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ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL DISTANCE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF GEOGRAPH STUDENTS IN HIGH SCHOOL IN THE MANKAYANE AREA OF ESWATINI

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Abstract:
One of the goals of education is to ensure that all learners have access to quality education within a short radius of their immediate environment. This study set to examine how the distance covered to school by the learner have impact on their academic performance in geography subject in Mankayane area of Eswatini. The study adopted a pragmatism paradigm using a triangulation mixed method research design in which qualitative data were generated using semi-structured interview guide that involved 16 participants and tests score of 80 participants. The findings of the study revealed that long distance travelled to school harmed learners' academic performance in geography as compared to those who stay closer to the school. The hypothesis tested at .05 significance level also revealed that that there was a significant difference between the performance of those who travelled a long distance and those who stay closer to the school. It was concluded that learners travelled long distance to and for schools negatively impact their academic performance in geography. Learners that experienced distance travelled to school should be assist by the government in providing transport facilities.

Keywords: distance travelled, long distance, short distance, academic performance, geography subject

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1. Introduction

Education is a right of a citizen and should be centred on achieving many other sustainable development outcomes. Quality education must focus on the development of a nation especially the children and youth in order to provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to face daily life challenges and take advantage of economic and lifelong learning opportunities. It is also a driving force for reducing poverty, fostering economic growth, and social development (Government of Canada, 2017).

Education is also a coping mechanism for countries globally in trying to meet the ever-changing and increasing requirement of skilled personnel and other fundamental demands that came with the technological age known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR). Naude (2017) adds that patterns of structural transformation in most advanced economies are characterized by labour moving from primary sectors to manufacturing than to the service economy. Therefore, courtiers need to train their labour under the current needs of this century in order to develop their economies.

The Southern African countries are also in the struggle to achieve high quality education to meet global standards. According to Majgaard and Mingat (2012) "*as in most countries worldwide, Sub-Saharan African countries are striving to build their human capital so that they can compete for jobs and investments in an increasingly globalized world*." Thus, these countries are simultaneously confronting numerous challenges within the education sector and much is at stake. The region is trying everything in its book to pull together resources and raise their standards of education, part of this being, the implementation of Free Primary Education (FPE). This sought to afford universal access to education for every child in the world.

Featherstone (2017) continues to stress that the region's educational systems continue to confront three basic key issues: access to education, quality of education, and relevance of education. These are very key issues that hinder the Southern African States and the increasing demands for new schools are a major issue as the population rises exponentially. This suggests that the region has a long way to go in achieving quality education. Featherstone (2017) further adds that the Sub-Saharan region still has about 30 million children who were not receiving any form of schooling, and most tertiaries are capacity constrained, leaving out qualified students. This goes to prove that among other things, the educational centres are not enough for the children in this region, which hinders the efforts of achieving quality education that is accessible to every learner.

Moreover, the Global South is considered the worst performing region universally in learning outcomes, with up to 40% of children not meeting basic targets in literacy and numeracy (Featherstone, 2017). The poor performances of learners have been attributed to a variety of things including teacher factors (low qualification, lack of experience, poor salaries and allowances, poor supervision), learner factors (unwillingness to learn, bad peer groups influence, among others), political factors, and societal factors (Adesegun, *et al*., 2016).

United Nations (2010) pointed out that achieving universal primary education requires more than full enrolment of children in schools but ensuring that children continue to attend classes. In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 30 per cent of primary school students drop out before reaching a final grade, this may be a result of the location of the schools and the distance covered per day. In order to address this problem of long distance to school, Mongolia has introduced mobile schools ('tent schools') to reach children who would otherwise not have regular access to primary education.

Another source of worry is that distance travelled to school may lead to bad behaviours like absenteeism, delinquency, truancy, lateness and indiscipline (Ebinum, *et al*., 2017). The learners, when faced with the long travelling distance, are susceptible to the aforementioned behaviours which could harm their academic performances. Also, others believe that long\ distances travelled to school, besides fatigue, may cause the tendency of learners to lose interest in school which can result in the learner dropping out of school (Duze, 2010).

Eswatini takes pride in the quality education that made accessible to every child since its independence in 1968. Eswatini has been trying to expand her educational systems to better t citizens and make them independent to improve the country's economy (Ministry of Education and Training [MoET], 2011). In the last twenty years, there has been a significant increase in resources made available to all levels of education and a systematic movement toward the achievement of Free Primary Education (FPE). The education sector of Eswatini has been implementing the Education and Training Sector Policy since 2011, which was revised in 2018. The sector policy mentions among others, a goal of ensuring that all learners of appropriate ages who have passed primary education have access to secondary school education within a seven-kilometer radius of their homes (MoET, 2018). This is to ensure that all learners have access to quality education.

2. Statement of the problem

There is no doubt that education stands at the centre of every country's progress and development. The Kingdom of Eswatini has made numerous efforts in trying to improve the quality of education. These efforts include the establishment of the Educational Sector Policy of 2011, the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE), the training of qualified teachers and other related improvements. The Mankayane area is characterized by secondary schools located further apart from each other and from some members of the communities or where some homesteads are located, which makes the travelling distances to attend school very long and tiresome for the learners. Empirical research in Third World countries indicates that early school dropouts and poor academic performances are highly related to the distance between schools and learners' homes (Ebinum, *et al.,* 2017). Therefore, the distance travelled to school every day by secondary school learners may have substantial adverse effects on academic performance. Younger learners are often most vulnerable to dropping out of school due to the distance travelled

to and from school. Walking several kilometers every day is more strenuous for students. Hence, this may result to poor academic performance in Geography because of the distresses of walking long distances. Studies on the factors that affect academic performances in Geography have been conducted quite a number of times in other countries and other regions in the Kingdom of Eswatini, however, there is a noticeable gap in focusing studies on rural schools in the Mankayane area. Moreover, in most of the studies undertaken, emphasis is made only on factors such as learning/teaching resources, teacher training quality, learning and teaching methods, socio-economic status and physical facilities as the prime factors that affect learners' performances in Geography. Therefore, school distance in the rural schools of Mankayane remains an important area that should be studied to enhance students' performances as it is a controversial factor instrumental in the learners' performances.

2.1 Purpose of the study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of school distance travelled by high school Geography students on their academic performance in the Mankayane area of Eswatini.

2.2 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

1) Investigate how distance travelled to school affects the academic performance of Geography students in the Mankayane area of Eswatini.
2) Examine if there is a difference in the performances of Geography students that travel long distances and those who stay closer to the schools in the Mankayane area of Eswatini.

Objective 1 was converted into research questions while objective 2 was transformed into a null hypothesis.

2.3 Research questions

How does distance travel to school affect Geography students' academic performances in high school in the Mankayane area of Eswatini?

2.4 Research hypotheses

There is no significant difference between the academic performance of Geography students that travel long distances to school and those that stay close to the school.

3. Theoretical framework

The study adopted Bronfenbrenner's Ecological system theory of 1977. The theory views a child's development as a complex system that is affected by the surrounding of the environment where the child grew and developed (Evans, 2020). The interaction of the child with his/her immediate environment is another major factor that determines the

success or failure of the child mentally or academically. Bronfenbrenner categorizes the human environment system into five: the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem.

- **The microsystem** explains the direct environment in which an individual belongs that involves the interaction and relationship that exist with the family, friends, classmates, teachers, neighbours and other people that have a direct contact that influence and change the beliefs and actions of the child. The theory proves further that we are not mere recipients of the experience we acquire when socialising with members of society but we are contributing to the construction of the environment directly or indirectly (Sincero, 2019). The microsystem is the most influential system in the ecological theory that contains the developing child such as family & school (Guy-Evans, 2020).
- **Mesosystem:** Sincero (2019) found that if parents neglect a child his/her behaviour might be negatively affected because of the influence of peers and many results in withdrawal from a group of classmates.

"The mesosystem is where a person's microsystems do not function independently but are interconnected and assert influence upon one another." (Guy-Evans, 2020)

- **Exosystem:** This system incorporates formal and informal social systems. In an exosystem, the child is influenced by the neighbourhood, parents' workplaces, parents' friends, and mas medical within the environment (Guy-Evans, 2020). For example, if one of the parents does not have an active role in the development of a child there may be a conflict between the child and the parent. Sincero (2019) found that if the father of a child is not staying together with his mother there might be a conflict between the mother and the child's social relationship.
- **Macrosystem** focuses on the culture of a society and how the cultural elements influence a child's development, beliefs, and perceptions about events that transpire in life. It also concerns socioeconomic status, wealth, poverty, and ethnicity, which may affect the academic performance of learners that travel long distances (Sincero, 2019 & Evans, 2020). Many students that stay in rural areas where schools are not located may find it difficult to travel a long distance before getting to school or rent an apartment that is nearer to the school due to the economic status & poverty level of the parents.
- **Macrosystem** is the transition and shift in one's span in the changes that occur over the lifetime in the environment that influences human development in their life retransition and historical events. The transition may be a normal life translation such as starting school or a non-normative life transition such as parents getting divorced (Guy-Evans 2020 & Sincero, 2019).

Students that traveled long distances experience a lot of problems that affect their academic performance as a result of what the ecological theory reveals about the five systems discussed. The justification for adopting Bronfenbrenner's ecological system in

this study is to understand the situation students are experiencing including social and economic factors that are part of the five systems discussed (Guy-Evans 2022). The decision of locating schools in an environment without thorough consideration of the human environment is called an environmental system based on five Bronfenbrenner ecological systems. Some of the learners' homes may have an adverse effect on the academic performance of the learner and their motivation to learn. These decisions have important long-term effects on learners' learning and motivation. A learner who consistently learns to attribute failures to long distances travelled to school in a particular subject area is unlikely to continue to be motivated to achieve in that subject area in the future.

4. Distance travelled by learners to attend school

Distance travelled by learners to attend school simply means the combined distance a learner covers daily when travelling to and from school. Adeboyeje, *et al.* (2003) as cited in Ayenigbara and Seidu's (2017) in their study, identify home-school distance through the involvement of stakeholders as one among several factors that cause poor performance of learners in public examinations. Other factors were identified including the poor location of the school, high student-teacher ratio, poor supervision, monitoring and evaluation machinery, lack of good textbooks, poor content and context of instruction, poor and non-conductive environment among others.

A distance of one kilometre to school on foot is considered by school head teachers to be too long for children between the ages of six and seventeen (Ebinum, *et al*., 2017). If learners walk more than a reasonable kilometre to school, the outcomes would not be in the best interest of both the child and the school because set goals and objectives may not be truly achieved. Ebinum, *et al*. (2017) also stated that the distance travelled from home to school by rural students with long commutes leads to a number of documented barriers to school success and that the long distance travelled between home and school necessitated that the long-distance commuters make participation in co-curricular activities only, but it is impossible for most students which then results in lower performances. All these factors are said to put the rural students at disadvantage, especially if their families struggle financially or depend exclusively on the bus for school-related transportation. Hazarika and Bedi (2006), found that an increase in schooling costs (both in terms of direct costs and distance to schools) impacts positively children's propensity to work and negatively their probability to attend school (but the two choices are not jointly analyzed). The issue of distance travelled by learners to attend school is therefore a very essential aspect of the academic performance of the learners, which means that it needs looking to determine the extent to which it influences results, especially in Geography.

5. Academic achievement of learners in geography

Academic achievement refers to the quality of outcomes produced by students as reflected in the quality of their examination scores. In furtherance, he stated that if more CA is given, it means more motivation on the part of the students and it is hoped that the achievement will increase (Muhammad 2007 as cited in Faremi & Faremi, 2020). The demonstration of knowledge of learners could be in terms of a validated teacher-made test or external examination, the test could be written or a performance act. Research reports have shown clearly that two individuals are never exactly alike or the same in overall personality characteristics (Plomin & Daniels, 2011). This means that no two learners have equal potential as far as learning is concerned. The ability of learners to excel is supported by a variety of things and includes internal and external factors. The external factors are mostly those that the learner has no control over and may lead to adverse effects on their academic performance. In this regard, researchers in the field of geographical education do the mapping on a variety of factors that affect learners' achievements. This shows that learners' academic achievement is influenced by numerous factors**.**

Another study conducted by Ozdemir (2012), showed that learners passed geography because it is influenced by a variety of reasons. One of the most powerful reasons is that learners are happy with the way teachers teach geography. Learners were delighted with the ability of teachers to present material, to draw and present the drawing skills in an appealing way to them. They benefited more if they learnt geography. The other reason is that they wanted to proceed to the next level by taking courses related to geography. Understanding the geography material is considered to increase knowledge and specific abilities such as understanding the environment, improving the ability to understand natural occurrences, and coping with natural disasters.

6. Methodology

This study adopted the pragmatism paradigm, the pragmatists argue that knowledge claims cannot be abstracted from contingent beliefs, habits, and experiences (Howe, 1988, as cited in Kaushik, & Walsh, 2019). They also argue that reality is true as far as it helps us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experiences (James, 2000, as cited in Kaushik, & Walsh, 2019). Pragmatist philosophy believes that human actions can never be separated from past experiences. The philosophical pragmatism associated with mixed methods research which allows a variety of approaches to be used in answering research questions that cannot be addressed using a singular method. The study uses a triangulation mixed method research design of one phase in which the researchers combined quantitative and qualitative research methods during the same time frame with equal weight to understand the phenomenon of interest. This design enabled the researchers to produce a more complete and well-validated conclusion (Vos, *et al*., 2011).

An interview was conducted to generate the qualitative data. The students' test scores were collected by Geography teachers which are readily available from the previous academic records that the questions have already been validated. Therefore, the scores cannot be manipulated which is an ex-post facto. Information about the experiences of the learners that travel short and long distances to school was obtained through the interview guide. The trustworthiness of the qualitative data in terms of credibility was ensured. The design allows the researchers to provide quantitative statistical results to test the hypothesis and qualitative data to answer the research question. The study was conducted in the Mankayane area under the Manzini region of Eswatini, which is a rural area in which the target population for the study consisted of all geography learners in the Mankayane area. Four schools and Sixteen (16) learners were purposively selected for collecting qualitative data The scores of 80 students comprises form 4 and 5 students in geography tests conducted by the geography teachers in each school were randomly selected. The first ten from each school were those who travelled more than seven (7) kilometres per day and another ten who stay closer to school.

The researchers obtained ethical approval from the Ministry of Education and Training and a letter seeking permission to conduct the research in each school was presented to the head of school. Participants' involvement in the research was voluntary and the researchers clearly explained the purpose of the study to the participants. All participants for the qualitative aspect were made to sign an informed consent letter. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used instead of the student's name in the scores obtained from the teachers in which the teachers indicated LDS and SDS which represent long distance to school and short distance to school respectively.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were analysed. The procedure involves a description of information, condensing such data into categories or themes for valid inference and interpretation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). On the other hand, learners' scores were analyzed through the window-based program called Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. These data were presented in the form of tables. The hypothesis formulated was tested using a t-test, at 0.05 level of significance (α).

7. Findings

The research question of the study sought to establish the effects of distance travelled by learners to school on the geographical academic performances of secondary school learners in the Mankayane area.

A long distance to school has been associated with fatigue and tiredness, especially during classes. Learners claimed that travelling long distances to school was a real issue as it affected their academic performance. They stated that they travel long distances to school and get very tired along the way which then reduces their concentration during class. They elaborated that this led to them losing out a lot in classes because they usually sleep during these lessons. Some learners claimed that they travelled longer than 12

Kilometers by foot to and from school which means they are usually too tired to concentrate during the first lessons in the morning. One learner during the interview reported that;

> *"I wake up very early in the morning, prepare breakfast for my younger siblings and prepare for school. I leave home as early as 6 a.m. and arrive at school at 7:30 a.m. after travelling more than 8 kilometres to school on foot. When I reach school, I am tired so I usually sleep through the first and second periods. Even the teachers know that I am very tired in the morning so they are not very harsh with me. However, I find myself far behind when it comes to tests and I fail what was taught in the mornings."* (Participant 3, school A)

They argued that sometimes even their transport is not reliable during rainy seasons which lead to travelling on foot and arriving at school very tired. When asked, a learner detailed that transportation adds a factor to their tiredness and fatigue:

> *"I sometimes have to travel a very long distance from home to school even when I have the money for transportation because the transport is unavailable. I feel very tired and dizzy when I arrive at school and lose concentration during the learning period. Sometimes all I think about during class is how I will reach home."* (Participant 6, school B)

However, some learners who stayed closer stated that they find short distances to be refreshing. They stressed that they arrive at school not tired and manage to concentrate during class. This is what a learner wrote in the question;

> *"I travel less than 2 kilometres to school, which is a very short distance to school. I wake up on time and do not rush through my preparations for school. Most of the time, I wake up and study before school, because I have enough time. I do not lose concentration during classes which is reflected in most of my performances."* (Participant 4, school A)

A learner supported this by saying:

> *"I travel a short distance to school and most of the time I could spend distance is spent on studying hence performance improves."* (Participant 15, school D)

They added that they usually arrive home very late and tired so they cannot effectively study because they usually have to relax while they lose valuable study time.

A learner stated in an interview that:

> *"Almost every day I arrive home very late and tired, as such I don't have enough time to study and do my homework. This affects me particularly when a teacher announces a test that has to be written within the week. This is because I have to force myself to study at*

night and sleep very late which leads to late coming to school as I may oversleep." (Participant 12, school C)

Another learner supported this claim by adding that;

"I get home very late after a long walk and have to do home chores before I can get to rest because I live with my grandparents. When I am finished it is very late to study and am mostly very tired to do my schoolwork." (Participant 3, school A)

This study revealed that the issue of late coming and absenteeism in Mankayane was still a very big issue that affects the academic performances of learners. One learner stated that:

"…at Lushikishini where we have one bus that travels very early in the morning and is used by everyone travelling to town. Sometimes when it is month end the bus prioritizes adults who pay full ticket prices so we are left behind when the bus is full. Sometimes the bus simply does not come due to the slippery road so we have to stay home because we cannot walk to school as it is very far." (Participant 11, school C)

7.1 Hypothesis testing

There is no significant difference between the academic performance of Geography students that travel long distances to school and those that stay close to the school in the Mankayane area.

Table 4.4: Independent t-test statistics

Variable Distance Travel	N	Mean	Std.	Df	t-calculated	T-critical
Short distance	40	62.1	17.15	78	2.99	1.980
Long distance	40	51.05	15.93			

Results of the independent t-test statistics above showed that there was a difference between the performance of students that travel long distances to school and those that stay closer to school. The result shows that the t-calculated value of 2.99 is higher than the critical value of 1.980, at df 78. The calculated mean performances were 62.1 and 51.05 by learners travelling short and long distances respectively, suggesting that students travelling a short distance to school had significantly higher performances in geography in the Mankayane area. Hence the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference between the academic performance of Geography students that travel long distances to school and those that stay close to the school in the Mankayane area is hereby rejected. This implies that there was a significant difference between the performance of students that travel long distances to school and those that stay close to school.

8. Discussion

Students claimed that travelling long distances to school was a real issue as it affected their academic performance. This conforms with the findings that the geographical location, culture, lifestyle and challenges in day-to-day life and the school distance affect the attitude of learners towards academic performance (Onouwokede, 1995 as cited in Wangombe, 2018). Ebinum, *et al.,* (2017) stated that the distance travelled from home to school by rural students with long commutes leads to a number of documented barriers to school success. The study revealed that the distance travelled by learners from home to school led to tiredness and fatigue during lessons which led to learners losing concentration. Tiredness and fatigue hinder a lot of things both at home and in school for learners. The learners claimed that they could not concentrate in school as they were very tired and they could not study at home because they had to rest.

The hypothesis tested revealed that there was a difference between the performances of students travelling long and short distances to school. Amazingly, the results indicated that the variability in performances between the two groups was different and there was a statistically significant difference between the performances of the two groups, with students travelling long distances performing lower than their counterparts who travelled short distances. The data and subsequent results findings show that a majority of the students in the schools travelled longer distances to school in the rural area and this affected their results negatively. Owusu-Edusei, *et al.* (2007) add through their findings that there was a positive value associated with closer proximity to school at all levels while longer than the average distance to schools had negative values.

9. Conclusions

Based on the findings it was concluded that distance travelled by students to school is a factor that determined their academic performances in geography. Lack of study time and tiredness of students after school result to their poor academic performance. It was also found that short distances have a major advantage on the student's academic performances as they have enough time with their books and their performances were found to be significantly higher than those who travelled long distances.

10. Recommendations

It was therefore established that long-distance travelling to school has a negative effect towards the academic performances of students in rural areas like Mankayane. The following recommendations were made based on the outcome of the findings.

1) There is need to build more schools in the area that will be in close proximity to these students so that the distance covered by the students will be reduced
2) The government has to consider building low/zero-rated boarding hostels for students' accommodation.

3) The policymakers should make more efforts to establish clear policies that support the establishment and construction of new schools based on where schools are too far from the member of any community.
4) Parents should undergo seminars on how to help their children who travel long distances to improve their academic performance by reducing home chores and motivating them to attain better studying habits.
5) Further research should be conducted to look into the proper strategies that could help students that travel long distances to improve their academic performance.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no financial or personal relationships with any organization or individual that could be perceived as a conflict of interest in relation to this article. The cost of collecting data was covered by the authors themselves, and the entire write-up was the collective effort and contribution of all three authors.

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