

## **Educational Policies Contributing to Poor Academic Performance in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi**

**Godfrey Mtchera – MRSED**

James Chiona Catholic High School P.O. Box 5599, Limbe, Malawi

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**ABSTRACT:** *The study investigated the Educational Policies contributing to poor academic performance in five Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi in the past five years (2019-2024). The researcher adopted a mixed methods research design in which the researcher used purposive sampling to select certain respondents who shared new perspectives on the phenomenon under study and using a systematic review of data through grouping it into categories and themes. A sample of 126 respondents was used for the study and it was found with the help of Slovin's Formula for sample calculation comprising 80 students, 40 teachers, 5 Head teachers from all the five public secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi and the District Education Manager. The researcher used interview and questionnaire as tools for collecting primary data while documentary review was used to collect secondary data. The findings of the study revealed that some Educational Policies explained herein have made detrimental impact on students' academic performance in CDSSs in the District. It is worth noting that there is absence of empirical evidence regarding the negative impact of the Educational Policies on the academic performance of students in CDSSs explained hereunder: System of selecting students, policy on no class repetition, policy on bursary awards and corporal punishment prohibition policy. These study findings are important for the overall academic/educational development in Malawi and Africa in general. Hence the researcher's recommendation that this study ought to be an eye opener for the policy makers at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), the District Education Managers and Head teachers regarding the insurmountable value of policies that are suitable for students' academic excellence in CDSSs. Therefore, all educational stakeholders need to collaborate in making concerted effort to curb the problem of poor academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District - Malawi that has become rampart in the recent years causing public outcry in the entire District.*

**Keywords:** *Academic performance, Educational Policy, Selection, Bursary; Dismal performance; Order of merit, Defeatist mentality, Motivation.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Education is a complex system with many interconnected subsystems and stakeholders and this interconnectedness requires policy and decision makers to ensure that coherent and consistent education policy and strategic frameworks are in place from a sector and system perspective [1]. There has been poor academic performance in community day secondary schools (CDSSs) in Mwanza District – Malawi over the past five years (2019 – 2024) prompting the researcher to carry out a study for causes of this phenomenon within the realm of education and all its components. Regardless of the fact that Secondary Education is a prerequisite for building a firm foundation for the academic pursuit into the tertiary level of education and indeed for students' future, the academic performance of students in the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi has been dismal contrary to public expectation. According to Malawi Education Sector Analysis (MESA), the Government embarked on a project of revamping secondary education in all the Districts in Malawi by setting out the rationale and details of a new secondary school curriculum in order to enhance students' performance at MSCE [2]. We acknowledge that there are many factors that contribute to poor academic performance, this study focused on the educational policies' detrimental effect on academic performance in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi. The educational policies are put into effect by the Ministry of Education in liaison with School Administrators in order to enhance what is referred to as "Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"[3]. What is at stake with regard to educational policies is that students as stakeholders, were not consulted in the drafting phase but only in the promulgation phase making its impact quite adverse for smooth academic pursuit.

According to Hector Lamas, academic performance involves factors such as the intellectual level, personality, motivation, skills, interests, study habits, self-esteem and teacher-students relationship [4]. When education policies contravene the normal usage of these students' personal attributes in the CDSSs, the consequential reality would definitely be low or poor academic performance in these public schools. The study revealed that published results by the Malawi Examinations Board (MANEB) [5], show that in the past five years, the students' academic performance in the CDSSs in Mwanza District were as dismal as follows: In 2019 – 48%, 2020 – 28%, 2021 – 38%, 2022 – 36% and finally 2023 – 47%. These pass rates have caused public dismay among the general public in Mwanza District – Malawi.

Despite the Government of Malawi's concerted effort to boost the education sector through its National Education Sector Plan (NESP, 2008 – 2017), the Education Sector Implementation Plan (ESIP, 2020-2025) and the boost in resources through the \$ 90 million EQUALS (Improving Secondary Education) Project by World Bank which was rolled out on March 14, 2019; the Malawi Education Reform Program stipulates that there has been low academic performance in national examinations in public secondary schools in Malawi [6]. According to the Malawi Education Sector Analysis (MESA), the National Examination pass rates can be used as a reflection of acquiring learning outcomes [7]. For the past five years, from 2019 – 2024, the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) pass rates in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District have shown the downward trend, hence poor academic performance. Therefore, this research aimed at investigating the educational policies contributing to poor academic performance in public secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi.

## **II. General Objective**

Exploring the school factors contributing to poor academic performance in Community Day Secondary Schools in Mwanza District – Malawi.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

This study employed qualitative approach whereby the researcher used interview and questionnaire as tools of data collection. The sample of 126 people comprising 80 Students as main respondents and 40 Teachers, 5 Head teachers from community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi and the District Education Manager (DEM).

## **IV. STUDY FINDINGS**

### **4.1 System of selecting students to secondary schools**

The system of selecting students to join form one in Malawi operates in such a way that the it sorts out all the candidates based on performance in order of merit and it further links the candidates with the schools they merit and lists the candidates in order of merit with the geographical location [8]. During the interview, a respondent observed: *There is Government's unfair system of selecting students to the public secondary schools.* The study revealed that there was preferential government's system of selecting students to start form one in secondary schools in the country with particular regard to the types of secondary schools in Malawi. These are: National Boarding Schools, Grant aided boarding schools, Grant aided day schools and Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) or public schools in their meritorious order. According to the system of selecting students at Primary School Leaving Certificate of Examination (PSLCE), the most qualified students are selected to go to National Secondary Schools which are only four in Malawi, then the more qualified ones go to Grant aided boarding and day secondary schools and the less qualified are selected to go to CDSSs which are well known to be less esteemed schools in their entirety. This perspective is held because CDSSs are considered as '*less stocked / equipped schools*' in terms infrastructure, teaching personnel and materials just to mention a few.

The study further revealed that students in primary schools know about this system. They are aware from the very on set that being selected to go to any of the community day secondary schools is a clear manifestation that one is among the less qualified at the PSLCE. As such, when they are selected, their morale is always low (they become demotivated). As a result, they develop negative attitude that they cannot pass the form IV National Examination (MSCE) which breeds a defeatist mentality that has detrimental effect on their academic performance. That is why the Public Service Reforms Commission in Malawi [8], stipulates that there are inefficiencies and inequalities in the selection process at all levels and there are perceptions of regional and political bias within the selection processes.

Having the less qualified students at PSLCE selected to go to Community Day Secondary Schools where there meagre resources for effective learning and students are demotivated to learn, is tantamount to an uphill task in making students achieve high academic performance in such circumstances. This could be among the reasons that contribute to low academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi. This finding is in tandem with the study by Hector Lamas [9] which revealed that academic performance involves factors such as the intellectual level, personality, motivation, skills, interests, study habits, self-esteem or teacher-students relationship. Therefore, a system of selecting students with different intellectual capacities into one school (blending students) would be ideal for enhancing academic performance. This means that students could be helping each other through sharing or group discussions in order to inculcate in fellow ‘less gifted’ students the intellectual acumen that can enhance academic prowess.

According to Robbins’ perspective on Herzberg’s Motivation Theory [10], the intrinsic or job content factors aim at providing employees with meaningful works that are able to satisfy themselves by their work outcomes and harvest. Among Teachers’ many motivational factors are the presence of students in schools and their harvest is the students’ high academic performance. However, Teachers for the CDSSs in Mwanza District knew that their students were a ‘squad’ of less qualified pupils as per the digitalized system of selecting students at Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations (PSLCE) to start Form I. Hence the demotivational effect which breeds poor work out-put and less striving for excellence due to students’ persistently low academic performance.

Therefore, the study revealed that most Teachers in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi were demoralized by the calibre of their students as well as their recurring dismal academic performance in the terminal results. This experience deprived teachers of job satisfaction and caused resentment among teachers as they could not teach diligently as per expectation. This could be among the factors for poor academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi.

#### **4.2 No class repetition policy**

A few years ago, the National Education Policy (NAEP) [11] in Malawi gave a directive that no student is allowed to repeat any class regardless of their dismal academic performance. The justification for this decree is what Ikeda and Garcia postulate [12], that the policy on no class repetition for students signals to students no tolerance for weak efforts and low performance and it gives lagging students an opportunity to get serious and get ready for the next grade. Furthermore, According to West, class repetition is ‘self-defeating’ and discourages students with low motivation, self-confidence and social promotion and forces retained students to repeat the same curriculum while their advancing peers keep learning more advanced topics [13]. However, the situation in the Community Day Secondary Schools in Mwanza District - Malawi is awful in that the more everybody goes to the next class, the worse the results at Junior Certificate Examinations (JCE) and MSCE. It is a fact that every person undergoes integral development that comprises mental, psychological, physical growth among others. As this reality continues to be attained gradually, the students’ approach to education becomes more focused with a lot of enthusiasm. Suffice to say that West’s perspective was that of no class repetition in the early grade and he surely did not make allusion to secondary education as per the status quo in the education sector in Malawi.

During the interview, a respondent revealed that: *The Government’s policy that no student should repeat any class regardless of their poor performance is doing much harm than good to Education in Malawi.* The respondent further observed that there were times when the teaching staff knew pretty well that some lagging students who repeatedly displayed poor performance would probably not get through in the national examinations. As such, repeating a class would help them to gain momentum before proceeding to the next class but the policy at hand prohibits it. Owing to this prohibition, there were some students who proceeded to the next class while knowing that they would just attempt the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), unless a miracle happens they will not pass the national examinations. This could be among the reasons that have led to poor academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi.

According to Fauziah and Tan [14], by application, Herzberg’s motivation theory stipulates that when teachers are satisfied with motivational needs, their productivity and efficiency will improve. In a school setup, high students’ academic performance is one of the motivators or intrinsic factors for teachers who feel elated to see their students excelling in their studies. Such a milestone provides job satisfaction to teachers and it also propels them to exert more energy in their work performance in order to realize more achievements or accomplishments. That is why Levy states that job satisfaction has been recognized to have positive impact on students’ academic performance and teachers’ commitment [15].

Since the policy on no class repetition came into effect in Malawi, teachers in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi know that whether they work hard or not, every student will go to the next class as the new term commences whether they pass or fail examinations. As such, implicitly, Teachers observed that the fruits of their work were not being recognized by the Government. A fortiori, most Teachers develop a *laissez faire*

mentality and resentment towards their job due to demotivation in their work performance which consequently affected the students' academic performance.

#### **4.3 Policy on bursary awardees**

The policy on bursary awardees stipulates that any individual or organization of good will is at liberty to take on board for bursary any students of their choice whether male or female in consultation with the school management. According to Musee [16], allocation of bursaries to the poor and vulnerable students enables such groups to access and complete school. A majority of respondents revealed that different organizations were coming to community day secondary schools in Mwanza District - Malawi asking for names of female students to be included on their list of bursary awardees. In most cases, there was no consideration for male students due to over-emphasis on girls as being much needier than boys which is fallacious and discriminatory. In such cases, more male students either drop out of school due to lack of school fees or stay long time searching for school fees without attending lessons. On the other hand, most female students with stable financial background were often benefiting from bursaries / sponsorship from different organizations. According to Ojwang [17], lack of proper policy on bursary awardees refers to unfairness especially in the distribution of secondary school bursary awards which ought to be given to needy students.

The majority of Teachers revealed that there were many male students who really deserved bursary awards but most organizations preferred female to male students. More often than not, female students whose parents had the capacity to pay for their wards were included on the list whereas many male students, who neither had capable parents nor bursary, were sent back home for lack of school fees. Consequently, they would stay home for weeks or months until they found school fees thereby missing a lot of classes. For instance, there is an organization in Malawi called CAMFED that has been providing holistic support to 49,631 female secondary school students in form of school and examination fees, uniforms, sanitary wear, books, pens, bikes, boarding fees or disability aids [18]. Teachers further remarked that this situation was paradoxical in that many male students who were needier and more capable academically than female students did not benefit from the bursaries. As such, male students were often sent home for failure to pay school fees in time. According to Robbin, the provision of bursary as an extrinsic factor in Herzberg's theory of motivation would only eliminate job dissatisfaction for teachers but it could not provide job satisfaction [19]. This unfairness that comes along with the provision of bursaries coupled with lack of supply for intrinsic factors like higher salary from the Malawi Government made teachers dissatisfied. Most teachers became indignant thereby affecting their pedagogical work performance which undoubtedly caused poor academic performance for students in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi.

The researcher observed that there was no regulatory authority in Malawi that oversees the process of awarding bursaries to secondary school students. That is, non-governmental organizations request names directly from the schools administration based on their aforementioned preferences. Hence the dire need for Government's deliberate policy on bursaries that paves way for deserving students to be among the bursary awardees. The study further revealed that most students on bursary had displayed little or no commitment to their academic pursuit. Worse still, their parents' financial non-involvement in the bursary, coupled with their semi-literate status, made them less concerned about following up on their wards progress at school. We can safely conclude that this is one of the reasons that have contributed to low academic performance in CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi.

#### **4.4 Punishment prohibition policy**

According to Gershoff [20], punishment can be defined as the use of physical force, mental assaults or subjecting a penalty for an offense which usually includes inflicting some kind of hurt either to maintain discipline or to maintain decorum of the class as well as school. Contrary to this perspective, the Ministry of Education in Malawi through the National Education Policy, communicated to all Schools in the country that teachers are under no circumstances permitted to administer any corporal punishment to students regardless of the offense committed [21]. This directive was promulgated in defense of students' human rights and to create in schools a conducive environment for learning and not a place where pain and suffering are inflicted on the learners. However, a majority of the Teachers bemoaned that: *There is sheer over-emphasis on human rights in that Teachers are not allowed to administer corporal punishment to students regardless of the gravity of offence committed*. It had been observed that this declaration had perpetrated indiscipline among students which had escalated to worrisome levels in the community day secondary schools in Mwanza District - Malawi. It is a known fact that in the realm of education, students' discipline is one of the key aspects that propel students' academic excellence.

Most Teachers confided in the researcher that punishments like whipping, or slapping, scolding bitterly or verbal insult; act as a corrective measure or a deterrent for students' various malpractices. This finding is



supported by Lowanshi whose study revealed that there is a positive effect of punishment on academic achievement of students hence major steps must be taken by school administration to maintain the process of teaching and learning without any fear and pressure so that the achievement of students can be enhanced [22]. On the other hand, it is always important to realize that too much of anything is hazardous. In the event that punishments were permissible, moderation on the type of punishment and students' size or age must be a priority.

Head teachers revealed that in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi, some students could, at times, challenge their teachers because they knew that they could be punished lightly thereafter. Such indiscipline brought about 'hands off attitude' among teachers who often refrained from interaction with students to avoid being infuriated. Thus, teachers had resigned attitude towards students' indiscipline because they were afraid of being reported that they abused students if they administer punishments. Therefore, most teachers turned a blind eye on students' malpractice like truancy, absconding classes and unruly behaviors. This led to lack of productive and healthy teacher-students interaction which affected core duties of teachers like monitoring on students' academic progress which contributed towards students' poor academic performance in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi.

Proponents of Herzberg's motivation theory, articulate that there is a significant positive correlation between job satisfaction and teacher-student relationship [23]. This study revealed that the quality of teachers' work performance in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi was compromised by the punishment prohibition policy. This could indeed be one of the policies that have contributed to poor academic performance of students in public secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi.

### **Summary of the Study**

The findings revealed that a majority of educational stakeholders namely: Head teachers, teachers and students have been affected by the recurring poor academic performance of students in the community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi. The realization that educational policies have played a role in hampering the academic progress of these CDSSs as well as that of students and consequently leading to poor academic performance is a step towards resolving the challenges at hand. The explored policies are: policy on selection of students to form one at Government Schools, policy on no class repetition, policy on the awarding of bursaries to needy students and the punishment prohibition policy. The study revealed that all these policies are among the many factors that have perpetrated truancy among students, poor blending of students' mental capacities or different IQ levels / potentialities, unruly behaviors among students leading to poor academic performance in the CDSSs in Mwanza District – Malawi. The study findings are clear evidence that students' academic success is inextricably connected administrative policies in that their effect can strangle the concerted efforts that teachers and other stakeholders put in place. Therefore, it is worth noting that Teachers' demotivation and job dissatisfaction has detrimental effect on students' academic performance because they are pivotal for wards academic progress.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Therefore, it can safely be concluded that some educational policies in Malawi are among many other factors that have contributed towards poor academic performance in community day secondary schools in Mwanza District - Malawi. Regarding the defeatist mentality when selection of students to start form one in Government Schools is done, we need deliberate effort from the Ministry of Education to take on board School Counselors to assist students psychologically. Professionally, they can assist those selected to CDSS to refrain from distorted thoughts that they are bound to fail national examinations but to be convinced that they have the capacity to excel academically through motivation, building their self-confidence and self-esteem. The Ministry of Education ought to engage strategists and professional policy makers to do thorough review of educational policies so that they should be user friendly in order to necessitate academic excellence in all the Government Schools in Malawi. Furthermore, it is high time the Government of Malawi instituted a Bursary Regulatory Authority that will see to it that the procedures for awarding bursaries are fair and ethically justifiable. Suffice to say that the students' dismal academic performance in MSCE in the community day secondary schools in Mwanza District – Malawi for the past five years, is not the end of hope and death for enthusiasm for students' desirable academic performance in the years to come as per the expectation of all the respondents in the study.

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