

## **Sociocultural Factors Associated with Learners' Poor Academic Performance in Lushoto Primary Schools, Tanzania**

*George Kahangwa\**

### **Abstract**

This paper reports the findings of a study that was undertaken in Lushoto district, Tanzania, to examine the sociocultural factors contributing to persistent poor academic performance of pupils in the district's public primary schools, and determine how to redress the situation. The study identified the key sociocultural factors condemning the learners to poor performances regardless of their efforts in both local and national examinations to include community members' habits of engaging children in early social obligations and income-generation. As a result, the children were reduced to part-time readers; or their return to formal education was significantly curtailed. Such blatant disregard for formal learning among parents undercut the prospects of the pupils since they receive little or no support, let alone encouragement from their parents, other community members, and even peers. This already dire situation has been compounded by the common preference for Islamic *madrassa* over formal education in the district. Furthermore, traditional beliefs and practices distracted the learners' attention to formal schooling.

*Keywords: sociocultural factors, academic performance, Tanzania*

### **Introduction**

Underwhelming academic achievement among primary school pupils continues to be a problem for the education system in many nations, including Tanzania. Such poor performances have continued to worry education policymakers, practitioners, pupils and other education stakeholders. Even though literature offers a variety of explanations for poor performance—such as ineffective school leadership (Mwangi, 2016), inept teachers, and learners' lacklustre study efforts (Ntawiha et al., 2020)—these grounds fail to demonstrate whether the reasons for the persistence of low performance are consistent across diverse sociocultural contexts.

In Tanzania, districts such as Lushoto have consistently generated the lowest-performing schools over the years. For instance, a school from Lushoto was ranked 16,089th out of 16,096 primary schools in Tanzania in 2015; 8,102 out of 8,109 in 2016; 9,735 out of 9,736 in 2017; 10,090 out of 10,090 in 2018; and 10,659th out of 10,659 in 2020 in the national Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE). This consistently abysmal performance begs the question of why Lushoto keeps on turning out Tanzania's lowest performing schools.

This study, therefore, was carried out to examine the factors accounting for such persistent poor performances among some primary schools in Lushoto district, particularly in PSLE. Specifically, the study sought to determine the sociocultural

---

\* School of Education, University of Dar es Salaam: [georgekahangwa@gmail.com](mailto:georgekahangwa@gmail.com)

factors that make some schools in the district perform poorly, while others have consistently performed relatively better in PSLE in the past five consecutive years. Of interest to the study were answers to the primary question: What sociocultural factors contribute to the consistently poor performance of some Lushoto schools in comparison to others in primary education examinations?

The study drew from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in education (Kozulin, 2003), which postulates that a child's learning and academic performance is influenced by one's sociocultural background. In particular, the performance of pupils in schools is determined by the strengths and weaknesses embedded in a society, and the culture that surround them. Such surroundings have social interaction, zone of proximal development, scaffolding, tools and signs, language, community of practice, knowledge transmission, role play and factors that mediate learning (Kozulin, 2003). This theory, therefore, facilitated the investigation into the pupils' sociocultural backgrounds and their academic performance. Moreover, the sociocultural theory informed data analysis, interpretation of findings, and the determination of the possible solutions to address academic underperformance. In the context of this study, sociocultural factors refer to issues that affect the academic performance of learners, but have their roots in unique circumstances surrounding their schools or homes (Odanga, 2018). The central argument of the paper is that pupils' poor academic performance in Lushoto schools is contributed to by detrimental sociocultural issues that must be addressed so as to improve education in the district.

### **Literature Review**

In the literature, the way pupils perform in examinations and other academic endeavours has generally been linked to factors such as teacher effectiveness, motivation, and incentive schemes; as well as to pupil and teacher efforts (Sharma, 2016; Sakiz, 2015), school culture (Kythreotis, et al, 2010), school infrastructure (Murillo & Roman, 2011), and the availability of teaching and learning resources (Ogwen, 2015; Ndlovu, 2018). Other contributory factors have included school administration/management, and community participation in school endeavours. Furthermore, multifaceted socio-cultural factors can also affect pupils' academic achievement. In this regard, Agyeman, Frimpong and Ganyo's (2016) study found ethnic affiliations, parents' occupation, peer-related factors, as well as parental socioeconomic status to have a bearing on pupils' achievement. In some cultures, for example, formal schooling might be accorded less value than traditional education (Tandika, 2015). As a result, parents from such culture might discourage their children from acquiring formal education. A dwindling parental support to formal learning inevitably affect their children's learning negatively (Tandika, 2015).

Akintoye and Saliu (2020) contend that detrimental factors against education range from the social environment (also termed as environmental, acquired, external or phenotypic ones) comprising the home background, school-related issues, teachers' attributes and societal factors; as well peer influence. Sociocultural factors with causal effects that have emerged in empirical literature include sex, peer group,

pupil's attitude, and parental educational background (Akinde, 2010). Other significant sociocultural elements include language, law, values, and religion since they also tend to affect the thoughts, behaviours and feelings of individuals (Njok & Edinyang, 2014). Similarly, Ternenge and Torkuma's (2021) study found a correlation between a pupil's academic performance and cultural factors such as their families' religious practices, cultural festivals, clothing customs, home environment, community traditional beliefs, and relationships with learners from other ethnic groups, parental cultural background, behaviour and expectations. Scholarly research further indicates that religiosity constitutes one of the sociocultural factors that have led to disparities in education around the world. Usually, Muslims tend to be less educated on average than non-Muslims in the majority of European countries, with Germany accounting for the biggest gap where Muslims, on average, have 4.2 fewer years of formal schooling than non-Muslims (9.5 years) out of the possible 13.7 years of studying.

Malmberg and Sumra's (2001) studies on sociocultural factors and school performance undertaken in Tanzania found that academic achievement correlated with age, parents' educational background, religious affiliation, gender, and school location (classified by town/village dichotomy). Generally, urban parents were more educated than rural ones, and, as a result, their children performed relatively better than their counterparts in villages. Gender-wise, male pupils outperformed their female counterparts in Mathematics and Science; meanwhile, younger students did better than older ones overall. Furthermore, language affected pupils' performance as well as their psychological well-being in the classroom. Pupils who were proficient in the home language of instruction—the majority of whom were from metropolitan areas—performed better in Language and Mathematics classes, reported a friendlier classroom environment, and showed less anxiety than their counterpart.

Moreover, some research indicates that religious practices have a beneficial effect on academic achievement. Fukofuka's (2007) research on the relationship between spirituality and academic performance found that pupils who make time for spiritual activities are more likely to achieve academic success. Fukofuka cites several studies that affirm a positive effect of spirituality on student academic performance. These studies include Walker and Dixon (2002), who established a positive relationship between learners' spiritual beliefs and religious participation and academic performance; and Line (2005), who similarly found a strong relationship between academic performance and personal religiosity, particularly in personal scripture study, living up to church standards, and personal prayer life. On the other hand, Jeynes' (2003) study on the effects of students' religious commitment on the academic achievement of urban children found no difference between Catholic and Protestant students, but there were variations between Christian students and those of other faiths. Implicitly, the religious background of students is a factor worth consideration in the study of the effects of culture on academic achievement in schools. The current study, therefore, also factored in religious affiliation in determining the academic performance of pupils in Lushoto district.

Early marriage, particularly for girls, is another sticking point. A research by Corno and Voena (2021) suggested that some cultures treat marrying off girls early as a lucrative venture because of dowry payment. In remote areas, some parents prevent girls from furthering their schooling for fear that their 'market' value will diminish the higher they climbed up the education ladder. Similarly, UNICEF (2005) found that bride price incentivises parents to forgo educating their daughters to cash in on them by marrying them, sometimes, as young as ten years to older men. Such early marriages kill off girls' dreams of ever acquiring formal education. Recent studies (see, for example, Mlyakado & Timothy, 2014) have further exposed the negative effects of learners prematurely engaging in sexual activities on academic performance.

Overall, sociocultural factors can have either positive or negative effect on academic performance depending on mitigating factors. Significantly, UNICEF (2005) has reaffirmed that pupils' achievement is highly influenced by the community, and/or parental attitudes towards education. However, the sociocultural underpinnings behind why certain schools in Lushoto regularly score either well or poorly in the PSLE are not well covered in earlier studies carried out in the area. Specifically, studies undertaken in Lushoto—such as by Kipfumo (2016)—have related the level of pupils' performance largely to widespread child labour.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study employed a case study design to examine the sociocultural factors contributing to persistent poor academic performance of pupils in Lushoto, which was purposively chosen as the case study given gross discrepancies between school performance records in the area. The district had a population of 350,958 people dominated by the Sambia and Pare ethnic groups (National Population and Housing Census, 2022). The district also happens to be one of the least performing districts in PSLE at the national level for the past five consecutive years, hence an intriguing prospect for such a study. In 2017 and 2018, for example, the district average pass rates were 52.4 percent and 53.8 percent, hence ranking 178th and 182nd, respectively, out of 186 districts countrywide. Out of 169 public primary schools in Lushoto, 10 were purposively drafted for the study. These schools were evenly split: 5 with high PSLE performance, and 5 with the least performance in the past five consecutive years.

The resultant sample of 202 participants comprised 1 official from the District Education Office (DEO), 1 district quality assurance officer, 10 ward education officers (WEOs) working in the proximity of the selected schools, 10 primary school headteachers, 60 teachers (6 drawn from each selected school), and 6 pupils from each of the selected schools interviewed with the consent of their teachers. The remaining 60 participants were parents conveniently selected from communities near the schools under review, with assistance from the headteachers.

**Table 1: Composition of the Sample**

Participants	Gender		Total
	M	F	
District education official	1		1
District Quality Assurance Officer	1		1
Ward Education officers	8	2	10
Headteachers	10		10
Teachers	38	22	60
Pupils	30	30	60
Parents	30	30	60

To collect data from these participants, the study utilised interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Besides, a review of documents helped to capture particulars of the district’s school performances.

In-depth and face-to-face interviews facilitated the exploration of sociocultural factors that either hinder or facilitate children’s performance. These interviews also explored the participants’ views on best practices and cases from best performing schools, and how to address challenges spurring poor results in underperforming schools. In all, the study held 22 in-depth and face-to-face interviews with selected education officials, ward education officers and headteachers.

Additionally, 10 FGDs with teachers and 10 with parents further gathered information on factors influencing ‘good’ or ‘poor’ PSLE results from the perspectives of these two groups of stakeholders. Each six-member FGD was heterogeneous, with participants of both genders. The use of Kiswahili—a language accessible nation-wide and predominantly the medium of instruction in Tanzania’s public primary schools—made the 45-minute to one-hour FGD sessions highly productive. To capture the voice of learners in this study, a total of 60 pupils were asked to take interviews in writing to express how being in Lushoto affects their learning. Interviews and FGD recordings captured the participants’ words verbatim for transcription, data processing and report writing.

Furthermore, the study reviewed the Tanzania Education and Training Policy of 1995 and 2014, the Basic Education Statistics (BEST) – 2019, and the NECTA PSLE results covering the five-year period, in addition to quality assurance reports on Lushoto performance using a documentary review guide.

Data analysis entailed three thematic analysis steps: preparing and organising data; creating categories and coding; and presentation and interpretation. Such data analysis started in the field with listening to audio-taped interviews and focus group discussion for familiarisation purposes, and developing a general sense of the data. Then verbatim transcription of the interviews and FGD proceedings preceded inductive data interpretation and analysis. Emerging themes from the dataset helped to determine the extent to which issues identified in the literature resonated

with data from the field. Coding resulted from reading the transcripts again once themes were developed. During the coding procedure, textual elements—words, phrases, and/or paragraphs—from each transcript were identified and categorized under relevant themes. The researcher then ascertained whether each theme's coded data extract comprised a logical pattern.

### **Findings**

The community's perception of the value of education is one of the major factors that emerged as a determinant of academic performance among pupils in Lushoto primary schools. The study found that many people in Lushoto detested conventional education, particularly because of the expenses and benefits associated with it. They had reservations about education and, hence discouraged children from doing well in school because they believe that education had limited benefits, but with enormous costs. Participants in this study cited cases of parents telling their children to deliberately fail the final primary school leaving examination (PSLE) to avoid progressing to secondary education due to what they feared were spiralling costs. One participant said:

*“Last year, we had a very good pupil here; almost all our hopes [for passing] were on him. You look at his mock exam results, he did very well. But at home his father told him: ‘My son, when your brother passed the exam, we sold our land to take him to school. He has completed his school but has no job, he is not giving us anything, If you also want to pass what should we sell? You better complete your primary school then we will find an alternative for you’”* (Headteacher at School A, November 2021)

This testimony reveals the pivotal role of parents in inducing either the failure or passing of their children. Moreover, it exposes the limited value some parents attach to formal education. Their logic was that such education was not only a drain on family resources, but also brought no rewards after a school-leaver ended up jobless. Such a role of parents in children's schooling is in line with the assumption of the sociocultural theory that parents and guardians are instrumental in one's learning (Tekin, 2011).

Participants also reported that some people in Lushoto no longer prioritised formal education, as testified by one of them:

*“In the eleven years of my teaching in this district, I have come across a number of challenges from the community, related to community awareness about the importance of education. Some parents do not care about children dropping out of school; some even threatened their children when they seem to do well academically. I managed to discover the threats that pupils were getting from their parents when they performed better academically because I have been very close to them”* (Teacher from School J, November 2021).

There is further evidence of parents discouraging their children from making headway in school: instead, they ask them to flunk deliberately to cut their education path short. When asked, through a written interview, to name issues that are in their communities that are responsible for their poor performance in schools, pupils also mentioned the influence of parents. Other issues raised by pupils are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Sociocultural Issues Affecting Academic Performance  
Mentioned by Pupils From Lushoto**

<b>Pupils' Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Advised by parents or family members to perform poorly or fail exams	19
Seduced or influenced by peers	5
Broken marriage background and family conflicts	3
Community dislike or despise of circular education	7
Early marriages arranged by parents	9
Early pregnancy	2
Financial difficulties	1
Genital mutilation	1
Low education levels among the people	4
Moral decay	1
Orphans if they pass, they will have nothing to do	1
Parents harassing their children	3
Parents stopping children from going to school	1
Participation in traditional dances frequently and other cultural functions	3

Indeed, the pupils' responses are a testimony of how parents are responsible for their poor academic performance. For such children to cope with parental threats, they need psychological support from their teachers to keep on performing well in academics.

Education officials in the district also bear witness on people's attitudes towards education:

*"Some people in the society have an outlook that it is not necessary that to succeed in life a child has to go to school because most of them are engaged in farming and petty business to eke out their livelihoods. They, therefore, see that instead of wasting much time in education and then return to the farm or to start some business, you better start early. They are making references to their relatives who decided to pursue the route of education but, eventually, came back only to create some self-employment which does not require being educated; or they end up being given a job for just very little pay. We have examples from ... [different] places [which] have more than seventy five percent of women engaged in petty businesses. In my view, this tells us those women are busier in petty businesses than taking care of their children"* (Education Officer, November 2021).

Such claims suggest that, to many Lushoto people, education wastes an individual's valuable time that could have otherwise been invested in economic productivity. Such outlook is shared by parents, as claimed by one of them:

*"Our culture is not a problem, but we make reference to what others have achieved. We ask ourselves: why is it that someone's child has gone for further studies, but he is still the same? We decide through comparison; but we cannot say this is a tradition. These are just minor issues that a person can look at what a neighbour's child has achieved, and wonder why he is still weak; still a drunkard. People need to learn from each other. When they don't see success, they start to bring each other down saying: 'Why is your child like this while he has been to school; and how can you convince me to take my child for further education while yours has been to that level but didn't go anywhere'"* (Parent, March 2022).

## **Socio-cultural Factors Associated with Learners' Poor Academic Performance**

According to this parent's argument, formal schooling has not produced any individuals for the younger generation to look up to as positive role models. As a result, parents decided whether to send their kids for higher education by weighing the projected value of their education level against the lifestyle and status of the district's educated population.

Although parents have been playing a role in deciding whether their children progress with their education, some parents usually disavowed the habit of threatening children performing well in school. They denounced such acts during community meetings often convened to discuss education matters. One of the WEOs in Lushoto said:

*“Surprisingly during the meetings with the parents about children's progress, positive comments are given by them by saying: how come we struggle to build schools and yet influence our own children to perform poorly in their examination? We don't do that”* (Ward Education Officer, November 2021).

Implicitly, not all parents discouraged their children from pursuing academic excellence. However, some of them behaved differently in public to show-off, and did the opposite in the privacy of their homes to avoid being held accountable for their negative attitudes that promoted mediocrity. Asked to explain why their parents and other members of the family were discouraging them to perform well in schools, interviewed pupils pointed out less valuing of education, poverty and the urge to start earning income, as some of the reasons. Their responses are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Pupils' Responses on Why Parents Convince Children not to Do Well In School or Continue with Further Education**

<b>Pupils' Response</b>	<b>Freq.</b>
Parents avoiding responsibilities associated with children's schooling;	3
Opting for working to earn a living; Preference for their female children becoming domestic workers; Preference for their sons to do petty business and earn income	5
Conflicts between parents	1
Considering education not important. A parent can support a family without further education	11
Involving the children in domestic chores, fetching water and shamba work	8
Early marriage for girls preferred	3
Having so many children in a family	1
Helping parents at home	3
Illiteracy of parents	4
Low income of lack of money to support further education IIIII	1
Lust for money	1
Negligence	1
Parents being busy in their jobs	1
Poor performance of some children in examinations	1
Poverty	4
Schooling is waste of time; it does not pay	4
Schools are teaching children bad manners	1
Stubbornness among some children	2
They cannot teach them	1
Working to support the family	4



In essence, some communities in the area were culpable of collectively creating conditions to make pupils fail. Indeed, it emerged that some communities around poorly performing schools had collective means for discouraging pupils to take their formal schooling serious; and instead encouraged them to fail their final examinations deliberately. One of the study participants explained:

*“On the eve of the national examination, a group of dancers in this village go around dancing and singing at night in a way that sends a message that it is of no use for someone to pass exams or to go for further education. They call this dancing and singing ‘yogoyaga’”* (Headteacher at School J, November 2021).

*Yogoyaga* is a local word for scribing incompressible things on the examination paper as a deliberate ploy for the candidate to score a zero. Such influence of the community agrees with the assumption in the sociocultural theory that the goals that are cherished by a community influence learning (Enciso & Ryan, 2011). When asked to explain why their children were not performing well in schools, one parent said during an FGD:

*“It is hard to afford school needs. Our children who do not have exercise-books and other things do not concentrate well at school and in class. They feel embarrassed and drop out of school. After all, they do not feel like losing anything because those who continue with school to the end do not get anything. The government has tried hard to force those who pass to go to secondary schools but even when some go, they quit along the way. With the absence of benefits from school, we better have our children in our family activities when they grow up a bit. They help us fetch water, do some work somewhere, and come home with money for buying the items we need in the family”* (Parent, March 2022).

Indeed, parents tend to overrule on what a child should do, which affects their academic performance. Moreover, it emerged that the community’s disavouring schooling, particularly post-primary education, was inextricably linked to the parents’ desire for their children to start earning an income for their families immediately after completing terminal primary education. As a result, parents tend to persuade their children into quitting school and finding manual jobs in towns. Participants explained that parents have managed to convince their children to believe that they could have a good life in towns armed only with elementary education. One interviewee said:

*“Some parents want their children to be employed at a very tender age, and start earning an income which brings a relief in the parents’ responsibility in child upbringing. Of course, children also lust for urban life because they think life in towns is much better”* (Headteacher at School B, November, 2021).

Impliedly, such temptation to migrate and start earning income end up undermining education in the area, even though the urban dream could remain simply an illusion. The tendency of town dwellers to employ under-18 youth as domestic workers, or in any other manual trades, might inadvertently be encouraging this practice.

Pupils' religious beliefs also affected their performance in Lushoto. In this regard, the study found that unfavourable sentiments of the community stemmed from people's preference for religious education over secular schooling. Headteachers at underperforming schools revealed during interviews that most of the local community support the *madrasa* education, often at the expense of formal education. As a result, kids had to go to *madrasa* in the evenings after getting home from school. It was additionally reported that, rather than receive secular secondary education, some Std. VII leavers left for a neighbouring country to continue with their education in religious studies. Other participants reported that the religious background of a pupils' family constituted one of the factors that adversely affected their academic performance. Notably, pupils from strict religious background did not value formal education since they favoured the religious one. One of the WEOs explained this dilemma thus:

*"Parents see religious education as more prestigious than school education. Parents feel proud and respected by the community when they have a religious person in their family. Pupils coming from families with religious personnel were influenced to work harder on religious education so as to keep the trend in their family, and ignore school education"* (Ward Education Officer, November 2021).

Such claims by the WEO were also echoed by one male parent who said:

*Religion has an influence for sure. There is a religion that is not sensitising people to go to school, but it is instead convincing them to go elsewhere. Our district continues to go down because of that. If you look at our school [school name] for example, the dominant outlook is that many belong to one religious' faith, they convince each other easily not to do well. It is common to find that the time needed for a child to do revision at home, s/he is somewhere else. For example, a child comes back from school at 4 in the evening. As from 6 he has to attend madrasa [under Islamic faith]. This child cannot have time to do homework, because s/he is already tired. We better cooperate the three of us: the teacher, the parent and the pupil. Let us work together. A parent has to understand that teaching a child is the child's right, and that there is success in the future which is not necessarily for the parent to benefit, but for the child. We, as parents, should understand this. We should also tell our children that learning is for their benefit, not otherwise. In Kilimanjaro [a neighbouring region] they have strategies, that is how they succeed. If we plant bad seeds, our harvest shall surely be poor"* (Parent, March 2022).

Such an explanation reveals how the preference for religious education over the secular one has ended up being counter-productive because of the deliberate failure to strike a balance between formal education and religious education in the district. Nevertheless, some studies—drawing from the tenets of sociocultural theory (for example, Itulua-Abumere, 2013)—see religion as a positive catalyst to learning.

Another factor that seemed to have an adverse impact on education in Lushoto was family structure. Certain children were doing exceptionally well in school, whereas others struggled because of their familial background. Participants described how some families struggled with child-rearing, and had different parenting philosophies, which impacted on the education of their kids. Since most pupils in some schools do not live with their parents, they were not properly fed, and had less parental supervision while learning. One of the headteachers

interviewed said that some of the children lived with their grandparents in the villages, while their parents dwelled in town. Moreover, there was no follow-up on pupils' learning progress because their guardians were old and often frail, hence unable to assume full responsibility of assisting grandchildren with their school work:

*"Most of the pupils are being raised by very old caretakers. They live with their grandparents instead of their parents, they lack balanced diet and support in their education..."* (Head of School).

Additionally, participants also claimed that Lushoto had pupils lacking parental guidance and upbringing. Some pupils lived with very old family heads, who failed to render necessary support in the form of school uniforms, exercise-books, pens and, significantly, parental monitoring of their studies at home. One parent further explicated during an FGD:

*"The schools are far away from our homes, and schooling activities take the whole day. Some of us are unable to pay for lunch for our children when they go to school. As a result, children go hungry during the day. Apart from that, the way to most schools is full of bushes and hills; this is where our children hide instead of reaching school. Our daughters are tempted by bad guys along the way. For those who are attending day-secondary schools, the schools have found on them phones which their parents know nothing about. Where do they get these phones from? Some children stay with their grandmothers. Therefore, there is no one at home to check whether they are learning at school and doing homework. Some children remove uniforms on their way to school, and put on home dresses and go elsewhere instead of heading to school"* (Parent, March 2022).

Further, family challenges were in the form of bad relationship between children and older members of their household. Because of the culture of silence, the participants gave away very little on this aspect. However, further probing revealed that some of the female pupils were allegedly impregnated by their own relatives. This problem persisted due to difficulties in prosecuting such cases because families of the victims were reluctant to co-operate with the legal authorities and testify against culprits they knew very well, including relatives.

Another sociocultural component that has been linked to Lushoto's inconsistent and subpar academic achievement has to do with genderised roles. In a perfect world, mothers would take on the responsibility of providing their kids with complete home support. In Lushoto, things have changed so much that mothers focused on undertaking small trades to support their families financially. One participant exemplified such a development thus:

*"Most women here are into petty businesses. Their contribution to pushing their children is a problem. Much worse, girls at home take over the domestic chores; they can't have time to study privately. As a result, their academic performance suffer"* (Teacher from School H, November 2021).

Gender roles are also related with what girls ought to do not only to earn an income but also to become young housewives, including forfeiting school to become housemaids or get married at a tender age, which is in common in Lushoto. Participants claimed that a certain ward [name] was infamous for early marriages, which rolled back education gains in the area. One of the officials said:

## **Socio-cultural Factors Associated with Learners' Poor Academic Performance**

---

*“Some parents want their children to become housemaids and bring money home. They also send them into early marriages arguing that, rather than bearing children while at home, they better get married. Today, Tanzanians have taken it to be common: that if you want to have a house girl, look for one in Tanga. Thus, many youths who complete primary education are ridding boda-boda [motorbikes for hire], or are domestic workers. Here, the children who are somehow serious with education are mostly Christians. They manage to progress well, except when a parent cannot afford the costs, but the parent will still fight hard. If you visit our serious secondary schools, they are filled by children from other regions in the country. For most people around here, it is better for a child to have religious knowledge, and not secular education” (Ward Education Officer, November 2021).*

This clarification suggests that schooling could have been helpful in addressing the negative effects of early marriages, while also enabling school dropouts to be aware of their options should they choose to work in such occupations. To prevent school dropouts, education must also teach them in trades that they can start right after graduation. In fact, certain groups in Lushoto still hold the belief that a girl's marriage is her ultimate destiny; and, as a result, education for girls is perceived in some quarters to be insignificant. Such a finding corresponds with that of Oguejioffor (2020): that early marriage has adverse impact on girls' education. Yet, in Lushoto, this continues to be a stumbling block to girls' education, as one participant affirmed:

*“Parents are preparing girls for marriage; hence, they do not emphasise education. For them, girls will go to primary schools to grow a little bit, waiting for marriage. I bear testimony of a parent who started taking his daughter's bride price earlier on; little by little, from the future son-in-law. Unfortunately for them, the girl passed standard seven examinations. Seeing this, they agreed to wait for her to fail the Form II national exams” (Headteacher, School C, November 2021).*

Implicitly, there is a need for proper enforcement of the law against early marriage to curb such practices. Community members also need adequate sensitisation to change their outlook and treatment of the girl-child. Even before being forced into early marriages, female pupils reportedly assume parenthood roles at a tender age in their families. One of the study participants explained the reason behind girls' poor academic performance as follows:

*“Gender roles are a challenge here. Pupils in Lushoto ... some of them are heads of households. Therefore, they have overwhelming family responsibilities; for example, fetching firewood in the evening after school, and some have to collect grass to feed their domestic animals” (Teacher, School G, November 2021).*

In other words, efforts aimed to enable female pupils to perform well at school must also target what happens at home, and help respective families to release the girl-child from too much domestic chores. Also, efforts to provide families with friendly sources of energy and income may contribute to enhancing Lushoto's education profile and status.

Besides, a problem of laxity among men was also pointed out by the participants:

*To a large extent, men in Usambara do not want to assume their responsibilities, and that is why the burden for upbringing children is left to mothers, including children's day-to-day needs at home and school. This triggers women's habit of convincing their children not to do well at school due to life challenges (Ward Education Officer).*

Impliedly, men and the way they behave determine their children's performance in schools. Thus, men in Lushoto need encouragement for them to be responsible and support their families. One of the parents claimed that attitude towards girls' education is now changing:

*"We are no longer entertaining the habit of not educating girls. Things have changed. We used to have a view that a girl will one day get married, but a boy stays in the family. If you sell a farm to educate a girl, she brings no returns because she will go away"* (Parent, November 2021).

The economic status of a household also contributed to the variations in the performance of pupils in Lushoto schools. Income differences accounted for varying family statuses. As one participant explained:

*"Pupils coming from poor households also suffer academically in Lushoto; including having no basic requirements for schooling such as school uniforms, exercise-books, and others. When pupil do not have such needs, they easily become truants. If they stay, they feel so bad when they compare themselves with others. Poor families are also unable to provide appropriate nutrition, hence making pupils fail to perform well in studies as they get stunted mentally and physically"* (Education Quality Assurance Official, at Lushoto in November 2021).

By this description, participants indicate that low-income families fail to provide their kids the basics—food, clothing, and so forth—that they need for school. Pupils who live in such poverty eventually miss school and drop out. Therefore, initiatives to improve Lushoto's low performance must be combined with plans to alleviate poverty. Pro-poor education policies may also be beneficial since some members of the community seem to be so consumed by poverty that they find it difficult to focus on the need of education. A participant observed:

*"Poor households are really a stumbling block. What they have in their minds is their poverty and, therefore, lack the ability to sustain a child who goes for secondary education. It is for this reason they convince them to fail deliberately"* (Ward Education Officer, November 2021).

Individual pupils' poor background also determines the status of the school one attends. Explaining the situation in Lushoto, an interviewee shared the following:

*"After all, parents who are well-off take their children to English-medium schools where all services are good and adequate. Take my own example. Although I am just a teacher and a ward education officer; my children go to English-medium schools, and most of my colleagues are doing exactly the same. It is also the case with successful entrepreneurs. For children who do not get enough food at home, and do not get it at school either, they are pulled back academically. It is a psychological punishment to them, especially when they compare themselves with their age-mates who are from fairly well-to-do families"* (Ward Education Officer, November 2021).

Thus, poverty and wealth are further drawing segregation lines in Lushoto communities through education. Even the medium of instruction is proving to be a divisive factor, including schools' varied performances.

Giving more evidence on how performance is associated with poverty, one participant explained:

---

## Socio-cultural Factors Associated with Learners' Poor Academic Performance

---

*“Now that you are doing research, see if you can link examination results and poor households that receive TASAF support. People know that life is hard, but they don't believe education has life solutions as a key. They believe what is important is what you earn. Money has the ability to solve their problems, that is why in my community looking for money is more important. Some children are taken to work as shopkeepers, and to do domestic work to get money. They cite examples of children who passed Std. VII exams and had gone up to form four; but have nothing: some are just in the streets riding motorbikes. They also question whether education is important when they see members of parliament who never made it to secondary education but are now making crucial decisions. Some are councillors; some are imams [Islam], or pastors [Christianity]; and others own shops in their home-towns. Some are also masons. All these have never been to secondary schools. Instead, they are the ones marrying teachers, nurses, etc., and are living quite well. Therefore, school is not important: one just needs to be street-smart to make it in life”* (Headteacher at School D, November 2021).

Implicitly, learning experiences need to be tied to what people do in life to earn a living for education, particularly in rural settings, to bring about tangible results. In relation to the questionable economic value of education, some of the participants said unequivocally:

*“We get disappointed with those who tried hard to go for further education only to return empty-handed, and remain idlers. We are also not happy to see hundreds of little children congested in one classroom. These schools have very few teachers; they can't teach our children adequately”* (Parent, March 2022).

*“As parents we have something to do as well. Pupils look so poor. You find a child having so worn-out shorts. We need by-laws to make parents responsible. Our kids go and stay at school, and stay hungry. We agree to contribute for midday meals, but some parents refuse to contribute. Then, do you think the few who are willing to do so will continue bringing food and contributions to the school?”* (Parent, March 2022).

Ethnic origin is another aspect that Lushoto study participants reported as having an impact on the academic success of pupils. The Mbugu, Pare, and Sambia ethnic groups are the most dominant inhabitants in Lushoto. Children from these ethnic groups perform very differently from one another. As one participant further explicated:

*“Some of the ethnic groups do not see the importance of education. When teachers punish kids from Mbugu families, they feel that they are not being treated fairly, they stop going to school and, eventually drop out of studies. Children from this ethnicity are so much scared of strokes; they easily drop out of school for that”* (Education Quality Assurance Official, at Lushoto in November 2021).

These justifications demonstrate the need to reconsider the use of corporal punishment to improve the performance of pupils in Lushoto, and keep them in school. They also highlight the need for teachers who are culturally-competent enough to recognise the differences in pupils' backgrounds; and treat them fairly.

Nevertheless, some participants considered the effect of ethnic background to be rather negligible considering the changes occurring in an inter-ethnic setting. In this regard, as one of the participants said:

*“The issue of ethnic divide is not that pronounced, even though some say Mbugu children are very smart as compared to the Sambaa and Pare. Mbugu parents in Kwemakame, Mazumbai, Kinko, Rangwi, Masare, Mavumo, Kitanga, and Magamba wards are committed and like education-based progress (Ward Education Officer, November 2021).*

The interviewee’s explanation hints at the role parental commitment play, and how it could be a game-changer for all ethnic groups living in the area. Indeed, as assumed in the sociocultural theory, ethnicity has an influence in one’s learning (Skerrett, 2006). Moreover, evidence regarding how education had contributed to people’s development is an important capital investment capable of encouraging people to value their children’s education.

Apart from ethnic background, Lushoto’s traditional beliefs and rituals also determined the course of children’s schooling in the district. One of the parents explained:

*“We have things which must take place, and in which our children have to take part. For example, we solve some of our problems through Pungwa [traditional dance] at night. We do it to calm down evil spirits. The next morning, children do not go to school” (Parent).*

Another parent claimed that some traditional rituals made some pupils side-step school to participate in them:

*“Some few chosen boys must be given Mkwiji [traditional healer’s bag] when they come of age. A clan must hand over its Mkwiji to a new generation individual so that this person takes full responsibilities as a clan healer. With such responsibilities, and a lot of people to attend to, the chosen one can no longer go to school or value education anymore” (Parent in FGD).*

Against such a backdrop, a parents’ education in Lushoto district could serve as a mitigating factor to ensure pupils stay in school and attain academic progress. Based on the participants’ explanations, parents with low education levels, or with no formal education at all, in many cases will not support a child’s education. The opposite is the case for educated parents. One of the education officers said:

*“Parents’ education level affect children’s progress because a parent who has gone to school, even if he is not economically well-off, finds a way out; he fights and encourages a child to do well at school, and find time to follow up on the child’s progress. It is a different case when a parent is not educated. I have seen this in my ward in some Lushoto schools that I have happened to serve as the headteacher” (Ward Education Officer).*

A similar view was given by one participant, who linked parental reluctance to the education of their children as arising from their being illiterate themselves:

*“We have parents who do not know how to read or write. They do not understand the importance of education and, therefore, do not take trouble to encourage their children to go to schools. The end result is truancy and poor performance” (Teacher).*

Parental understanding of the value of education is crucial in giving children in Lushoto equitable access to formal education regardless of their ethnic, religious and financial background. As such, local authorities and education officials need to meet with parents; and educate and convince them on the value of education as an inalienable right for the future generation.

Not surprisingly, some parents end up engaging their children in economic activities that are in essence the responsibilities of adults:

*“The cause of academic failure is parents; they do not bother to encourage their children to study. Some parents do dare come to school to seek permission for their children, for example, to attend a clinic on their behalf; or go with the parent to the shamba (farm lot). One pupil narrated to a friend that he also accompanies his parents to wherever they are going. Parents are also telling each other that it is possible to have a child attend a farm instead of going to school. We once had a case of a parent whose daughter did not pass Std. VII exams in 2021; the girl is now the caretaker of the entire family, and even provides the younger siblings with their school needs. The parent has confessed that even the school contributions that she brings are from this daughter who is currently working in Moshi”* (Headteacher at School E, March 2022).

Such a parent only sees what the family has gained from the child's loss of education prospects; and not what the daughter has lost as a person in realising her full potential as a human being, including her inalienable right to education.

Participants also noted that peer group pressure on pupils' study habits—particularly when classmates persuade one another not to work hard in class or attend school—seems to impact on academic success. Some participants have also witnessed the significance that intrinsic desire plays in students' pursuit of academic excellence in the face of sociocultural obstacle. According to one teacher, some are highly motivated, while others are not.

Although these sociocultural factors have negatively affected education in Lushoto, there is still room for further change in the district. One optimistic participant said:

*“The community is now changing. You can see that some of us are willing to have our children back to school even when they fail Std. VII. Our once strongly held traditions are no longer affecting education because they are just for a few people, and children do not take part in them. But there are other problems, which we are solving. In the past, we used to have very challenging school environment. Our school had three teachers: how can they teach?”* (Parent).

Such peer group influences agree with a tenet of the sociocultural theory: that the kind of peer one is associated with determines his/her learning (Daneshfar & Moharami, 2018). In other words, sociocultural factors are impermanent, and may also be affected by school-based factors. Indubitably, the current study exposes the multifaceted nature of problems besetting elementary education prospects in Lushoto district, whose primary intervention would also entail changing the mindsets of the community members. As such, community-based factors need addressing through community education and the employment of an ethnographical approach to bring about the desired change in the education prospected for children in Lushoto.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the study findings, it is apparent that it is sociocultural factors that made some schools in Lushoto perform poorly consistently relative to others in the same district during PSLE. These factors included a negative attitude of the community



towards formal education, unmotivated parents, and the preference for religious education. One cannot also preclude the disparities that exist between schools in terms of school infrastructure and facilities, which also impact academic performance. Well-off schools with better facilities and resources tend to perform better in terminal examinations than those lacking such endowments. Also, the school-based teaching and learning factors that affect learners' performance in PSLE in Tanzania—which are attributable to leadership, the number of teachers available, as well as their capacity to teach science, English and mathematics—also affect school performances in Lushoto.

Moreover, it is recommended that, to improve academic performance of pupils in schools that have persistently performed poorly in PSLE in Lushoto district, education officials should provide community education with the purpose of changing the way that education is viewed in Lushoto. Intensive and positive involvement of parents in school matters and in the learning of their children must also be promoted. Moreover, there need be a continued collaboration among the district educational leadership, the community, teachers and pupils.

The five-component model that was tried out in this study has proven to be helpful in not only understanding the contributory factors, but also in considering means for addressing the seemingly intractable problems behind the endemic and persistent poor performance in examinations for some schools in the study area. Further studies, therefore, can be undertaken to examine the extent to which action taken against people's disregard of the value of schooling may help them maintain a non-detrimental attitude towards education.

## **References**

- Agyeman, G.A., Frimpong, E.A. & Ganyo, E.R. (2016). Students' Perception of Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Academic Performance. *American Scientific Research Journal for Engineering, Technology, and Sciences* (ASRJETS): 19(1): 19–24. Retrieved from <http://asrjetsjournal.org/> on 9th July 2022.
- Akinade E. A., Adewuyibi, T.D.O. & Sulaiman, A.A. (2010). Socio-Legal Factors That Influence the Perpetuation of Rape in Nigeria. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Science*, 5(1): 1760–1764.
- Akintoye, H. & Saliu, J. (2020). Impact of Socio-Cultural Factors on Senior Secondary School Students Academic Achievement in Physics. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation*; 5(8): 129–134.
- Corno, L. & Voena, A. (2021). Selling Daughters: Child Marriage, Income Shocks and the Bride Price Tradition. Working Paper.

---

### **Socio-cultural Factors Associated with Learners' Poor Academic Performance**

---

- Daneshfar, S. & Moharami, M. (2018). Dynamic Assessment in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: Origins and Main Concepts. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 9(3): 600–607.
- Enciso, P. & Ryan, C. (2011). Sociocultural Theory. *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*, 132–138.
- Fukofuka, S. (2007). The Impact of Spirituality on Academic Performance. In *International Forum Journal*, 10(2): 35–47.
- Itulua–Abumere, F. (2013). The Significance of Religious Education in Local Primary Schools (Specific reference to Christianity). *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 6(6): 69–94.
- Jeynes, W.H. (2003). The Effects of Religious Commitment on the Academic Achievement of Urban and Other Children. *Journal of Education and Urban Society* 36(1):44–62. DOI:10.1177/0013124503257206.
- Kipfumo, B.H. (2016). *Impact of Child Labour on Pupils' Attendance: A Case of Selected Primary Schools in Lushoto District, Tanzania*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Dodoma.
- Kozulin, A. (Ed.). (2003). *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kythreotis, A., Pashiardis, P. & Kyriakides, L. (2010). The Influence of School Leadership Styles and Culture on Students' Achievement in Cyprus Primary Schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 48(2): 218–240.
- Line, L. W. (1991). *Correlates of Effective Schools: The First and Second Generation*. Okemos MC: Effective Schools' Product, Ltd.
- Malmberg L.E. & Sumra, S. (2001). *Socio-Cultural Factors and Tanzanian Primary School Students' Achievements and School Experience*. Utafiti [New Series] Special Issue, 4: 1998–2001:207–219.
- Miyakado, B.P. & Timothy, N. (2014). Effects of Students' Sexual Relationships on Academic Performance Among Secondary School Students in Tanzania. *Academic Research International* 5(4): 278 – 286.
- Murillo, F. J. & Roman, M. (2011). School Infrastructure and Resources Do Matter: Analysis of the Incidence of School Resources on the Performance of Latin American Students. *Elementary Education Journal*, 2(7): 22–30.
- Mwangi, R. (2016). Impact of School Leadership on Academic Achievement in Kenyan Secondary Schools. *Project: School Leadership in Kenya*.
- Ndlovu, N. (2018). School Resources and Students' Achievement: A Study of Primary Schools in Zimbabwe. *Academic Journals: Education Research and Review*, 13(7): 238–248.
- Njok, P.C, & Edinyang, S.D. (2014). Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting the Teaching and Learning of Social Studies in Nigeria. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 5(24): 1–7.
- Ntawiha, P., Nzabaliwa, W., Otieno, M., Ngaboyera, V. & Ntawiyanga, S (2020). Determinants of School Performance in Selected Public Secondary School in Rwanda. *Journal of Contemporary Research* 17(3) 20–37.
- Odanga, S.J. (2018). Influence of Socio-Cultural Factors on Performance in Examinations in Kenya. *Asian Research Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 7(1): 1–4.

- Oguejioffor, C. N. (2020). Early Marriage and Its Impact on Girl's Education in Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State.
- Ogweno, P. O. (2015). Teaching and Learning Resources as Determinants of Students' Academic Performance in Secondary Agriculture, in Rachuoni North Sub Country, Kenya. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 3(9): 577–587.
- Petersen, I., Louw, J., Dumont, K. & Malope, (2010). Adjustment to University and Academic Performance:.
- Sakiz, G (2015). Perceived Teachers' Factors in Relation to Students' Achievement Related in Science Classrooms in Elementary Schools. *European Journal of Science and Mathematics Education* 3(2) 115–124.
- Sharma, G. (2016). Teacher Support as Determinant of Academic Achievement. *The Journal of Education Research*, ISSN: 2456–2947.
- Skerrett, A. (2006). Looking Inward: The Impact of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Social Class Background on Teaching Sociocultural Theory in Education. *Studying Teacher Education*, 2(2): 183–200.
- Tandika, P. (2015). Stakeholders' Construction on Quality of Pre–Primary Education in Tanzania. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 3(4): 24–35.
- Tekin, A. K. (2011). Parent Involvement Revisited: Background, Theories, and Models. *International Journal of Applied Educational Studies*, 11(1): 1–13.
- Ternenge, T.S. & Torkuma, T.T. (2021) *Library Philosophy and Practice*. Summer 5–27–2021.
- UNICEF. (2005). *Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education*. The Gender Gap Report, Part One. New York: UNICEF.
- Walker, K. L. & Dixon, V. (2002). Spirituality and Academic Performance Among African American College Students. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 28(2): 107–121.