Transitional Problems in the Vertical Progression of Students Between the Secondary School and the University in Swaziland

Joyce M. Djokoto
Faculty of Education, Monash University

ABSTRACT

Swaziland, a monarchy of about a million people in southern Africa, has developed a three tiered system of education that leads to university. After seven years of primary and three years of secondary education, about 80% of students successfully meet examination requirements to enter high school. However, two years later less than 30% of this group are able to qualify for entry to the University of Swaziland.

The question the paper is concerned with is why so many students who appear to have been doing very well should suddenly do so badly? Is it because there are differences in the standards of examinations? Do the schools make concerted efforts to bridge the gap, if it exists? Are outcomes dependent on the location of the school? Has the Examinations Council of Swaziland explored why this occurs and have teacher education institutions examined outcomes to see how effective their graduates are?

Qualitative and quantitative analytical processes have been used to provide answers to these questions and to develop recommendations for improving success rates in future years.

Introduction

This paper examines school and classroom process problems that preclude students in two selected schools in Swaziland from obtaining good enough grades in their General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level Examinations in English Language. English Language has been selected among other subjects because it is compulsory at the Ordinary Level Examinations and, without at least a credit grade in it, students cannot qualify to enter the University of Swaziland.

What makes this scenario a concern for this study is the fact that two years before the students take the GCE examinations, they are admitted into a two-year high school program that prepares them for the GCE on the strength of satisfactory outcomes in a Junior Certificate Examination. Statistics indicate that over 80% of the students pass this examination but many of these same students are not able to obtain credit grades in the GCE examination after two further years of schooling (Government of Swaziland, 1998). In the 1996 JC examinations school A obtained a pass rate of 85.7% and school

---

1 Swaziland has a five-year secondary education scheme. After primary education a student enters the secondary school for a three-year course after which he takes the Junior Certificate Examinations, a pass in which qualifies the student to enter the high school for two years. This is conducted by the Examination Council of Swaziland. The final examination at the high school is the General Certificate of Education administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate.
B obtained a pass rate of 81.1% for the examination in English Language. The same cohort of students took the GCE examination in 1998. At school A 18.9% of the students scored a credit or better while at school B only 4.5% of the students achieved a credit grade or better.

Swaziland is a monarchy in Southern Africa with a population of 980 722 (UNICEF, 2001). Among African nations, it enjoys quite a good economy. The government is strongly committed to education and school enrolments rose dramatically in 1973 from 12459 in 64 schools to 60830 in 177 schools in 1998 (Magagula, 1992; Government of Swaziland, 1998). Despite the high enrolment rates, the education system is beset with many problems. It has generally been described as low quality (UNICEF, 2001).


The two schools are situated in the Lubombo Region, the poorest of Swaziland's four administrative regions (Stenflo, 1995). One of the schools is church sponsored and the other is a community school. Both schools are, however, classified as grant aided schools ("The Education Rules, 1977," 1977). Such schools are typical all over Swaziland and they serve to illuminate the problems that are experienced by most students in secondary schools in Swaziland.

**Review of School and Classroom Process Research**

Having thoroughly examined the research on school systems, it was deemed prudent to rely on the theory, practice and literature of School Effectiveness Research for this study, despite criticisms from some scholars that SER is down playing researching disadvantage, equity and the educational politics of identity and difference (Slee & Weiner, 2001). An alternative choice would have been to rely on inclusive education, which is seen

> as a generalised call across educational sectors to bring in students marginalised by education's organisational structures, limitations of curriculum offerings, restricted pedagogy and assessment, and identity politics as expressed through the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, disability and student geographies and forms of educational provision (Slee & Weiner, 2001, p. 93).

The study sought to answer questions relying on the three areas of SER– School Effects Research, Effective Schools Research and School Improvement Research (Teddie & Reynolds 2001). Since Coleman's (1966) study in the USA in which he concluded that schools did not make much difference and that students' SES determined more the academic success of students, a great deal of progress has been evident in educational research and now the conclusion reached is that schools make a difference. (Armitage, Bautista-Neto, Harrison, Hosinger, & Leitel, 1986; Avalos, 1990; Fuller & Heyneman, 1989; Heyneman, 1989; Jimenez & Lockheed, 1995; Lockheed & Komenan, 1989; Jimenez & Lockheed, 1995; Lockheed & Komenan, 1989;

---

2 Swaziland is classified a lower middle income country with a GDP of $US899.
3 School Effectiveness Research
Researchers have used different theories of learning and different traditions of research on the use of time at school to inform and guide most of the studies on the effectiveness of schools (Bloom, 1976; Carroll, 1963; Keller, 1983; Reezigt, Gulfemond, & Creemers, 1999; Wiley & Harnischfeger, 1974). In the Third World the overwhelming evidence has been that schools have a greater influence on students' cognitive outcomes than the SES of the students (Avalos, 1980; Fuller, 1987; Fuller & Heyneman, 1989; Lockheed & Komenan, 1989; Walberg, 1991).

Reynolds (2000), however, has challenged the validity and utility of this evidence because of a number of faults in the designs of the studies. He has indicated that only two of the studies used multilevel methodologies, very few of them controlled for prior achievement, the body of knowledge has been derived almost exclusively from cross-sectional studies rather than cohort studies and the issues of constrained variance were not carefully considered, particularly for secondary school research.

Selection and certification examinations that are also often used for accountability of the schools and teachers also influence school achievement in developing countries (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1992). In recent times the importance of culture when examining school processes indicate that input effects are conditioned by the social rules of the classroom (Fuller & Clarke, 1994).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in guiding this study has been strongly influenced by both the school effectiveness framework described in Creemers, Schreens et al (2000) and Public Choice Theory (Creemers, Schreeren, & Reynolds, 2000; Jackson, 1982). Creemers proposed a multilevel structure of schooling which takes cognisance of the fact that students are nested in classrooms, which are nested in schools, which are also nested in districts. Public Choice Theory holds that officials in government employment are in their positions because of self-interest and so do not work to the best of their ability (Jackson, 1982; Michaelsen, 1977; Niskanen, 1994; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997).

Research Design

The purpose of the study was to examine the problems students in two schools in the Lubombo Region of Swaziland have in their attempts to gain good enough outcomes in their General Certificate of Education Examinations (GCE) in order to qualify for entrance into the University of Swaziland. Two objectives of the study were:

- To discover the state of teaching and learning in forms four and five in schools A and B in English Language
- To assess the “value added” between the JC and GCE examinations in the two schools.

The researcher approached this study firstly as a pragmatist, secondly as a scientist and then as a humanist. Therefore the mixed-methodology approach was adopted. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were consequently used in reaching the objectives stated (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).
Subjects
The participants in this study consisted of
- all forms four and five students from the two schools
- all forms four and five English Language teachers, two from each school
- the headmaster and his deputy in school A and the acting headmaster of school B.

In pursuing the first objective, a Likert scale questionnaire was administered to the students, interviews were conducted with the teachers and senior staff and a total of six weeks was devoted to direct observation of teaching, learning and management activities in each school. Unfortunately, direct classroom observation of students was limited to one classroom observation in each school. To meet the second objective the examination results of the JC and the GCE were obtained for the years 1997 to 2000. These represented the results of two cohorts of students.

Data
Three measures of education quality were obtained from the Likert scale questionnaires, the most important of which related to teacher behaviour. The object of this section of the analysis was to determine what variables affect the students’ measures of teaching quality. In particular it was desired to measure the effect of the classroom and the school on the measure of quality. The effects of the following covariates were considered:
- JC results
- gender
- hours spent per day studying
- hours spent previous holiday studying
- number of exercise books
- number of textbooks

All these covariates were at the individual level. The models were all fitted using REML (Restricted Maximum Likelihood).

For the second research objective, the data consisted of the number of students in each school who achieved each grade level of English Language in the GCE examination. Since the students usually sit for the GCE two years after sitting for the JC, the GCE results from 1999 were compared with JC results from 1997 and the GCE results from 2000 were compared with the JC results from 1998. It is important to note that the results were only available at the school level and therefore it was not possible to tell which student achieved which grades. The school was therefore considered as the unit of analysis and an overall measure of performance for the school in the JC and the GCE was constructed for each year. There was difficulty in making a direct comparison. Therefore the scores were standardised. A measure of “value added” was constructed by regressing the school’s GCE score against the school’s JC score for the same cohort of students. The value added by the school is then the difference between the actual GCE score and the predicted GCE score based on the JC score.

Findings
Preliminary results with the method indicated above so far show that the JC examination results have a very significant effect on students' hopes of performing well at the GCE. No significant differences were observed regarding the gender of students,

---

4 Within six weeks, the Deputy Headmaster and the Headmaster passed away and so an Acting Headmaster who was new to the school was appointed.
the number of hours spent per day studying, the number of hours spent last holidays studying and number of exercise books. However, the prior JC results obtained by students did have a significant effect on their assessment of teaching quality. This effect was observed between the two schools and within classrooms in the same school. In general, students who performed better at the JC examination rated the performance of their teacher higher. Form four classes are self-streamed by difficulty of subjects chosen and this streaming continues into form five. Students in the stronger stream in each school rated teaching performance higher than did those in the weaker stream.

Surprisingly, the more textbooks the students have access to, the lower they rate the quality of instruction. The two classroom observations conducted show that teachers relied heavily on the textbooks, virtually clinging to them to the extent that little discussion or teaching took place outside the parameters set by the textbooks. Teachers felt that students should be able to read their books for information. Unfortunately the students complained they could not understand the language of the text books.

Two key issues arose from interviews of the teachers. Firstly they considered that most of the students being admitted into form four are not ready to undertake the two-year GCE course. Secondly, there was consensus that the standards demanded by the JC examination were too low to serve as an adequate preparation for the Cambridge examination.

Teacher quality in terms of qualification and experience was similar in both schools. In school A one teacher had a B.Ed and the other B.A., PGCE. In school B both teachers held B.A. PGCE. Apart from one teacher in school A who had less that five years' teaching experience, all the teachers had been teaching for more than five years. Learning orientations were not properly established in all the two schools. Advance organisers were not used to cue in students to the nature and content of the subject matter to be taught. Students were generally not informed about the nature of their examinations and the skills to be tested. Most had never seen the syllabus and the teachers testified to this. Teachers did not make concerted efforts to align the syllabus to textbooks, so students did not really understand how their textbooks would give them the skills required for their examinations. The classroom observations and teachers' interviews revealed that there was no strategy teaching and no attempts to scaffold students' task engagements.

Group work was seldom used as a teaching strategy and teachers were not aware of co-operative learning strategies. Assessment of students was done regularly in both schools but was haphazard and it was not necessarily goal oriented. It was done as a ritual that was required by regulation. It was however better organised in school A. Feedback to students after exercises were marked was most often absent and therefore there was no corrective instruction. Students virtually were left groping for good outcomes in their examinations. When Academic Learning Time\(^5\) (Berliner, 1979) is considered, the conclusion is there is very little in either school.

The value added for school A for the 1997 JC and the 1999 GCE was 0.53 while school B had 0.57, a difference of .4 indicating that school B did more to improve the quality

\(^5\) David Berliner posited three measures of instructional time. They are allocated time, which is the time a teacher provides for instruction, engaged time, which is the time the student is attending to instruction in a particular content area and academic learning time which is the time a student is engaged with instructional materials or activities that are at an easy level of difficulty for that student.
of their students than school A. The following year school A performed better than学校 B. Traditionally, school A has a better intake for the GCE course than school B and is more highly regarded by the community. For the whole of Swaziland, the schools that perform traditionally well using the raw scores generally still performed better when the value-added scores were used. In 1999 the value added by almost half of all the 125 secondary schools in Swaziland was negative! Both schools studied had positive value added but the best of the schools in the country scored 2.49.

Therefore it will be safe to infer that intake qualities to a certain extent determine the performance of students but when they are held constant the good schools still do better. This implies that there are certain conditions in those schools that predispose their students towards doing well at the GCE and that some schools do not have those conditions.

Also discovered was the fact that the ethos in the two schools was very different. Regarding rules of instruction, evaluation policy and professional policy, school A was far better rated by the author than school B. Rules of time use and orderly atmosphere ratings showed that school B was very disorderly. In term three when the researcher was in the schools, school A opened 76 days, the number of days required for all schools to open but school B opened 60 days. Teachers responded to the bell for change of lesson in school A better than in school B. Morale appeared higher in school A than in school B. The teachers interviewed in school A were reluctant to complain about school conditions. In school B however teachers were vocal about their feelings. One teacher indicated:

\[I \text{ am not happy where I work}.......I \text{ feel I am not doing my work. I am in the wrong school. I cannot be proud and say I have achieved. You put in so much and you don't get good outcomes.}\]

Employment in the teaching profession is a popular choice in Swaziland because of the relative ease of entry and is seen as a stepping stone to a better job. The teachers interviewed had become dissatisfied and were seeking alternative employment since they were in agreement that their initial training did not equip them with the skills they thought they required for the kind of teaching demanded at the "O" level and the calibre of students they had to teach. They also complained that in-service training did not help either. Some 79% of the students in schools A and B considered they had no hope of passing the GCE examination and all the teachers indicated that the students in form four normally gave up and arranged to be admitted into other schools the following year to repeat form four.

Discussion

6 Value added was calculated for 125 schools with results for the JC 1997 and the GCE 1999, and 126 schools with results for JC 1998 and GCE 2000.
7 The school lost their Headmaster and Deputy Headmaster during this term and participated in a nationwide teachers' strike while school A did not take part in the strike action. Form 5 students in school B were given study break for two weeks before the GCE examinations.
8 It is significant to note that in school A teachers have some religious obligations. Teachers' private lives are closely monitored and they are forbidden to take alcohol or have visitors of the opposite sex when not married.
Further analysis of the data is still required but it is fair to state that, unless significant reform occurs, the future of the two schools is grim. It has been advocated by Mazibuko (1999) that the teacher training institutions need to change their training strategies. The present study indicates that welfare and community development studies need to be introduced into teacher training in Swaziland. Teachers need to be more aware of the powerlessness of the poor and the responsibility they have to encourage disadvantaged students and their parents to make more extensive use of public education (Freire, 1994; Goulet, 1971; Kavanagh, 1994).

As regards government policy, headmasters and their deputies must be appointed with greater care and need to engage in ongoing professional development. The current approach to teacher recruitment has to change. In order to encourage retention of staff, teacher remuneration must be improved and a more rewarding career path established. Continued effective professional development for teachers is imperative as is provision of adequate teaching resources to assist students to attain better university entrance outcomes. If the current wastage rate of teachers is allowed to persist then the majority of secondary school students will continue to be demoralised and precious government funding will fail to produce educational programs of benefit to Swaziland.

References


