teacher performance, suggesting that school-level, hands on support has the most immediate effect as found in this study, this result directly relate with the work of Mng’ong’o (2016), who found that minimal support services such as orientation sessions and local mentorship, significantly uplift the morale and classroom effectiveness of early-career teachers in Tanzania.

In another way, Haßler et al., (2021) and Papi (2018), pointed out that professional development initiatives across Sub-Saharan Africa often lack systemic coherence, and that when structured well, they have measurable benefits on teacher quality. This reinforces the high reliability and influence of constructs like scaffolding (S) and social interaction (SI) as revealed in this current study.

Also, this study found that Social Interaction significantly predicts teacher performance, affirming the role of peer support in effective professional adjustment. The results correspond with the study of Pogodzinski (2017), as reported, emphasising that strong collegial relationships and inclusion in school decision-making processes are vital for novice teachers' sense of belonging and job satisfaction.

Moreover, the study conducted by Kutsyuruba et al., ( 2013), found that early-career teacher retention is enhanced when structured mentorship and induction programs are embedded into school culture. This is echoed in the current results, where it has been found that both MKO and SI showed significant effects, highlighting the long-term value of embedded peer support systems. According to Taylor (2023), new teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa often struggle due to a mismatch between theoretical preparation and the practical demands of classrooms, and this gap is worsened by insufficient institutional follow-up. This might explain why the Cultural and Institutional Context (CIC) variable in the current study was not a significant predictor; policies may exist, but their impact is diluted when implementation is weak or inconsistent.

Moreover, Junaid (2015), argued that ineffective coordination and inconsistent delivery of in-service training programs across African countries result in negligible classroom improvements. Similarly, in the present study where it was found that broader constructs like Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and CIC were not statistically significant predictors of performance, suggesting that theoretical support frameworks need practical translation to yield tangible results.

As not enough, the work of Hardman et al., (2021), commented that limitations in teacher preparation, particularly the lack of hands-on practicum experiences, contribute to the challenges faced by new teachers. This substantiates the strong role found for school-based scaffolding as revealed by this present research, as novice teachers rely on structured and in-practice learning to build competence.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of structured support services in enhancing novice teachers’ performance in public secondary schools in Njombe, Tanzania. Grounded in Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory. The results reveal that support mechanisms such as mentoring from More Knowledgeable Others (MKO), scaffolding through school-level interventions and social interactions significantly influence the effectiveness of early-career teachers. Among these factors, scaffolding emerged as the most robust predictor of teacher performance, confirming that access to in-service training, teaching resources and collaborative opportunities directly empowers novice educators in their professional transition.

Conversely, variables related to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Cultural and Institutional Context (CIC) did not show statistically significant effects, suggesting that broader institutional policies and contextual dynamics may have an indirect or long-term influence on novice teachers' effectiveness. The favourable pupil-teacher ratio in Njombe and the observed positive impacts of even minimal support underscore the potential for institutionalising these services nationwide. Overall, the study affirms that strategic investment in support structures is essential not only for novice teacher retention but also for sustainable improvements in education quality.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and local education authorities prioritise the institutionalisation of structured support services across all secondary schools. This should include formal mentorship programs where novice teachers are paired with experienced colleagues (MKO), regular in-service training sessions tailored to early-career challenges and the provision of adequate teaching resources. Emphasis should also be placed on creating an inclusive professional culture that fosters collaboration and peer learning to maximise the benefits of social interaction among teachers.

Furthermore, policymakers should re-evaluate existing institutional frameworks to incorporate novice teacher induction as a mandatory component of school operations. This can be achieved by developing national guidelines for school-based mentorship, allocating resources for school-level teacher development and reinforcing accountability mechanisms to monitor the delivery of support services. Given that the institutional context did not yield a strong direct influence, reforms should focus on translating policy intent into tangible school-level practices. Ultimately, improving the support ecosystem for novice teachers will not only enhance their performance but also contribute to broader educational equity and student achievement outcomes.

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