

HOW THE PROXIMITY TO A SCHOOL AFFECTS THE EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF LOWER PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS IN RURAL MWANZA, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

Learning starts at quite an early age, as soon as cognitive functions of a child become active. This never stops until old age. It is necessary to engage children in activities in childhood that will enable them to develop relative to their age. A school is the ideal setting to achieve this. However, the even distribution of schools, especially in rural areas, remains a challenge. This paper has proposed investigating how proximity to a school affects the educational and social development of lower primary school pupils in rural Mwanza, Tanzania. The study applied a descriptive study design. The target population was all the ECDE centres and primary schools within rural Mwanza. A sample of 106 participants was randomly selected from 22 schools. Data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. The collected data was analyzed using SPSS. The study came to two conclusions. First, it found out that the proximity to a school affects the social development of a child. They also found out that a school's proximity affects a child's educational development.

Keywords: Child's Social Development, Preschool, Lower Primary School, Distance to School, and Child's Educational Development

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Learning is a dynamic process that starts as soon as one can communicate at an early age. Not only does learning occur in an organized formal setting, but it also begins in an informal home setting when a child starts pronouncing their first word, which is often "mama." However, the school system presents an opportunity for everyone to develop not only in terms of knowledge but also socially. This opportunity is often available starting from early childhood and never ceases even in old age. A school offers an appropriate environment that is safe for learners to engage in knowledge acquisition and interact with their peers (Kutsyuruba, Klinger & Hussain, 2015).

For a child to properly develop physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially, they should be presented to a learning centre at the appropriate age for preschool education

(Bridges, 2017). This has been proven as a prerequisite to a child's general development and a determinant to their future educational and social outlook. Typically, the preschool age is considered between three and six years (Bridges, 2017). However, preschool remains optional in most African countries (Achola & Pillai, 2016). There is also a glaring disparity in preschool attendance between children in urban and rural areas (Achola & Pillai, 2016).

A majority of those in urban areas within the preschool age attend these schools. However, a considerable number of their rural counterparts only wait until they are seven years old. This disparity may be linked to schools' distribution, including early childhood development education (ECDE) centres in these areas (Achola & Pillai, 2016). Urban areas often have at least one school within a locality, and there is a variety of schools from which parents can choose to take their children. The situation in rural areas is quite different. There are very few schools widely apart, with two or three villages sharing a primary or secondary school (Achola & Pillai, 2016). Getting ECDE centres in these areas is also not a guarantee.

A perusal of literature revealed very little concerning the effect the school's distance has on a student. However, most of the research points to the importance of early childhood and primary education to a child. These studies are of the consensus that early childhood education is paramount in a child's development (Britto et al., 2017; Black et al., 2017; Kim, Sherraden, Huang & Clancy, 2015). Therefore, this research seeks to find out how the proximity to a school affects the educational and social development of lower primary school pupils in rural Mwanza, Tanzania.

1.2 Theoretical foundation

This study forms its theoretical base on justice as fairness theory. John Rawl developed this theory. He strongly supported the principles of justice to guide contemporary social order (Follesdal, 2015). Through his approach, Rawl developed a framework for legitimately using political power. He points out that legitimacy is the bare minimum of moral acceptability. Justice should be incorporated to ensure the maximum use of political power. With this in mind, social institutions should be arranged in a morally best way for the beneficiaries (Follesdal, 2015).

Rawl structures justice as the fairness context in particular understandings of free and equitable people and fair society. He sees it as overcoming the contradictions between the concepts of freedom and equality that have been illustrated by both the socialist criticism of liberal democracy and the conservative critique of the modern welfare state (Follesdal, 2015). Rawl maintains that the most equitable and the most logical view of these basic principles of democracy is justice as fairness (Follesdal, 2015). He further claims that justice, as equity offers the best possible understanding of justice in modern political theory to prevailing utilitarianism traditions (Follesdal, 2015). Therefore, education at all levels should be designed to remove external obstacles of any nature. This prevents children from marginalized and disadvantaged areas from taking advantage of inborn talent, which speeds up their social development.

The concept stresses the equitable allocation of all essential services. They include rights, jobs, and wealth-creating opportunities. All people in society will equally satisfy their needs

by restricting the unjust distribution of assets, services, and opportunities to the least favoured ones (Eryilmaz, 2019; Follesdal, 2015). Socioeconomic disparities can be structured to favor the disadvantaged to the maximum degree. Therefore, they should be connected and available to everyone in terms of equitable allocation of resources and services. By making preschool education accessible to all kids from all countries, long-distance disadvantages may be eliminated.

Further, the theory supports that children should have equal opportunities in schooling stages regardless of their background. This indicates the establishment of optimal conditions for achieving the vision of equal opportunity. It must be accessible by everyone to the form and standard of education that suits them (Eryilmaz, 2019). According to Rawl, denying a child the chance to adequate preschool learning amounts to discrimination. This equates to inequality in offering education opportunities (Eryilmaz, 2019). This theory applies to the research study since all children from disadvantaged backgrounds can participate in and attend a school like the other children. This is by eliminating the long-distance obstacle from home to school, thereby gaining equal opportunity.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The design proved to be advantageous to the study because of its simplicity and ease of administering. It is an appropriate design for educational fact-finding. Moreover, it yields vast information that is accurate on individuals' feelings, attitudes, opinions, interests, and problems (Atmowardoyo, 2018). It also provided the opportunity for the researcher to meet the respondents in person. This enabled the accurate gathering of data, getting their views, describing, analyzing, and interpreting the study's various features (Atmowardoyo, 2018).

This study's target population included all the pupils and teachers in ECDE centres and primary schools within rural Mwanza in Tanzania. From this population, a sample of ten ECDE centers and twelve primary schools were randomly selected. Stratified random sampling was used to determine a sample of the pupils and teachers from these schools. A total of 72 pupils and 34 teachers were picked for the study. This sample contained pupils and teachers from across all the classes within preschool and lower primary classes of grades one to three.

The research employed the mixed research methodology having both quantitative and qualitative data. Questionnaires were used to collect statistical data from the participants. This covered the quantitative feature of the study. Interviews were then used to gather the qualitative aspects of the study. The questionnaires had open-ended questions to capture the ideas and emotions about the issue being researched. Additionally, close-ended items were used to collect fixed facts (Krosnick, 2018).

A pilot study, which was not included in the actual survey, was used to check on the research instruments' validity and reliability. For data analysis, the researcher used the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) (Wagner III, 2019). Analysis of qualitative data was conducted through content analysis. This data was analyzed by grouping them into themes,

patterns, and subtopics. It was then presented in pie charts and percentages. Quantitative data was analyzed by measuring the numerical values and presented in descriptive statistics.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Demographic data

The respondents' demographic data were sought and grouped based on the gender, professional training, level of education, and experience of both the preschool and lower primary school teachers. Of all the teachers who took part in the study, 71% of the teachers were female, while 29% were male. Based on the professional qualifications, 66.7% of the teachers had a certificate in early childhood education, while 33.3% had a diploma in early childhood education. Teacher experience was categorized based on the teacher's level, either preschool or lower primary school teachers. In the lower primary, 50% of teachers had between one to five years of experience, 37.5 % had taught for less than one year, while 13.5% had more than six years of teaching experience. In preschool, 42% of the teachers had taught for four years, and more, 41% had three years of experience, while 17% of them had been teaching for less than two years.

3.2 How Proximity to a School Affects Pupils' Educational and Social Development

The study found out that most pupils in preschool (75%) needed to cover more than three kilometres to get to school daily. 15.3% of the pupils walked between one to three kilometers, while only 9.7% covered less than one kilometer to school. None of the schools under study had teachers' quotas within or near the school. Therefore, the teachers also had to cover a considerable distance to school. The average distance covered by the teachers from their home to school was 1.5 kilometers. The teachers' and pupils' common means of transport were walking or cycling, with more than 80% of both the teachers and pupils walking to school. The schools also lacked a feeding program. This means that both the teachers and pupils either had to go back to their homes for lunch or carry food to school.

3.3 Proximity to School and a Child's Social Development

The study sought to find out how the proximity to a school affected the pupils' social development. The researcher went through the schools' timetables to check how the pupils' time is allocated. It was realized that the schools had two breaks between when lessons started in the morning at eight and lunch break, which was at thirty minutes after midday in most of the schools. Each lesson took forty minutes, with two periods before the pupils were allowed to break. The two breaks took thirty minutes, with the short one being ten minutes and the long one lasting twenty minutes.

During lunchtime, the kids had to go home to have their lunch before coming back to school to continue their afternoon lessons. 50% of the kids who lived five kilometres away from school rarely returned to school after lunch, while 30% of those who lived within three to five kilometres from school did not attend the afternoon classes. Those who had homes relatively closer to the schools, within one and three kilometres, saw a higher turnout during all the lessons throughout the day, with only 10% missing out on the afternoon lessons. This study's

observation was that the only times the children would interact with one another freely was during the two breaks, at lunchtime as they walked home, and in the evening when they were done for the day. However, these interactions were very brief since the time-restricted breaks limited the kids.

During lunchtime, the children may not have interacted with one another because of the limited time allocated to walk the distance home and prepare lunch for themselves. This very little social interaction between the children, especially those who stayed far from school, significantly impacted their social development. Those who stayed close to school had more time to interact and play with their peers before they had to go back to class.

3.4 Proximity to School and Pupils' Academic Performance

The study intended to establish the effect of the distance a pupil covers to school has on their academic performance. The researcher requested to check the pupils' enrollment and attendance rate chosen for the study. 64.4 % of these pupils in preschool attended school regularly. In lower primary school, it was established that the pupils' attendance rate was 81.3%. It was also observed that 77.7% of the children in lower primary school who scored an average of 150 marks out of the possible 300marks in the four subsequent exams had gone through preschool. Only 5.55% of the students who scored below average had attended preschool while the rest had not attended preschool. It was also observed that the pupils' preschool attendance depended on how far their homes were from the ECDE centres. A majority of the parents who lived more than three kilometers from the ECDE centers chose not to take their children to preschool until they were old enough to join primary school.

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographics

There was an evident gender imbalance among the teachers in both preschool and lower primary school. There are generally more female teachers than their male colleagues. The deep etching of gender stereotypes is the main reason for this phenomenon. Generally, society perceives the handling of children of lower ages, especially before adolescence, to be a woman's job (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Therefore, it is considered strange for a man to take up a liking to careers that involve constant interaction with young children. Females' temperament is well suited to handle little kids (Mortensen & Barnett, 2015). They are considered to have a more emotional and practical attachment to children than men. This is because their biological and psychological build-up necessitates raising young ones (Raphael-Leff, 2018). Men are often not as patient with children. They will think twice before teaching children in preschool and lower primary (Xu & Waniganayake, 2018).

Teacher training is an essential aspect of ensuring that children get the right education and are adequately cared for while in the school setting. Preschool teachers need to engage in continuous professional development to improve their behavior to facilitate more engaging and productive child performance. It also allows teachers to enhance instructional content, teacher skills, and address difficulties in educating young children (Kraft, Blazar & Hogan, 2018). In addition to teacher-parent involvement, competent preschool teacher preparation is

essential in ensuring diverse student needs are met. Preschool teacher skill preparation helps foster the teacher's awareness of holistic child development. The main areas they will be aware of include cognitive skills, emotional and physical growth, spiritual exploitation, and self-expression (Kraft et al., 2019).

Therefore, early childhood educators' professional progress is vital to the consistency of experiences accorded to children. Teacher experience helps them better grasp the curriculum content. It also helps them to deal with individual learners and meet their particular needs successfully. Teacher experience lets teachers better understand child growth and early education issues, and provide all children with enhanced educational opportunities, particularly marginalized and poor ones.

4.2 How Proximity to a School Affects a Child's Social Development

The study findings indicate that the proximity to a school impacted a child's social development. Social development entails how a child develops friendships and other relationships. It may as well refer to how a child learns to handle conflict with their peers (Over, 2016). A child's ability to interact healthily with individuals around them is an essential determinant of how they will behave as they grow, from learning basic communication to resisting peer pressure as a teenager. The findings of this study resemble those by Yıldırım and Akamca (2017). Their study involved a sample of 35 disadvantaged preschool children from Turkey who had previously had no access to education. The children were then offered ten weeks of preschool education through which the study was conducted. Their research revealed that preschool, especially outdoor activities in this setting, improved children's cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, and motor skills. The researchers also acknowledge that every child needs adequate early childhood support for development. However, those children in disadvantaged communities are at the highest risk of not getting this support (Yıldırım & Akamca, 2017).

4.3 How Proximity to a School Affects Pupils' Academic Performance

This study established that the distance that a pupil has to travel to school impacts their academic performance. Mwanza's main economic activities are agriculture, livestock keeping, and fishing (Renatus, 2015). These activities are done on a small scale level and are often family-based. This means that every member of the family has to take part in running these activities. Children are also involved in farming activities at a relatively young age (Renatus, 2015). Therefore, parents in rural Mwanza would rather have their children stay at home and learn some of these activities until they are old enough to go to school on their own. This often leads to most children skipping preschool. The majority will only start school when they are at least seven years old at the primary school level (Achola & Pillai, 2016).

The skipping of the preschool stage is often detrimental to the child's assimilation into the education system. These children have not fully developed some social skills than their peers who went through preschool have, making them lag (Achola & Pillai, 2016). This generally explains why they tend to perform dismally academically.

Results from several studies are also comparable to this study's finding. One such study was conducted by Mhiliwa (2015). The researcher sought to find out how school distance affects secondary school students' performance in Makambo Town in Tanzania. Mhiliwa found that prolonged walking to schools affected students' performance negatively compared to those who stay within the school environment. Respondents to this study argued that longer distances made students tired by the time they reach school. Therefore, it takes them longer to get fully prepared for personal classes and lessons. Long distances also affected the performance and delivery of teachers as they teach (Mhiliwa, 2015).

Another study also confirmed that a child's linguistic development highly depended on the teacher (Justice, Jiang & Strasser, 2018). Most of the vocabularies a child uses are pegged on a teacher's behaviours that facilitate communication. Embracing strategies that will encourage a child to converse more and be more attentive during conversations are a definite way of developing a child's vocabulary.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In contemporary society, education is an essential aspect that ensures that everyone is on equivalence. Education can either be formal or informal. The school system offers an organized and proper way for individuals to learn. The organization is done in terms of age groups so that people may learn from their instructors and their peers. School is available to anyone of any age, ranging from a three-year-old child to even a ninety-year-old lady. Education offers a chance for learners to develop knowledge and social-wise. However, schools usually are not evenly distributed, and therefore learners often have to cover varying distances to get to them. For this reason, this study intended to establish the impact the proximity to a school has on the educational and social development of lower primary school pupils in rural Mwanza, Tanzania.

This study was guided by justice as fairness theory by John Rawl. The theory proposes the equitable sharing of resources by those in power to all individuals in society. Based on this principle, education should be designed so that external obstacles of any nature are cleared. These obstacles are predominantly those that hinder children from marginalized communities from getting an education. Rawl supports that all children should have equal opportunities, regardless of their background, at all schooling stages.

The study contained both qualitative and quantitative aspects, thus adopting a mixed research methodology. A descriptive research design was used for this research. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data from seventeen ECDE centres and seventeen primary schools. Two main results stood out from the study. First, the study concluded that proximity to school positively impacted a child's social development. Secondly, the study also concluded that proximity to a school positively impacted a child's academic performance, which is a great contributor to educational development.

There remains very little literature on this topic. The current study barely scratches the surface of this phenomenon. More research needs to be conducted on this topic, especially one that targets a more extensive study sample.

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