

Performance in Modern Agriculture in Swaziland: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

An analysis of the school performance in the external agriculture examination revealed that some schools consistently performed well while others constantly performed poorly. There has been no study conducted to compare high performing and low performing elementary schools in the area. The aimed to compare the high and low performing schools in Agriculture. It focused on 27 schools and targeted 15 high performing schools and 12 low performing schools. This study was carried out to collect data on the teachers of various schools in Eswatini. All the 38 teachers and 26 teachers from high and low performing schools respectively, participated in this study. A questionnaire was used to collect data on the subjects of study. The data collected were then validated by experts and teachers. Thirty agriculture teachers were selected for the pilot test to establish inter-item reliability using Cronbach's Alpha and the reliability coefficient was .85. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The result indicated that High performing schools have the following features that low performing schools lack: motivation of learners to excel in academic work, practice farming in school garden, student making consultations with teachers, provision of extra lessons for students, monitoring class attendance and absenteeism, and teachers attending classes regularly. Aside from the teachers, the parents and the Ministry of Education were also more involved in the academic success of high performing schools than those in low performing ones. The study suggested that improving the academic performance of low performing schools should be prioritized. This can be done by addressing the various issues affecting low performing schools.

Keywords: performance, modern agriculture, schools

Introduction

In Swaziland, the teaching of agriculture has evolved from Agricultural Science to Modern Agriculture and Prevocational Agriculture. Agricultural Science was mainly taught as an ordinary level subject. It was mostly theoretical and was offered by the Cambridge O. Level Examinations Syndicate (Simelane, Mkhwanazi & Dlamini, 1999). The Modern Agriculture Programme was launched in 1985 to replace the Agricultural Science. Its goal was to promote positive attitudes towards farming among the youth (NERCOM Report, 1985). The changes in the syllabus of

secondary school education greatly impacted the development of agriculture, change of syllabus from Ordinary Level (O'level) to International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and then to Eswatini General Certificate of Secondary Education (EGCSE). The changes were made to provide a relevant syllabus for the students. Modern Agriculture students are doing the EGCSE syllabus at senior secondary schools. The students then sit for the external examination organized by the Examinations Council of Swaziland. By year 2020, it was revealed that some schools consistently performed well while others had continuously performed poorly (Examination Council of Swaziland, 2017; 2018; 2019).

In 2012, the ministry stated that some schools remained on top while others were at the bottom. Some schools performed well while others were mediocre in the Agriculture external examination. This situation forced some parents to enroll their kids in better performing schools. There is no study that has focused on the compare of high performing and low performing Modern Agriculture schools in Swaziland. Thus, this study sought to analyze the high and low performing schools in Modern Agriculture in Eswatini.

Literature Review

The study was based on the Systems Analysis Theory postulated by Sheppard in 1998, which proposes that a system has three main indicators: input, process, and output. Input indicators refer to the relevant physical facilities such as personnel and financial resources devoted to education (Sheppard, 1998). Archbald (1996) described input variables as “givens”, because the system has little or no control over them in the short term. Indicators of these variables are useful for understanding the demographic conditions affecting the school such as poverty, ethnic composition and employment. The process indicators refer to the manner in which the resources are distributed in a system.

The factors that affect the school's demographic conditions are also known as the process indicators. These measures help identify the various factors that are affecting the school's academic success. This may refer to the various strategies and practices used by school leaders. It also provides insight into the level of skills that the education system produces. These outputs are used to measure the system's performance on various educational goals such as academic achievement, values, student behaviour, and parental satisfaction (Archbald, 1996).

The study aims to collect input data from various stakeholder groups such as teachers, parents, students, and employers. The process indicators are used to identify the various factors that influence the academic performance of students in Agriculture. Lastly, the product indicator is the learners' academic performance in Agriculture.

Academic performance in school is linked to various factors such as parental involvement, school environment, peer influence, and learning facilities (Narad & Abdullah, 2016; Hanushek, Kain, Markman, & Rivkin, 2003; Singh, Malik, & Singh, 2016 and Kibaara & Ndirangu, 2014). Debnath, Raychaudhuri, and Majumder (2011) explored the various factors that affect the academic performance of students. They found that different socioeconomic factors such as the number of teachers and students in school affected the academic performance of students. Akerson and Ceylan (2014) found that the educational background of students and socioeconomic status of students affected their academic performance.

According to Nolen (2003), classroom characteristics such as the number of students and the types of activities they engage in influence their academic performance. Noble, Roberts, and Sawyer (2006) found that academic performance of students does not depend on their academic activities, perceptions of their adapting strategies and background qualities (such as family pay, circumstances at household level, and parents' level of education).

Rhona and Michael (2012) focused on some characteristics that distinguish high-achieving schools from those with low-achieving schools. Rhona and Michael (2012) concluded that characteristics distinguishing high-achieving schools from low-achieving schools were: school climate established by staff for learning, meeting improvement planning goals, parental engagement, and engagement of students in learning. Shannon and Bylsma (2007) identified the following characteristics for high performing schools: (i) clear and shared focus, (ii) high standards and expectations for all students, (iii) effective school leadership, (iv) high levels of collaboration and communication, (v) curriculum and instruction aligned with standards, (vi) frequent monitoring of teaching and learning, (vii) focused professional development, (viii) supportive learning environment, and (ix) high levels of community and parental engagement.

High-achieving schools had a more favourable environment and school culture than low-achieving schools (Makewa, Role, Role, & Yegoh, 2011). The most notable characteristics of these schools were home background and parental support for academic performance. Students in high-achieving schools have higher levels of book ownership, home ownership, and parental education. They also have higher aspirations for higher education (Anonymous, 2015).

Performance in low-performance schools usually stems from several factors, such as the government's inability to implement job-satisfaction measures in teachers. These include the failure of parents to counsel their kids, the ineffective teaching system, gross misconduct by students use of corporal punishment (Enwereji, Mbukanma, & Chukwuere, 2017). The negative behaviors of learners in school settings contributed to the decline in their performance (Enwereji et al., 2017).

Low academic performance is linked to community poverty, which can result in stress on the school. This stress is evidenced by the high number of teacher absences and the lack of expectations for student achievement (Corallo & McDonald, 2001).

In 2016, Brawner, Stephens, Eash, and Stripling argued that teachers contribute to the academic success of their students. Academic performance of students depends on the involvement of their school's stakeholders (Burby, 2003). Moswela (2014) stated that school stakeholders are people involved in leading and directing learners towards their competent development.

These are the various stakeholder groups that make up the school community, these include the government, teachers, parents, and students. The school regularly interacts with these groups and individuals. The headteachers and teachers as main stakeholders, should play an integral role in ensuring that learners receive quality education by employing different strategies to control disruptive behaviors in the classroom (Chukwuere, Mavetera, & Mnkandla, 2016; Dibapile, 2012; Isaiah & Nenty, 2012). The headteachers and the teachers should develop a school climate that is conducive to teaching and learning in order to enhance academic performance (Cheruto & Kipkoech, 2011). The head teachers should share the goals with the teachers and the learners (Sapungan & Mondragon, 2014). Similarly, several studies have found that parental involvement, support and interest on the progress of the learners, improved school academic performance (Burke & Hara, 2008; Moswela, 2014).

Other stakeholders factors that affect the academic performance of a school include the Ministry of Education, the local community, industries / companies and associations (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). The Ministry of Education is responsible for the development of policies that support student learning (Moswela, 2014). The community should be engaged through formal partnerships and informal relationships and activities.

School improvement processes should involve the participation of the community members. The community members, including parents, Families should have a voice in the improvement of their schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). This includes

having active roles in school improvement processes. Schools are also working in partnership with other external agencies and community organizations. School leaders work with various agencies and organizations to enhance the curriculum of their students. These include companies that sponsor various student projects (Bell & Cordingley, 2014).

Academic performance is the centre of attention of the whole education system. It is used to measure academic success and failure of students. The success and failure of any educational institution is measured in terms of academic performance of students. Both the schools and parents expect their students to perform well academically. They believe that academic success will improve their future security and career options (Narad & Abdullah, 2016).

Purpose of the study

The study focused on analyzing the academic performance of high and low performing schools in Eswatini. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Compare the academic characteristics of high and low performing schools in Agriculture as perceived by agriculture teachers.
2. Compare the stakeholders' influence on high and low performing schools in Agriculture as perceived by agriculture teachers.

Methodology

The study analyzed 27 schools, 15 high performing schools and 12 low performing schools in Agriculture for their performance in the external examination. There were 64 agriculture teachers, 38 agriculture teachers from high performing schools and 26 agriculture teachers from low performing schools from different schools in the

study. The schools were selected based on their performance over a three-year period. The study involved analyzing all the schools in the area. Low performing

schools underperformed during this period, and all the high performing schools excelled over this period.

A questionnaire was used to collect data about the school and its stakeholders. It was self-administered and consisted of three sections namely: characteristics of the school [12 items], the performance of the stakeholders [26 items], and demographic characteristics and background information [10 items]. The self-administered questionnaire used a Likert-type scale. The survey measures the influence of various stakeholders on the performance of high and low performing schools in Eswatini.

Likert-type scale had six ranges. 1= strongly disagree, 2=slightly disagree, 3=disagree, 4=agree, 5=slightly agree, and 6=strongly agree. The purpose was to gather information regarding the various characteristics and factors that influence a school's academic performance. The questionnaire was validated by experts from the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension at University of Eswatini, and two agriculture teachers.

A field test was also conducted on the instrument to see if it could maintain its reliability. The test was carried out by 30 agriculture teachers. The reliability of the various items was tested using the Cronbach's Alpha. The Cronbach's Alpha revealed that the instrument was 82% reliable. The test-retest reliability coefficient for the individual items was .87.

The researchers collected data about the teaching of agriculture. They were able to deliver the questionnaires to the teachers personally. Researchers asked the respondents to provide their mobile phone numbers so they could check if the questionnaires were completed. Permission to conduct the study was granted after

the school's principal and the respondents agreed to participate. The questionnaire was created to ensure the respondents' anonymity. The cell phone numbers and the questionnaire were only used by the researchers to access the data collected by them.

Also, the data was only accessible to researchers. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. For means less than 3.5, respondents agreed with the statement that was made. For means 3.5 and above, respondents agreed with the statement that was made.

Findings

Characteristics of High and Low Performing Agriculture Schools

Table 1: *Comparison of Characteristics of High and Low Performing Agriculture Schools*

Characteristics	High-performing schools (n=38)		Low-performing schools (n=26)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Motivation to excel in academic work	5.42	0.75	1.89	1.03
Practice farming in school garden	5.15	0.94	2.08	1.09
Provision of extra lessons for students	5.07	0.88	1.97	0.95
Provision for students' educational trips	4.31	1.29	2.93	1.09
Instilling self-discipline to the students	4.84	0.82	2.30	0.97
School having sufficient agriculture facilities / equipment	4.73	1.00	2.74	1.15
Teachers prepare lesson plans daily	4.78	1.16	2.65	0.89
Provision of extra-curricular activities	4.78	1.18	3.11	1.21
Monitoring student class attendance / absenteeism	5.05	1.01	4.23	1.24

Meting discipline to unbecoming students	4.89	1.08	2.30	0.73
Teachers attend classes regularly	5.02	1.10	2.42	0.85
Students make consultations with teachers	5.13	0.93	1.81	1.09

Note: Participants indicated agreement on a 6-point Likert-type scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Slightly Disagree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Slightly Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree.

From table 1 above, High performing schools were able to do well due to various factors such as their motivation to excel in academics, practice farming in school, and the provision of extra lessons and teachers regularly. Table 1 reveals that high performing schools were doing well because of the following reasons: motivation to excel in academic work (M=5.42, SD=0.75), practice farming in school garden (M=5.15, SD=0.94), student making consultations with teachers (M=5.13, 0.93), provision of extra lessons for students (M=5.07, SD=0.88), monitoring class attendance and absenteeism (M=5.05, SD=1.01), and teachers attending classes regularly (M=5.02, SD=1.10), and so on.

The low performing schools were mainly due to the following reasons. Aside from having no extra lessons for students, they also lacked sufficient motivation to excel in academic work. They also had teachers who were not present in the classrooms regularly. Students not making consultations with teachers (M=1.81, 1.09), low motivation to excel in academic work (M=1.89, SD=1.03), having no provision for extra lessons for students (M=1.97, SD=0.95), having no practice on farming in school garden (M=2.08, SD=1.09), indiscipline among students (M=2.30, SD=0.97), teachers not attending classes regularly (M=2.42, SD=0.85), teachers failing to prepare lesson plans daily (M=2.65, 0.89), inadequate facilities and equipment (M=2.74, SD=1.15), and so on.

Stakeholders' Influence on High and Low Performing Agriculture Schools

Table 2

Comparison of Stakeholders' Influence on High and Low Performing Agriculture Schools

Characteristics	High-performing		Low-performing	
	schools (n=38)		schools (n=26)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Headteachers</i>				
Create environment to nurture learning and growth for staff and students	5.00	1.09	1.74	1.07
Lead by example	4.63	1.21	2.24	1.24
Sharing of vision with the students	4.15	1.24	3.27	1.07
Convey a deep sense of mission	4.34	1.36	3.20	1.16
Forge links with community to enhance learning	4.00	1.11	2.66	1.03
<i>Agriculture Teachers</i>				
Have love for all learners in the school	4.76	1.17	2.12	.71
Promote innovation and creativity in students	4.52	1.15	2.27	.96
Seek to learn continuously	4.44	1.32	3.50	1.27
Help students find potential within themselves	4.50	1.20	2.43	.85
<i>Parents</i>				

Support school with effort such as paying fees and buying learning materials	4.36	1.45	2.47	1.02
Care for their children's education by showing interest in what they do	4.44	1.15	2.66	1.19
Instill a sense of responsibility in their children	4.39	1.38	2.43	.85

Community

Provides support to needy students	4.10	1.46	4.04	1.14
Offers bursaries to vulnerable students	3.76	1.58	3.66	1.32
Accommodates young people as members	3.97	1.38	2.97	1.34

Ministry of Education and Training

Involved in setting the strategic direction of the school	4.84	.97	2.92	.68
Works with the school to formulate policies	4.42	1.19	3.30	.83
Provides support for the teachers to effectively discharge duties	4.15	1.28	3.33	1.06
Collaborates with other ministries and nongovernmental organizations to assist the school	4.23	1.19	3.11	1.14

Industries

Collaborate with schools to formulate effective students' programmes	3.21	1.45	3.50	1.33
Support placement of teachers for professional development	3.17	1.30	2.53	1.17
Offer scholarships for the students	3.22	1.44	2.23	1.17
Professional associations				
Advocate for the future of the students	3.11	1.32	3.46	1.24
Provide the school with history of education	2.56	1.14	3.46	.94

Provide mentorship and role modelling for the students	3.32	1.33	3.30	1.22
Offer scholarships to the students	2.76	1.49	2.92	1.19

Note: Participants indicated agreement on a 6-point Likert-type scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Slightly Disagree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Slightly Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree

From table 2, High performing schools' headteachers were influential because of their ability to create an environment that encourages learning and growth. They also convey a deep sense of mission and link with the community. Table 3 depicts that headteachers in high performing schools were influential through the following: create environment to nurture learning and growth for staff and students (M=5.00, SD=1.09), leading by example (M=4.63, SD=1.21), conveying a deep sense of mission (M=4.34, SD=1.36), and forging links with the community to enhance learning (M=4.00, SD=1.11). The findings indicated that the head teachers did not create an environment that encourages learning and growth. This was despite the fact that many of the schools in low performing areas had great teachers. Findings revealed that the head teachers were unable to: create an environment to nurture learning and growth for staff and students (M=1.24, SD=1.07), lead by example (M=2.24, SD=1.24), forge links with the community to enhance learning (M=2.66, SD=1.03), and so on.

The study revealed that the teachers of agriculture in high performing schools and low performing schools seek continuous professional development. Agriculture teachers from both high performing schools (M=4.44, SD=1.32) and low performing schools (M=3.50, SD=1.27) sought for professional development continuously. The study also revealed that high performing agriculture teachers have the love for all students and promote creativity and innovation in them. Agriculture teachers from

high performing schools have love for all learners in the school ($M=4.76$, $SD=1.17$), promote innovation and creativity in students ($M=4.52$, $SD=1.15$), and help students find potential within themselves ($M=4.50$, $SD=1.20$). The agriculture teachers in low performing schools were not able to provide love and support to their students. They also did not promote creativity and innovation in their students. The agriculture teachers from low performing schools lacked love for all learners in the school ($M=2.12$, $SD=0.71$), do not promote innovation and creativity in students ($M=2.27$,

$SD=0.96$), and do not help students find potential within themselves ($M=2.43$, $SD=0.85$).

High performing parents were responsible for their children's academic performance by encouraging them to be active participants in their school activities. Parents from high performing schools were contributing to the academic performance of the students by caring for their children in showing interest in what they do ($M=4.44$, $SD=1.15$), instilling responsibility in the children ($M=4.39$, $SD=1.38$), and supporting school with efforts such as paying fees and buying learning materials ($M=4.36$, $SD=1.45$). Contrary to what some of the parents of low performing schools had to say, they were not actively involved in their children's education. Instead, they were more concerned with paying their fees and buying learning materials. Parents from the low performing schools were not forth coming in instilling responsibility in the children ($M=2.43$, $SD=0.85$), supporting school with efforts such as paying fees and buying learning materials ($M=2.47$, $SD=1.02$), and caring for their children in showing interest in what they do ($M=2.66$, $SD=1.19$).

The community was doing well in providing support to needy students and those with special needs in both high and low schools. Findings of the study revealed that the community was doing well in both high and low performing schools in the following areas: providing support to needy students (high performing – $M=4.10$,

SD=4.04, and low performing – M=4.04, SD=1.14), and offering bursaries to orphaned and vulnerable students (high performing – M=3.76, SD=1.58 and low performing – M=3.66, SD=1.32). The community accommodated young people as members from high performing schools (M=3.97, SD=1.38) better than young people from low performing schools (M=2.97, SD=1.34).

The Ministry is more involved with high performing schools than low performing schools. This is evidenced by the various activities that the school conducts, such as the strategic direction, policies, and support for the teachers. The Ministry is

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involved in setting the strategic direction of the school (M=4.84, SD=0.97), works with the school to formulate policies (M=4.42, SD=1.19), collaborates with other ministries and nongovernmental organizations to assist the school (M=4.23, SD=1.17), and provides support for the teachers to effectively discharge duties (M=4.15, SD=1.28). Unfortunately, the Ministry is not involved in all these areas in the low performing schools.

Discussion and Conclusion

The various factors that affect the academic performance of agriculture students are identified as the primary factors that determine the level of success in the industry. Wagstaff, Combs, and Jarvis (2000) found that although educators are trained to deal with absenteeism, they do not feel empowered to do so but tend to blame parents, cars, television, and learners' work schedule. According to Nolen (2003), academic performance is influenced by several factors, such as the classroom environment and student-centered activities. The characteristics of a classroom can affect a student's academic performance more than their motivational characteristics (Nolen, 2003). Academic performance is also influenced by various student-centered activities (Odom, Stoddard, & LaNasa, 2007).

High performing schools usually have a good school climate, clear and shared focus, effective school leadership, and a favorable school culture. These characteristics are observed in the following factors: High performing schools are characterized by good school climate (Rhona & Michael, 2012), clear and shared focus (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007), high standards and expectations for all students (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007), effective school leadership (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007), frequent monitoring of teaching and learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007), favorable milieu (Makewa et al., 2011), and favorable school culture (Makewa et al., 2011). Low performing schools are characterized by various factors such as gross misconduct (Enwereji et

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al., 2017, Moswela, 2014), teacher turnover (Corallo & McDonald, 2001), and use of corporal punishment.

Teachers and school leaders from high performing schools were more involved in making sure that the learners performed well in school than those from low performing ones. It has been revealed that the support provided by the government to the top performing schools was greater than that of the low performing ones.

Even though the industries are partly involved in the education sector, their support was mostly directed towards the low achieving schools. While the Ministry of Education was supporting high performing schools, it also provided less support to the low performing ones. Even though the industries were partly involved, their support was towards the low performing schools than the high performing schools. The community was supportive of both high performing and low performing schools. However, in accommodating the young people, those from high performing schools were more accommodated than those from low performing schools.

Although many factors were considered when assessing the support of teachers and subject associations for high and low performing schools, the findings suggest that all school stakeholders should collaborate in order to ensure that the teaching of

agricultural is successful. Head teachers play a vital role in the school's success, developing a conducive culture for teaching and learning (Cheruto & Kipkoech, 2011), and providing motivation for individuals in the school (Sapungan & Mondragon, 2014). They play an integral role in making sure that the students receive quality education (Dibapile, 2012; Isaiah & Nenty, 2012).

In a study, Chukwuere et al. (2016) stated that teachers provide a safe and comfortable learning environment for all students. Also, Brawner, et al. (2016) in a study that sought to establish the impact of teachers on an Australian Community, reported that teachers contribute to the student growth through their student

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performance. The findings of the study were supported by Moswela (2014) who asserts that the Ministry of Education's policies and procedures help improve student learning and academic success.

Shannon and Bylsma (2007) suggested that parents should be involved in the community through formal and informal relationships. This could help improve student academic performance. Parental involvement is important in enhancing students' academic performance (Burke & Hara, 2008), as it creates stability and a conducive environment to learning and academic success of the students (Hatry et al., 2004).

School leaders should involve the community in their improvement processes. Families should also have a voice in school improvement. The community members, including parents should have active voices in school improvement processes. The findings indicate that the industries and associations are not doing enough to support the schools. Students should be the main focus of these associations and industries. Industries should sponsor various student projects (Bell & Cordingley, 2014) while associations should represent the interest of the schools or the subject (Moswela, 2014).

The study also suggests that schools that offer agriculture should conduct a comparative study to identify areas of weakness and areas of strength. This may identify the practices that have influenced the academic performance of low performing schools in Swaziland. It could also help identify the factors that can affect the academic performance of these schools.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were highlighted in the study:

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1. The Ministry should ensure that low-performing schools have the necessary equipment and facilities for effective teaching and learning.
2. It is the school's responsibility to monitor that both the agriculture teachers and the learners are present when there is class in low performing schools. The school heads should also ensure that their agriculture teachers are trained daily on how to prepare lessons.
3. Parents and teachers should motivate their kids to perform well in school. Agriculture teachers can also arrange extra classes for those who are not performing well.
4. Teachers should be involved in the development of strategies and procedures that will support the learning of agriculture in schools.
5. Industries and Teacher associations should also promote their involvement in the teaching of agriculture.

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