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Socio-cultural Factors and Tanzanian Primary School Students' Achievements and School Experience

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Abstract

We investigated how Tanzanian primary school students' *school experience* varied according to *school performance* in subjects such as mathematics and Kiswahili) and several *sociocultural factors* like parental educational level, gender, age, religion, and home language. A representative sample was collected from urban and rural schools in Morogoro region. 545 students (254 boys and 291 girls) from Std III through VII responded to a questionnaire in Kiswahili. The findings showed that high achieving students experienced the classroom atmosphere more positively and felt less social anxiety than low achievers. Use of Kiswahili at home was related with positive school experience in the urban sample and related with less use of native tongue in the rural group. Educational level of the parents was not correlated with their childrens achievements. Unlike the lowly educated parents, more highly educated parents had placed their children in higher performing schools (according to the Primary School Leaving Examination). Children in the urban higher performing schools experienced school more positively than in the lower performing urban school.

Introduction

Several serious challenges for the Tanzanian schools have been pointed out during the recent decades, for example decrease in student enrolment, large classes, lack of teaching materials and facilities, corporal punishment, teacher absence and student drop out (Chonjo, 1994; Ishumi, 1994; Khwaya Puja & Kassimoto, 1994; BEST, 1994; Malmberg & Hansdn, 1996). Macroanalysis of how financial crises in the country have affected the educational system have

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been carried out (Ishumi, 1994; Sumra & Samoff, 1994; Chinapah, 1996), but less emphasis has been devoted to how students perceive themselves in the present school system, that is the students' self-concepts. Considerable variation in students' school achievements can be found, which are due to sociocultural factors, for example parents' level of education, mother tongue and gender (Fuller, 1990; Hus6n, 1990; Khwaya Puja & Kassimoto, 1994; Temu, 1995; Booth, 1996).

Sociolcultural factors and achievement

Investigations of the effects of socio-economic status (SES) background on students' school achievements have been carried out across the world (Hus6n, 1990; Temu, 1995). These studies have established that the higher the educational level of parents, the higher their children perform at school and are more likely to pursue further studies. However, as Booth (1996) points out, several studies in Africa, in which SES has been included, have been based on homogenous or nonrepresentative samples. Also case studies of schools which provide valuable in-depth investigations of how one school functions (e.g., Kolouh, 1993) usually lack features of representativeness. In Tanzania, the educational level of parents has an impact on whether students apply for non-government schools or government schools, whether the child receives individual tuition of the teacher after regular school hours, or whether the child is assisted doing homework (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Subramamian, 1994; Temu, 1995). Also parents' attitudes and involvement towards their children's learning varies according to educational level (Malekela, 1994; Mganga & Mizambwa, 1997).

Gender has an effect on school experiences and achievement in Tanzania. Girls perform lower than boys especially in mathematics and science. Statistics show a higher percentage of boys than girls drop out. Girls receive negative expectations about their studies, from teachers, peers and the community at large (Bendera, 1994; Khwaya Puja, & Kassimoto, 1994; TGNP, 1993). These gender differences are more pronounced in secondary and further education than on the primary school stage.

The choice of school language in Tanzania has been pointed out as a "hot issue" on the political level (Rubagumya, 1991; Brock-Utne, 1993; Roy-Campbell, 1995). However, compared with its neighbouring countries, Tanzanians coexist peacefully regardless of tribe, language or religion. However, no empirical investigations have so far addressed the relation between mother tongue and educational achievement in Tanzania.

Student-teacher relations

Teachers are in a position of influencing the general atmosphere of the classroom through their actions, feedback and communication (Goodenow, 1993). This means that teachers influence how children feel about themselves at school, or their self-concept (Marsh, 1992). In previous research, the students' perceived interaction between themselves and the teacher has been labelled student-teacher relation (Anderson, 1994; Linnakyld, 1996), or student-self (Korpinen, 1990). Consequently, a positive relation with the teacher has been found to correlate with students' general satisfaction at school. In this article then, we have defined the students' perception of their teacher as classroom atmosphere. In other words, we are attempting to find to what degree the students experience that the teacher is fair and therefore maintaining a positive emotional climate in class.

Studies on the relation between school achievement and self-concepts have shown that high-achieving students at school have a more positive academic self-concept (Skaalvik, Valfins & Sletta, 1994), higher self-esteem (Korpinen, 1990), higher level of agency and control belief; (Little, et al, 1995). They attribute their performance to effort rather than to ability or luck (Juvonen & Murdock, 1993), and express lower level of ego-defence (Skaalvik, 1990) than low-achieving students. Moreover, teachers reward prosocial and academic behaviour in their student assessment (Wentzel, 1993; Bennett, et al., 1993; Temu, 1995), and also reward low-ability student who shows evidence of high effort (Griswold, 1993).

Clearly, these studies show that student-teacher relations are different for high and low achievers. Therefore teachers use both continuous assessment and final examinations in assessing Tanzanian students. The former is includes several aspects of student personal characteristics, such as cooperativeness and responsibility, while the latter covers their academic performance (Temu, 1995). As a contrast to classroom atmosphere, already mentioned, we, included a second measure covering for the negative side of the teacher-student relationship. We defined *social anxiety* as a feeling of uncertainty in situations of self-disclosure, in line with the defensive ego-involvement scale (Skaalvik, 1990) or as a negative affect (Linnakyld, 1996), that makes students feel ashamed in situations which are likely to lead to embarrassment in the classroom. Classroom atmosphere was expected to be negatively correlated with social anxiety.

Method

Selection of Schools

A sample of 545 primary school students (254 boys and 291 girls) from Standard III to Standard VII, were selected from urban and rural schools, in Morogoro, which we regard as a mid-range economic region, in August, 1996. We used the results of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) for 1995, as basis for selecting 33 and 22 schools within the municipality and in the Mlali ward, respectively. Based on the District Education Officers' (DEO)-reports (1996a,b), the mean levels of the examinations were standardised within each area. As we were not interested in differences between the highest and lowest performing schools within each area, we used approximately ± .75 z-scores as selection criterion. Consequently, we selected two urban schools (52.8 points; Z= +39 and 32.8 points; Z= -.75) and three rur~l schools (32.03 points; Z= +33, 20.62 points; Z= -.58 and 20.04 points; z= -.60). The correlation between percentage of students entering secondary school and the mean PSLE result was rxy=.87 (rxy= .91 for urban and rxy= .69 for rural schools).

Selection of Subjects and Procedure

A questionnaire spanning students' perception of their relation with the teachers, as well as students' action-control beliefs Malmberg, Wanner, Sumra & Little, 1998) was constructed. It was pre-tested with a small group of children of various age as subjects, in Dar es Salaam. According to that experience, unclear wordings were changed for higher face validity.

The second version of the questionnaire was administered by research assistants during regular school hours in groups with a maximum of 35 students, without their teachers being present. One of the assistants read the items aloud while the other helped the children to fill in the questionnaire. In the introduction of the lessons, the students were trained to use the four step scale ("0--hapana, 1=mara chache, 2=mara nyingi, 3=kila wakati"P'0=never, l=seldom, 2=often, 3=always") on items referring to everyday situations. The assistants emphasised that the questionnaire was not a surprise examination but intended to get access to what students think about their studies, teachers and school performance. Filling in the questionnaire took from 45 to 75 minutes, depending on the age of the respondents.

In the urban schools each class comprised 57 - 227 students. Therefore, each ninth student was selected to participate. Six questions in the urban sample were excluded, due to frequent missing values. In the rural schools the group size

varied from 7 – 39. Ten questions in the rural sample were also excluded, due to frequent missing values. When the mean level of achievement of our selected sub-samples were compared with the total group of students the sub-sample were drawn from, for Kiswahili and mathematics separately, it was found that only one sub-sample out of 25, achieved lower than the total student group. In other words, the sample is suggested to be representative of the students in these sbhools, as far as achievement is concerned.

Measures

In the background part of the questionnaire, we included several items for the sociocultural factors. The respondents indicated their *parents' educational level,* for mothers and fathers separately (O=no education, 1= adult education or basic vocational training only, 2= primary education, 3=primary education and vocational training, 4=secondary education or certificate level, 5=secondary education and diploma level, 6=university degree), ggee, *gende* and *religion* (Islam or Christianity). *Language use* at home was measured with three items; the use of Kiswahili, English and Native tongue on four-point scales ("O=hapana, I =mara chache, 2=mara nyingi, 3=kila wakati") for each language separately. Students indicated whether they could speak *Kiswahili at school start* (O=no; 1=yes). For *achievement,* the previous report card grades (0-100) were copied at the schools, for Kiswahili and mathematics separately. For comparison between urban and rural schools the dummy-coded variable EMi2n was used (O=urban; 1= rural). The *performanc* in the PSLE, of the schools within each district was also dummy-coded (0= lower performing school; 1=higher performing school).

Two variables for students' school experience were included. *Classroom atmosphere* was measured with 6 items, e.g., "Darasani kwangu walimu wengi huwatendea sawa wanafunzi wote"/'In my class most teachers treat all students alike" on four point scales as mentioned earlier. The items were worded with the "generalised teachee' as target teacher. Internal consistency was (Cronbach's alpha) a=.58. Social an2ji Ut was measured with 8 items, for instances., "Afadhali nisijibu maswali darasani kwa sababu naogopa kukosea/ "I would rather not answer questions in class, because I am afraid I might make mistakes" on the same scale type. The items focused on behaviours in classroom which students think are likely to lead to embarrassment are similar with Skaalvik's (1990) ego-defence scale. Internal consistency was $\alpha = 64$.

Results

Sociocultural factors and school performance

Initial analyses, using t-tests, showed that the educational level of urban parents was higher than that of rural parents as expected (ps <001). Urban children are reported using more English and less native tongue at home, than rural children did (ps <001). Urban children achieved lower than the rural children in mathematics (p <001), but equally in Kiswahili (p=.66). Due to these regional differences, we produced correlation matrices for the urban and rural group separately (see Tables 1 and 2). In the correlation tables we used pairwise analyses, since the amount of non-completed items varied non-systematically. The interpretation of the correlation matrix is based on substantial magnitude of the coefficients. The larger the sample size the more significant the coefficients become, significant even though they are weak in magnitude.

School Differences within the Regions

When the higher performing schools were compared with the lower performing ones (± .75 z-scores), a larger difference was found between the urban schools (see Table 1) than between the rural schools (see table 2), when it comes to educational level of parents, achievement and school experience. The students in the higher performing urban school were younger than the ones in the lower performing school. Additionally, most of them were Christians. They performed higher in Kiswahili and mathematics, experienced a more positive classroom atmosphere and less anxiety than the students in the lower performing school. Among the urban students the achievements in mathematics decreased markedly by age. Although not shown in the table, the achievements in mathematics were lowest in the lower performing urban schools, among the five schools included in the sample. Students reported using Kiswahili at home more often as they grew older.

The parents in the urban group had more similar educational levels than the parents in the rural group. The students in the higher performing rural schools were reported as using more Kiswahili and less native tongue at home, than those in the lower performing schools. More Muslim students were found in the higher performing schools, than in the lower performing rural schools.

In neither group did educational level of parents correlate with school achievement. In the rural group the children who reported using more Kiswahili at home, had more highly educated mothers, reported using less native tongue, could speak Kiswahili at the start of school, and showed a tendency to achieve higher in both ICswahili and mathematics.

Table 1. **Correlations between sociocultural factors, school achievement and school experience, for the rural sample (n:s pairwise 178-214)**

	1	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.		
1. School[a]		.61											
2. Educational level (father)		.06	-.00										
3. Educational level mother)		.01	-.11	-.25***									
4. Gender (O=boys, 1=girls)		.08	.05	.02	-.03								
5. Age		.06	-.06	.01	.14***	-.02							
6. Religion		-.02	.12	-.02	.05	-.03	-.04						
(O=Islam, 1=Christian)		-.11	.09	-.02	-.04	.06	-.11	:21**					
Home language		-.04	-.08	-.06	.11*	-.03	.12*	.00	-.03				
7. Kiswahili		.05	.02	.04	-.13*	.13*	.10	-.09	.02	.14*			
8. English		.04	-.03	-.'09	-.34***	.16**	-.01	-.09	-.04	.04	.59***		
9. Native language	7***	.04	.09	-.05	.00	.02	.13*	.12*	-.02	.00	.13*	.15**	
10. Kiswahili at school start		18**	-.11	.05	-.04*	-.02	-.20***	-.03	.05	-.15**	-.23***	-.21**	-.38***
(O=no; 1=yes)													
School achievement													
11. Kiswahili													
12. Mathematics													
School experience													
13. Classroom atmosphere													
14. Social anxiety													

School (O=lower performing schools; I =higher performing school)

Note: all levels of significance are two-tailed: p<05 p<.01 p<001

Table 2. Correlations between socio-cultural factors, school achievement and school experience, for the rural sample (n:s pairwise 178-214)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. School[a]													
2. Educational level (father)	.03												
3. Educational level mother)	-. 11	.35***											
4. Gender (O=boys, 1=girls)	-.02	-.01	.07										
5. Age	-.02	.09	-.05	-.05									
6. Religion (O=Islam, 1=Christian)	-.24**	-.04	.14*	-.17*	-.09								
Home language													
7. Kiswahili	.19**	.12	.19**	.03	.02	-.13.							
8. English	.09	.08	-.07	-. 16*	.01	.10	.13						
9. Native language	-.12	.03	-.00	.04	.09	.00	-.27***	.00					
10. Kiswahili at school start (O=no; 1=yes)	-.01	-.04	.11	-.10	.03	-.07	.14*	.01	-.05				
School achievement													
11. Kiswahili	-.06	.06	.08	-.13	-.00	.04	.15*	-.08	-.14	.09			
12. Mathematics	-.13	.01	.09	-.09	.10	.06	.18*	-.10	-.14	.05	.57***		
School experience													
13. Classroom atmosphere	.0 1	.10	.16*	-.01	.15*	.12	.14*	-.12	-.07	-.05	.23**	.27***	
14. Social anxiety	-.05	-.09	-.06	.13	14*	-.06	-.07	-.03	-.02	.02	-.28***	-.35***	-.37***

School (O=lower performing schools; I =higher performing school)

Note: all levels of significance are two-tailed: p<05 p<.01 p<001

School Achievement and School Experience

The relation between achievements in mathematics and Kiswahili was high in both regions. The correlations between classroom atmosphere and social anxiety was negative, as expected. The correlations between achievement and classroom atmosphere ware positive, and between achievement and social anxiety negative. No regional differences in school experiences were found. However, in the urban group, achievement in both subjects correlated with the use of Kiswahili at home, but not in the rural group. As mentioned earlier, the difference in school achievement between the urban higher and lower performing schools was stronger than the difference between the rural higher and lower performing schools.

Discussion and Conclusions

We have investigated how students' school experience varied according to achievement and sociocultural factors.

First, classroom atmosphere and social anxiety, as expected, were negatively correlated with each other, (Korpinen, 1990; Linnakyld, 1996; Skaalvik, 1990). The magnitude of that correlation suggests that the two constructs are separate, overlapping entities. The overlap indicates that the teachers influence the general atmosphere in a class: the more positive the climate is, the less anxiety the children experience. The non-overlap suggests that factors not included in the present study can be partly responsible for the feeling of positive class atmosphere or anxiety. For example, as Temu (1995) points out, the general atmosphere at school, a positive teacher headmaster interaction, teacher-teacher interaction, as well as teacher-parent interaction can account for well-being of the students within one school. On the other hand, if children encounter one teacher, among several who is an authoritarian or uses corporal punishment, while the others do not, that could make them feel more anxious in some lessons than others. In future research, it could be interesting to use specific subject teachers as "target teachers" in this kind of study, instead of teachers in general. Other variables as predictors of anxiety, for example, peer-relations, school absence, health status, or father's absence (e.g., Booth, 1996) could be worthwhile.

Second, school experience and achievement were related quite substantially in both the urban and rural schools. For achievement in Kiswahili, unlike in mathematics, the correlation with anxiety (-.27 and -.35) was moderate although stronger than the correlation with classroom atmosphere (. 15 and .23). This

finding suggests that in the case of achievement in Kiswahili, not in mathematics, the negative impact of the teacher is stronger than the positive impact of the teacher, which is in line with research saying that people react more strongly to negative feedback than to positive (Coleman, Jussim & Abraham, 1987). In the case of the urban students, the use of Kiswahili at home was also related with school experience in the same magnitude as achievements in Kiswahili.

School and Regional Differences in Mathematics and Kiswahili

Achievement in mathematics was strongly related with Kiswahili, which is of similar magnitude as the correlation between achievement in English (mother tongue) and mathematics of Canadian students (Byrne & Shavelson, 1986). In the present study, no gender differences were found for school achievement, in contrast to previous studies in Tanzania (TGNP, 1993; Bendera, 1994). The probable explanation of this finding is that gender differences become more pronounced in secondary and tertiary education, than they are on the primary stage. The educational level of parents was not correlated with the achievements of their children. Instead, in the urban group, the impact of the parents educational level was found between the higher and lower performing schools. The age difference for achievement in mathematics in the urban group was found, but not in the rural group. It is possible that the criteria for achievement levels in the standardised tests increase more rapidly than the students learn the subject content. Interestingly students in the lower performing urban schools achieved lowest in mathematics among all the five schools included in the study.

The difference between the higher and lower performing urban school is perhaps not so surprising. The criterion for marks in mathematics is higher than the criterion for Kiswahili. Clearly, the direct effects of region and parental educational level are in line with world wide findings although not so pronounced (Hus6n, 1990). Parents' selection of school for their children seems to be an important factor, especially in the urban area, where they may have the possibility of choosing between several schools, while this is not the case with rural parents.

The studies regarding the use of Kiswahili suggest that this variable has perhaps been underestimated in research on primary school students' achievements. More studies on students' self-concepts and student-teacher relationships are called for.

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