

## **A Rapid Appraisal of Poor Educational Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Navakholo Constituency, Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

Educational performance at any level of learning is a multi-variate function influenced by various factors such as access and enrolment to schools, ability to keep students in school till completion, actual academic coaching and holistic guiding and counselling of the learners. Educational performance in Navakholo constituency in Kenya has been on a decline during the past five to ten years. This observation was the gist of this study with the hope that insights from the research would help reverse the trend. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire administered to 170 boys and girls from two schools purposively sampled as they largely represent the outlook of most of the schools in the constituency. Results showed that other factors rather than access, enrolment and retention are responsible for poor performance in national examinations. Limited academic mentorship, inadequate learning resources, internal school culture and student-related challenges were particularly singled out. A multi-stakeholder and integrated approach is necessary toward enhancing student completion and performance in their studies. This paper discusses specifics in this regard.

**Key words:** Educational Performance, Challenges and Opportunities, Secondary Schools

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## 1. Introduction

Education is the centre of human capital. Education is widely seen as one of the most promising paths for individuals to realize better and more productive lives and as one of the primary drivers of national economic development. As a result, citizens and the government of Kenya have invested heavily in improving both access and quality of education. A 21<sup>st</sup> century education is about giving students the skills they need to succeed in the new world and help them grow their confidence to practice these skills but schools are unable to deliver resulting in a mismatch between formal education and industry (World Bank, 2018). While access to education has tremendously improved, being in school is not the same as learning (OECD, 2018). This may in part explain the current drive toward competence-based learning initiatives.

The strategic objective of Kenya's education system is to ensure equitable access, attendance, retention, attainment and achievement in education, science, research and technology by ensuring affordable education services (Republic of Kenya, 2015). Kenya has made progress in access and completion rate. By the year 2015 the enrolment rate at secondary level was 33.1% and completion rate at 73.8% (Republic of Kenya, 2015). Despite these achievements, Kenya's education sector has challenges of governance, management and administration leading to gaps in service delivery, learning outcomes, teacher management, competences and performance levels thus hindering the realization of education sector targets (World Bank, 2018). Among these challenges are unqualified teachers, poor infrastructure, inadequate payment of teachers, poor government monitoring, and inaccessibility to computer learning (Frederiksen, 2018). Other challenges include inadequate strategies for teacher development, uncoordinated monitoring and evaluation of education outcomes, weak linkages between education and labour markets, low progression from primary to secondary and from secondary to tertiary and lack of guidelines to address cross cutting issues that affect learning outcomes such as poverty, hunger, conflicts and emergencies (World Bank, 2018). To a large extent, formal education has focussed exclusively on academic performance without paying attention to development of skills necessary for the nation's development. These issues continue to challenge the relevance, quality and equity of Kenya's education sector (Glennerster *et al.*, 2011).

The Kenyan education sector has had a series of structural reforms over the years that have been aimed at improving various aspects in the education system. For example, the government implemented free primary education in 2003 and free day secondary education in 2008

(Republic of Kenya, 2014). The government also instituted the Education Management Information System (EMIS) in 2014 as a monitoring tool to collect timely, accurate and reliable data on school enrolment and related infrastructure, hence boost planning. These notwithstanding, challenges still abound against the realization of the desired goals, and particularly in rural public schools. While the government should be commended for its policy of 100% transition from primary school to secondary school, transition from secondary to university education is severely constrained by poor performance, particularly in rural public schools.

Makokha (2016) reported the Free Day Secondary Fees Policy has had a positive effect on access as well as transition from primary to secondary school but had no effect on performance in KCSE. Despite efforts by various stakeholders to improve Kenya's education sector, challenges of quality, equity and access persist. Kenya's education sector has not improved much over many decades due to lack of political commitment, inadequate financial resources, stakeholder engagement at both local and national levels and the general lack of commitment to implement education policies. In terms of completion rates, data indicates more completion rates for boys than for girls and that tuition was the main reason for the drop out for girls. Poverty, pregnancy and early marriages are listed as other causes of drop out for girls (Mudemb, 2013; Lugonzo *et al*, 2017). Culturally when resources within the family are scarce girls get disadvantaged as boys get favoured to go to school unlike girls.

This aspect of finances can be corroborated by Githaka's (2018) study on the influence of educational subsidies on completion rates in public day secondary schools in Kitui County. The study found that in spite of the subsidies, completion was as low as 72.8 per cent, falling far below the government's expectation of 98 per cent. The findings revealed that, the funds were inadequate to keep a student in school for a whole year and equally, teaching and learning materials were inadequate. Boys recorded higher completion rates over girls (Githaka, 2018). A similar study by Imbovah *et al* (2018) in Meru County which focused on completion rates with regard to teaching and learning resources found that, teaching and learning resources contribute to a great extent to the students' completion rates in secondary schools in Kenya. Their study agrees with Enos (2003) who argues that student enrolment rate in public secondary schools is higher than the available teaching and learning resources. This lowers the students' motivation leading to failure to complete their education.

Overall students' performance in KCSE is poor among secondary school students. In 2017 only 15% of students scored a C+ in KCSE with girls being less likely than boys to score a C+. The performance was weakest in district and rural school and public schools where only 11% of the students scored a C+ compared to National schools with 43% scoring a C+. The proportion of boys achieving at least a C+ was twice the proportion for girls (Republic of Kenya, 2018). During the year 2019, Navakholo district schools performed dismally with a mean score of 4.36 in KCSE. The differences in performance across these schools partly reflect differences in facilities, teachers and other resources but it also reflects the different levels of academic preparation of students admitted to this school. Considine and Zappala (2002) opine that social economic status (SES) of parents is a major source of educational inequality in poor economies. Other factors cited that are closely related to the SES are: type of school; absenteeism; gender; ethnicity (in the context of immigrant families); geographical location and housing type. Majority of the learners in sampled schools for this study can be classified as coming from households having low socioeconomic status.

Mugambi (2015) reported that both school and student related factors did influence performance in a study in Lang'ata Division, Nairobi County. Thus unless these factors are taken seriously by all players, students will continue to perform poorly in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education. This paper has attempted to shade light on this challenge and proposed learner and teacher actions at the school level that could reverse this trend using two schools in Navakholo constituency as case studies.

## **2. Methodology**

This study took place in one girl's boarding school and one mixed school in Navakholo Constituency. The names of the school have been concealed to protect them against any unintended publicity. These schools are among the oldest and relatively well established in the constituency. Their selection for this study was purposively done because of the poor academic performance in KSCE they have posted in the past several years, which is a largely a reflection of the situation other schools in the constituency. Analysing determinants of poor performance would help inform operational and policy changes toward improved performance and completion rates. Seventy-two and 100 students from the girls and mixed schools respectively responded to the same structured questionnaire administered by the authors. Contextual analysis showed no significant difference in responses in the case of being in a girl's or mixed school, or

being in a boarding of day school; hence the decision to handle the responses as one complete whole. Data was subjected to descriptive statistics to yield general trends that could inform the design of requisite interventions.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Socio-economic background of respondents**

Majority of respondents (71.2%) started in form one and had thus stayed in the school for about 4 years. A remnant had transferred from other schools. This finding agrees with those of Ministry of Education (2015) which reported that secondary completion rates have improved tremendously with the introduction of Free Day Secondary Education. Further, the majority (84.9%) of form four students were aged 17-19 years, which being the expected age at this level suggests that enrolment takes place in good time. The demographic characteristics of the parents speak about the students' socio-economic backgrounds and how this could support their schooling. In terms of education, more fathers than mothers had at least a college or university education. This finding is expected noting that traditions in this society do favour boys as far as education is concerned.

Formal employment was the main source of income followed by business. Since most households depend on subsistence farming in this constituency, the aspect of formal employment was attributed to students being enrolled from the entire Kakamega County, with parents having different forms of income generation avenues. The role of income in keeping students in school, and particularly girls cannot be overemphasised as observed by among others (Githaka, 2018). Students with fee arrears are often send home, thus disrupting their schooling. Considine and Zappala (2002) reported that education performance is usually related to parents' socio-economic status. Imbovah *et al* (2018) further reported that inadequate teaching/learning resources do negatively contribute to a great extent to students' completion rates especially for the girl child. In order to improve retention, schools should not be sending students home for non-essential items. The same should apply where parents and schools enter agreements on how and when to settle fees.

## 3.2 Influencers of Performance

### 3.2.1 Class Attendance

Consistency in class attendance is viewed as a precursor to good performance. Majority of students from both categories of school (84.9%) rarely missed school. Day scholars were however more likely to miss school. This gives credence to the importance of boarding schools in keeping students and in particular girls in school and away from a myriad of distractions common at home and community environment. However, the dilemma is why this does not seem to boost performance. Where absenteeism was indicated, lack of school fees (56.4%) was the main reason. Sickness contributed to about 32.7%. Other reasons were minor and often involved very few students. Imbovah *et al* (2018) reported that apart from fees it is those non-fee costs such as uniform, development fees and other costs that do keep students from school. While the government subsidizes fees these other costs do keep on coming up and do keep students out of school for one reason or another. This is commendable considering the fact that in this constituency early marriages and early pregnancy have been cited as the main causes for girls drop out during secondary education. (Wangia *et al*, 2019).

Parents and guardians need to be capacitated on more reliable ways of getting school fees away from subsistence farming. The county governments where the students hail from should also enhance the capacity of scholarship funds to keep all students in school within the framework of free primary and secondary education. The amounts needed are often very meagre compared to what both national and county governments spend on hospitality, leisure and non-essential engagements. Through pro-active austerity measures and financial discipline all students can be kept in school across the nation.

When asked how they made up for lost time 52.9% indicated finding time to study from home, the distractions there notwithstanding. About 27.1% attended private tuition, which comes at a cost (Table 1). Except for the boys, girls did their studying at home from the main house because culture does not allow them to have separate houses. The above finding does illustrate that students in secondary schools put efforts for excellent performance and do apply various mechanisms in order to excel in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination.

**Table 1: Ways of Making up for Absenteeism (n=70) (% Frequency)**

Factor	% F	% F
	School A	School B
1. Do nothing	2.9	3.7
2. Find time to study at home	52.9	49.5
3. Engage friends during weekends or holidays	17.1	20.4
4. Attend private tuition	27.1	26.4

### 3.2.2 Consequences of missing classes

If for any reason students are late or absent for classes, 98.6% indicated that punishment would be inevitable. At 65.8%, cleaning the school compound was the most popular punishment followed by caning (although it has been banned as per the education policy) (Table 2).

**Table 2: Forms of Punishment for Lateness at School**

Punishment type	School A	School B
	% F	% F
Sent back home	2.7	11.6
Canning or corporal punishment	20.5	25.6
Cleaning school compound	65.8	48.2
Washing toilet	4.1	9.1
Doing mathematics	1.4	0.6
Students reaction to punishments	School A	School B
	% F	% F
Feelings of depression	5.5	11
Hinders academic concentration	28.8	29.9
Hinders time management	4.1	7.9
Demoralized	37.0	34.8
Missing	24.7	12.2

The use of mathematics as a punishment tool is also a misplaced philosophy as it paints mathematics negatively, which may impact on students' passion for the subject and hence overall performance. Similarly cleaning the school compound and washing toilets are a noble

task, which must be nurtured among learners as part of their natural contribution to enhanced public health, household hygiene and environmental health. What needs to be considered is the justice behind punishment and its effects on the self-worth, self esteem and ultimately lost learning time. Punishments that are perceived as unjust and whose cause may be out of the students' control are likely to cause psychological effects that ultimately exacerbate poor performance. Wangia *et al* (2019) reported that students develop low esteem when parents and teachers use abusive language when rebuking and or mentoring them. This ultimately leads to lack of motivation and results in poor performance. Under good practice, cleaning of the school compound should be the responsibility of support staff. Students can only complement these duties as part of their mentoring. However, keeping their dormitories clean should be the sole responsibility of the students.

### **3.2.3 Repeating Classes and its Effects**

At 67% and 61% scores for school A and B respectively, repeating classes was most prevalence at form three, and least prevalence at form 1 (Table 3). The feelings of having to repeat classes were myriad and almost uniformly scored. While 32% indicated they would change school, 25% felt it was okay, while 26% felt it was demoralizing. Those who said they would not report back to school were 13%. Adding this figure to those who will change school seems to be indicative of the stigma felt when one is considered academically inadequate. About 84.9% of the students indicated that it was voluntary, with poor performance being the main criteria used to encourage repeating classes. At form three most students would have settled in their school environment and due to the combined effect of peer pressure and psycho-physiological development, much time is spent on emotional things, which often cause decline in performance. At form four, the reality of final examination and eventual exiting the school would have sunk in. Peer counselling though important at all levels, needs to be intensified and regularized in form three.

Although students indicated that repeating class was voluntary, this may not be the case all the time. Most schools force weak students to repeat so as not to lower the school mean score, contrary to the Ministry of Education Guidelines. Students tend to change schools under such circumstances.



**Table 3: Repeating Classes and its effect on students**

<b>Prevalence of Repeating Classes</b>	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>
	<b>% F</b>	<b>% F</b>
1. Form One	1.4	1.8
2. Form Two	5.5	6.1
3. Form Three	67.1	61.6
4. Form Four	19.2	20.1
5. Missing	6.8	9.8
<b>Effect of repeating a class</b>	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>
	<b>% Score</b>	<b>% Score</b>
1. Positively accepted	25.0	29.1
2. Demoralization	26.2	29.6
3. Will not report back to school	13.1	10.2
4. Will change school	32.1	23.0
5. Others	3.6	8.2

### 3.2.4 Students' Performance and Attitude to Various Subjects

In terms of overall class performance, 32% were pleased thereof while 67% were not. Majority of the girls (68.5%) were not willing to indicate their reasons for not being pleased with their performance. For acknowledging existence of a problem means that they are aware of the reasons but are not free to articulate them. Again this calls for individualized and confidential counselling in this regard. At 18.6% and 17.1% mathematics was almost equally rated as worst in both schools. Inherent in this rating could be the use of mathematics as punishment for certain misdemeanours. Overall science subjects (Physics, chemistry and biology) were perceived as the worst subjects in both schools, while the arts including languages were considered the favourites (Table 4). Negative perception about other science subjects could be attributed to lack of competent teachers and or poor teaching methods thereof. In both schools, English appears to be the students' favourite subject. But alone, the career choices for the students are significantly constrained. Home Science, Computer Science and Music, though having professional and life-skill value appear to be marginalised, a factor attributed to lack of teachers and subject appreciation by schools. From a policy level, it could also mean that the Science, Technology,

Engineering and Mathematics stimulus programme (STEM) may have failed to realise its objective.

**Table 4: Students' Favourite and Worst Subjects (%)**

Subject	School A		School B	
	Favourite	Worst	Favourite	Worst
1. Mathematics	11.0	18.6	9.4	17.1
2. English	16.1	4.9	16.9	2.8
1. Kiswahili	10.6	9.3	11.6	7.2
2. Business Studies	2.3	4.4	9.8	4.1
3. Physics	1.8	6.4	2.2	11.1
4. Chemistry	6.9	21.1	7.1	16.6
5. Biology	7.3	17.2	6.9	14.9
6. CRE	17.0	3.9	13.4	4.5
7. Agriculture	5.5	1.5	8.6	3.6
8. Geography	6.9	5.9	6.3	6.6
9. History	7.8	5.9	4.7	11.1
10. Home science	4.1	0.5	1.8	0.2
11. Computer science	2.8	--	1.2	--
12. Music	--	0.5	--	0.2

Similar findings were reported by Wangia *et al* (2019) in two other different schools in the same constituency. Schools face many challenges among them the lack of teachers, unqualified teachers, poor remuneration of teachers, and low morale of teachers among others. These finding agree with those by Frederiksen (2018) who reported the same among educational institutions in developing countries. OECD (2018) supports these findings when he articulated that being in school is not the same as learning and thus schools should focus on both quantity and quality. Mugambi (2015) reported that both school and student related factors affect performance. Makokha (2016) reported that although subsidized fees have aided completion rate it has no impact on performance.

### 3.2.5 Role of Different Stakeholders in Boosting Academic Performance

At a score of at least 55% students rated the role of parents and guardians highest when it came to paying their fees, which is the expected obligation (Table 5). Teaching was perceived as being exclusively the role of schools, which gives credence to the importance of well trained and adequate teachers. Teachers, parents and guardians were seen as key in providing academic resources and materials.

**Table 5: Role of different stakeholders in Boosting Academic Performance**

Stakeholders	Parents or Guardians		School Teachers		Siblings		Church or Mosque	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Paying fees	58.9	55.5	--	--	--	0.6	2.7	1.8
General encouragement	1.4	4.3	--	--	16.4	34.1	--	18.9
Moral & Social support	9.6	15.2	43.8	48.2	50.7	43.3	32.9	9.1
Provides academic resources	6.8	9.8	15.1	17.1	--	--	--	--
Guiding & Counselling	15.1	9.8	5.5	6.7	--	--	5.5	3.7
Provides basic needs	8.2	3.7	--	--	--	--	--	--
Teaching	--	--	34.2	26.8	--	--	--	--
Spiritual support	--	--	--	--	--	--	54.8	62.2

Moral and social support was most provided all stakeholders listed in the questionnaire (i.e. Parents, guardians, siblings and religious institutions). Spiritual support was seen as exclusively the domain of religious institutions. It is interesting to note that parents and guardians were more important in counselling than teachers, who spend much more time with students. This is a dimension that needs in-depth analysis, and more so how to leverage on it to raise performance. Essentially, different stakeholders thus play different and strategic roles in boosting student performance. An integrated approach is thus necessary in mentorship and academic advancement.

With regard to ways of improving performance, students proposed a wide menu of interventions, which is also a reflection of both internal and external bottlenecks that impact their schooling (Figure 1). The need for exercises based on past examination papers too out as very critical. Not

being familiar with how questions are generally framed due to limited exposure to past examination could cause fear and panic when students see such examination papers for the first time on the D-day.

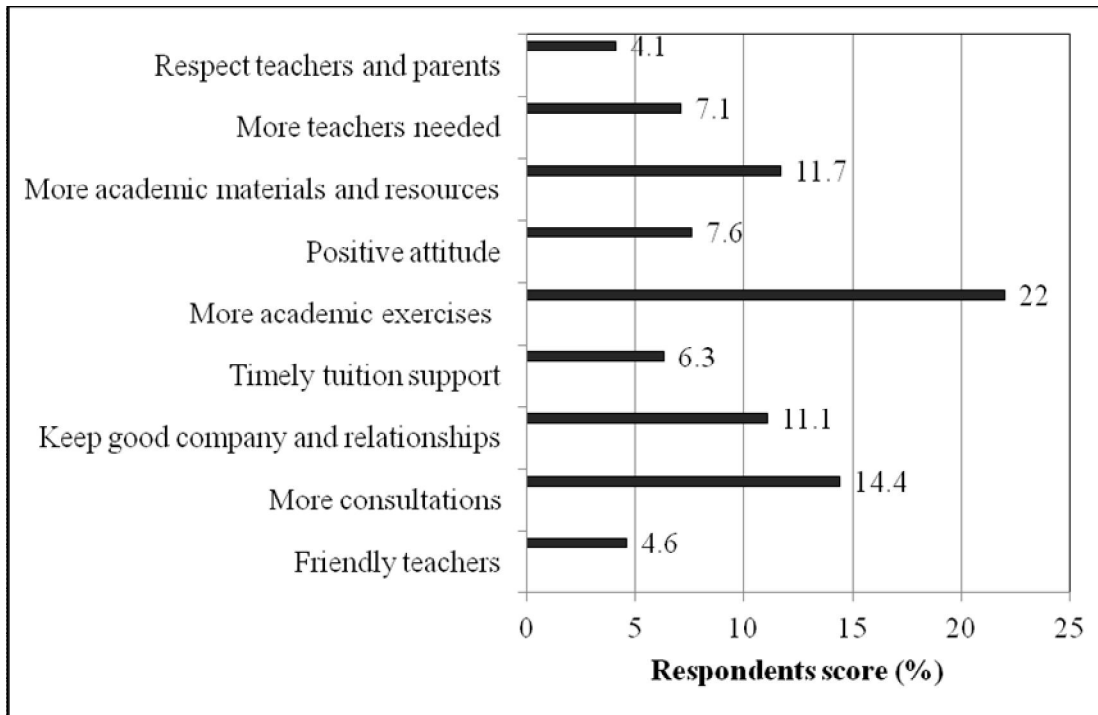


Figure 1. Students' opinions on how to improve performance

The need for more academic resources is a reflection of scarcity of course books, which the government is now attempting to solve through the text-book programme in all schools in the nation. Old boys' and girls' associations can however play a vital role in complementing government in this area. Although adequacy of teachers is a perennial problem in most rural schools, those who are available need to nurture a friendlier environment that encourages students to consult them as need may arise. The shortages of teachers in some schools could also be attributed to skewed national distribution of this resource.

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Ability to pay school fees is a key determinant in enrolment and retention of boys and girls in school. Innovative ways of addressing this requirement at different levels of decision-making should be explored. Statutory educational support through scholarship can easily breach this gap with pro-active financial discipline and austerity measures, in line with the government's policy

of 100% free primary education and 100% transition to secondary school. Boarding schools significantly reduce absenteeism in school and should be encouraged. Punishments meted on students for various misdemeanours influence students' perspectives to schooling and certain subjects. Using cleaning of toilets, the school compound, as well as mathematics as forms of punishment should be avoided. Caning and how it is done on the other hand has the effect of demeaning students. Repeating classes was rather a common feature and was more prevalent at form three. It should be voluntary and based on performance thresholds.

Science subjects were consistently perceived as the worst subjects, while the arts including languages were considered the favourites. This calls for an audit to isolate bottle necks there-to in order to broaden the scope for students' future career options. Since the education system in Kenya is heavily oriented on written examinations, adequately exposing students to past examination papers should be a key component in student academic mentoring. All barriers that discourage students from consulting their teachers need to be removed.

The roles of different stakeholders in boosting student performances cannot be overemphasised. But why parents and guardians were more important in counselling than teachers, who spend much more time with students, is a dimension that needs in-depth analysis. A pro-active partnership involving parents/guardians, school administration, teachers and faith organisations that students highly value need to be nurtured.

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The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest on this paper.

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