

Stakeholder Perceptions about Factors that Cause Poor Student Performance in Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) Examinations in Lesotho

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ABSTRACT In Lesotho, students generally perform poorly in the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) examinations, as can be seen by the low pass rates, which stood at 55.4% in 2012. Few students (less than 22% in 2012) qualify for tertiary education, and a dismal performance in mathematics and science, resulting in only a small percentage that secures admission into science-based programmes. Using a quantitative design, the study collected data from a total sample of 808 respondents consisting of students, teachers, principals, deputy principals, school board members, education secretaries and Ministry of Education officials. The aim was to probe the participants' perceptions about student performance in COSC examinations. By using mainly frequency counts, the results reflect that most respondents rated the performance of their schools as poor. The reasons for this include a lack of selectivity, especially in Form A (Grade 8), a lack of commitment on the part of teachers and students, and the grinding poverty afflicting mainly rural households, which makes it impossible for parents to support their children's education.

INTRODUCTION

There is a general perception among the Lesotho public that the performance of students in the school-leaving Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) examinations is very poor, despite endless proposals by the public, parents and government to improve the situation. Student performance in these examinations has remained poor for decades and has only improved mildly after a number of years (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) 2012, Examinations Council of Lesotho (ECOL) 2013). Since Lesotho is a poor country with a narrow economic base, it regards its main resource as its people and seeks to educate them. Education gives people greater economic hence, it is important to improve its quality and student achievement, particularly at COSC level. Cheng (1996) holds that, although different stakeholders in a school may have different organisational goals, student achievement in the public examinations is still a common denominator or common "currency" for measuring school effectiveness. Reynolds et al. (2006) note that schools that particularly present a problem are those in disadvantaged areas, which persistently perform below the national norm, and that poverty is a substantial barrier to educational attainment and achievement.

Up to now, the COSC results are still very poor, and a pass rate has never reached the 60%

level (ECOL 2013). For example, of the total 13,739 candidates who sat for the examinations in 2012, 4,538 (33.0%) passed in third class, 2,420 (17.6%) in second class and 658 (4.8%) in first class, leading to a total of 3,078 (22.4%), first and second class candidates, who could be admitted to institutions of higher learning. However, many second class candidates usually fail to obtain a credit or at least symbol C in English, which disqualifies them for direct university entry. On close examination, it is clear that performance is particularly dismal in the critical subjects of mathematics and science; a situation which blocks many students' opportunities into science-based courses when they go to enrol at tertiary institutions. In this regard, Moru et al. (2009) established that the enrolment and retention rates of students in science programmes at Lesotho's sole public university, the National University of Lesotho (NUL), are low despite the Pre-entry Science Programme (PESP) the institution runs to bridge the gap between high school and university mathematics content, science content and laboratory skills in order to increase students' coping chances and throughput rates.

An Overview of Systems Theory

Organisations such as schools are better understood in terms of the models on which they are formed, organised and operate. One such

model is the *systems theory* or general systems theory (GST), first developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, an Austrian-Canadian biologist, who viewed an organism as a composite of cells (which are made up of molecules) that have to work in harmony for the good of the whole system (Owens 1991). Social systems theory is thus based on the notion of interdependence, cooperation and a symbiosis between the stakeholder groups, subgroups and individuals in an organisation; between them, these must work harmoniously for the accomplishment of organisational goals or effective education service delivery (Whitaker 1998). This underlines that an educational problem cannot be understood fully by looking at it in isolation or piecemeal. It should, instead, be viewed holistically as part of a network of interactions between different parts and functions.

Laszlo and Krippner (1998) constitute that the systems theory was a response to the increasing fragmentation and duplication of work in organisations and scientific and technological research and decision making during the first half of the 20th century. Bartlett (2010) concurs that systems thinking emerged as a critique of reductionism, which is a means of generating knowledge and understanding of phenomena by breaking them down into constituent parts and then studying them individually looking for cause and effect. In terms of systems thinking, the world is regarded as systemic which means that phenomenon is understood to be an emergent property of an interrelated whole. This underscores the importance of synergy and maintaining a healthy working relationship among staff within an organisation in order to produce a greater effect than the sum of individual effects. Flood (2010) stresses that *emergence* and *interrelatedness* are key ideas of systems thinking, emphasising the popular saying relating to emergence that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. This highlights the essence of systems thinking that everything is systemic, meaning that everything interacts with, affects and is affected by things around it.

According to Sheppard (1998), the systems analysis theory was adapted by Johnstone (1981), who maintained that there were three main indicators within subdivisions, namely *input*, *process* and *output* indicators. *Input* indicators refer to the relevant physical facilities such as personnel and financial resources de-

voted to education (Sheppard 1998). For Archbald (1996), *input* variables are “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. This may refer to school principals’ management practices and leadership styles. The *output* indicators reveal the quantitative and qualitative value of the products, or the level of skills produced by the education system. Archbald (1996) aptly notes that they reflect the system’s performance on educational goals such as academic achievement, values, student behaviour and parental satisfaction. The next section explores the applicability of systems theory and some factors that contribute to poor performance in COSC examinations.

Possible Causes of Poor Performance in COSC Examinations

The causes of poor performance in COSC examinations in Lesotho are multiple and multilevel. These include factors such as the environment, resources, students, teachers, and management, which together work in an interdependent network.

The Environment

Environmental factors play a crucial role in determining student achievement. The argument is usually made that parents with a high educational levels usually show greater appreciation for their children’s learning, create opportunities for them to learn at home, and supervise their academic work. Walberg (in San Diego County Office of Education 1997) contends that creating an academically stimulating home environment and what is termed a “curriculum of the home”, characterised by informed parent-child conversations, have a positive influence on student achievement. When parents are involved in their children’s learning, children tend to achieve high academic scores, regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnic background or parents’ educational level (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network 2002).

In a study of primary schools in Zimbabwe, Ross and Postlethwaite (1992) found that the

main reason for some schools' high achievement is their "well-off" locations, implying that parents in those areas have enabling amenities, such as television sets, radios, books and the internet. There is also general agreement that home "human capital", measured by the educational attainment of the parents, has positive effects on social relationships between family members, and on student achievement (Muola 2010). Riddell (in Jansen 1995:193) concludes that: "The influences which have moulded a child before he or she reaches secondary school constitute more significant influences on the child's academic achievement than factors to which the child is exposed in the secondary school classroom." A question that can be asked is: how can families afford to create an education-friendly home environment in Lesotho where so many households suffer from extreme poverty, particularly in the rural areas?

The above analysis fits Bourdieu's theory of *cultural reproduction*, this being that cultural capital typified by the cultural experiences, cultural values and norms, is sustained across time (Sullivan 2001). Cultural reproduction leads to *social reproduction* or the process of transferring certain aspects of society such as class from generation to generation (Sullivan 2001). According to Sullivan (2001), Bourdieu's thesis is that children from middle-class families are advantaged in gaining education credentials because they possess cultural capital. Conversely, "... it (is) very difficult for lower-class children to succeed in (the) education system" because the school uses an 'educated' language (Sullivan 2001). Bourdieu (in Sullivan 2001) argues that: "Education is in fact one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a *social* gift, treated as a *natural* one." Through education, therefore, educated parents bequeath a socio-educational advantage on their children, while children from poor uneducated parents tend to inherit their parents' educational deficit. The achievement differentials between these groups of children are, therefore, determined in advance.

Resources

In most schools in Lesotho, there is a general dearth of educational materials and speciali-

sed facilities (for example, laboratories) because the funds to run schools come from the parents themselves. A lack of facilities and educational resources in many secondary schools in Lesotho can be linked to the poor quality of secondary school education (MOET 2012), because good school facilities help to create a climate conducive to learning (Uline and Tschannen-Moran 2008). A lack of laboratories or materials for science subjects in schools means that there is no interface between theory and practice, which implies that students cannot be given a thorough and practical understanding of the subject content.

Teachers

In Lesotho, teachers have frequently been accused of lacking the motivation and professional commitment required to do their work conscientiously. The indicators often cited include ineffective teaching and assessment practices, teacher absenteeism and tardiness, and shoddy or no preparation of lesson plans (Lekhetho 2003). A critical shortage of mathematics and science teachers mainly due to the low turnout of these by teacher training institutions and high staff turnover, particularly in the impoverished mountain areas, are some of the factors associated with poor student performance in COSC examinations (Ministry of Education 1992; Moru et al. 2009). Furthermore, Rice (2003) stresses that teacher quality is the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement, and that the teachers' experience, competences and selectivity or prestige of a tertiary institution attended have a strong influence on student achievement, particularly at secondary level.

Students

In Lesotho, many children do not attend secondary school mainly owing to financial constraints. For instance, in 2012, some 388,681 381,690 students were enrolled in primary schools, but only 127,852 (33.5%) were enrolled in secondary schools (MOET 2012). This enrolment is worryingly low given that, since 2001, the government in conjunction with several non-governmental organisations significantly increased scholarships for orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) in secondary schools in

order to mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS and extreme poverty. Circumstances beyond students' control, such as high school fees and other related costs, push children out of the system. The Ministry of Education (2000) concluded that it is an enormous waste for both the nation and individual families if children drop out before reaching form E or if they fail COSC.

Management

As long ago as 1984, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (1984) considered "ineffective school management and administration...." to be one of the causes of poor examination results. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education (1992) stated that the problem of poor school quality emanates from ineffective or weak school management, low teacher morale and marginal involvement of communities in education.

Effective leadership is critical for managing change and improving student achievement and this relates to the ability of leaders to employ, develop, motivate and retain high-quality teachers (Fuller et al.2011). In terms of exerting an influence on student learning and achievement, leadership is only second to classroom teaching and, as such, principals should be trained for the role (Kelly and Saunders 2010). Effective leadership is thus critical to creating a productive and success-oriented school culture that sets high expectations for teachers and students.

Problem Statement

The main research question which this study seeks to answer is as follows:

What are the perceptions of different stakeholders regarding the performance of schools in COSC examinations in Lesotho?

The following specific questions are asked to guide the study:

1. What are the major causes of poor performance in COSC examinations in Lesotho?
2. Are there differences between the various stakeholders regarding the causes of poor performance in COSC examinations in Lesotho?
3. What strategies can be adopted to improve poor performance in schools?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

In this study quantitative research methodology was used because of the multidimensional nature of the problem, which probed the perceptions of different stakeholders about the causes of poor performance of Lesotho students in COSC examinations. Since schools in this study were spread across all the geographical areas of the Maseru district, namely urban, peri-urban and rural areas, a survey (which typically uses questionnaires) was used.

Quantitative research explains phenomenon by collecting numerical data and analysing it using mathematically based methods, particularly statistics (McMillan and Schumacher 2010). The quantitative method is regarded as scientific and objective in the sense that it uses the scientific principles from the design of questionnaires, the selection of the study samples, and the presentation of the results.

The qualitative method, on the other hand, provides a vivid picture of the life-world of the respondents, because respondents provide in-depth responses to open-ended questions in semi-structured or unstructured interviews. The primary distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is that the quantitative method uses statistics to present data, while the qualitative research provides narratives or thick descriptions (McMillan and Schumacher 2010).

Sample and Sampling Techniques

In this study, 25 high schools in the district of Maseru were selected by means of stratified random sampling to ensure that they were representative of the proprietors, the location (in terms of rural, urban and peri-urban areas), and the level of school effectiveness (in terms of high-, average- and low-performing schools). To determine the effectiveness of a school, the COSC pass lists of the past three years were used to classify schools. Having selected the schools by stratified sampling, the subjects were selected by *random sampling*, since this guaranteed every member of the population an equal chance or probability of being selected (Creswell 2009). An additional 45 high schools were purposively selected in the districts of Leribe, Berea, Mafeteng, Mohale's Hoek and Qacha's Nek exclusively for the principal, deputy principal and school board member samples in order to ob-

tain a wider perspective on their perceptions of their schools' performance in COSC examinations (and what could be done to improve the situation). Table 1 presents information on the planned sample based on the number of questionnaire copies distributed, and those that were actually returned.

Table 1: Research participants

<i>Respondent group</i>	<i>Planned</i>	<i>Returned</i>	<i>%</i>
Form E students	625	575	92
Teachers	250	110	44
Deputy principals	70	40	57.1
Principals	70	43	61.4
School board members	70	17	24.3
School inspectors	20	12	60
Education secretaries	5	5	100
Total	1110	808	73

Principles and Ethics Guiding Research

When undertaking the empirical research, the researcher adhered to the ethical principles and standards guiding research by being open to and honest with the research subjects, and disclosing fully the purpose of the research. Moreover, where research subjects asked questions that sought clarification regarding the questionnaire questions, the researcher answered these questions to ensure that there was clarity with the requirements of the questions. Before administering the instrument, the researcher sought informed consent, and treated all information as confidential – respondents were also guaranteed anonymity (Cohen et al. 2004).

Data Analysis

Data were 'cleaned' by identifying and eliminating all errors deriving from the questions that respondents misinterpreted; other, associated inaccuracies were also eliminated. This was followed by data coding and data reduction, which refers to translating both closed and open-ended answers into numbers or segments in order to develop the meaning of each segment (Creswell 2009). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise, organise and reduce large numbers of observations (McMillan and Schumacher 2010). Open-ended responses or textual data were coded to facilitate the identification of recurring themes and the translation of data into fre-

quency counts. Due to time constraints, no pre-test was conducted to check the reliability and validity of the instrument. However, this was counterbalanced by being meticulous, coherent and logical in the construction of the questionnaire, proofreading it, giving it to two experienced researchers, and finally giving it to the language editor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Current School Factors

Different respondent groups were asked to rate the performance of their schools in COSC examinations on a Likert-type scale with the following options provided: (a) excellent, (b) very good, (c) good, (d) fair, (e) poor, (f) very poor. The school inspectors were asked to rate the overall performance of secondary schools in COSC examinations in the country on the same scale (Table 2).

Table 2 indicates that most school-level respondents rated their school's performance as average. These respondents consisted of: 143 (35%) students, 58 (54%) teachers, 23 (55%) principals, 22 (55%) deputy principals and 9 (60%) school board members. A substantial proportion of students (76 (19%)), rated the performance of their schools as poor and 49 (12%) rated their schools as very poor. Altogether, 125 (30.5%) students judged their schools to be performing poorly. The majority of respondents outside school – 8 (66.7%) school inspectors and 3 (60%) education secretaries rated the performance of schools as poor. Overall, this rating could be interpreted to designate that the performance of most Lesotho schools in COSC examinations is unsatisfactory.

The school-level respondents and those outside differed in their ratings of school performance probably because those at school rated their schools as *average* compared with others in the area or country, whereas those outside school (that is, school inspectors and education secretaries) rated the performance as *poor* because they looked at the 'total picture', that is, all schools in Lesotho. In other words, variances in perceptions reflect respondents' different vantage points.

To highlight the subjectivity involved in rating the performance of schools, the Education Secretary of Catholic schools stated: "*In com-*

Table 2: How would you rate the performance of your school in COSC examinations?

Rating	Students		Teachers		Principals		Deputy principals		Boards		Education Secretaries		School Inspectors	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Unclassifiable	165	-	3	-	1	-	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Excellent	21	5	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	1	6.7	0	0	0	0
Very good	30	7	3	3	1	2	0	0	1	6.7	0	0	0	0
Good	91	22	19	18	9	21	9	22.5	2	13.3	0	0	1	8.3
Average	143	35	58	54	23	55	22	55	9	60	2	40	2	16.7
Poor	76	19	26	24	5	12	7	17.5	2	13.3	3	60	8	66.7
Very poor	49	12	1	1	4	10	1	2.5	0	0	0	0	1	8.3
Total	575	100	110	100	43	100	40	100	17	100	5	100	12	100

parison with other proprietors, our schools perform better than others in COSC examinations, but of, and in itself the performance is still poor, given that the majority of candidates fail to obtain good passes.” This Education Secretary stressed that a school’s performance is influenced by several factors. These factors include: the quality of teachers who taught students in primary school (in terms of professional qualifications and competence), students’ home background, the school’s culture, and the effectiveness of school principals and teachers.

Factors that Contribute to Schools’ Performance in COSC Examinations

On the question of what factors the respondents considered to contribute to the performance of their schools in COSC examinations, the following major themes emerged:

Reasons offered by respondents who were negative about their schools’ performance:

- Students are not serious about their studies.
- Teachers lack commitment.
- Students do not speak English at school.
- Lack of a selective admission policy.
- Parental poverty and its effects.
- Teacher turnover and shortage of staff.
- Lack of suitable libraries and laboratories.
- The examinations are difficult and not relevant to students’ social context.

Students are Not Serious about Their Studies

The majority of student respondents, 165 (46%), claimed that their schools did not perform well in COSC examinations because stu-

dents were not serious about their studies. This factor was reported by 37 (35%) teachers, 16 (38%) principals, 11 (28%) deputy principals, 3 (18%) school board members and 5 (41.7 %) school inspectors. Their perception was that students were generally unmotivated and lethargic probably because they did not see the value of education, and that they usually became serious about their studies only when examination time approached. Teachers indicated that students lacked a sense of purpose as to why they were at school and a sense of urgency. Most respondents emphasised that students did not realise that hard work was the key to academic success. Murphy and Alexander (2002) agree that intrinsic “motivation and personal interest lead to greater achievement”.

To emphasise that students were unmotivated, one student of a low-performing school made the following statement:

Students do not work hard. Once they come to this school, they believe that life has defeated them, and they take advantage of the fact that most people know that the performance of this school has always been poor; ever since the school was established.

This quotation underlines the fact that a school’s public image or reputation, based on the school’s performance in COSC examinations, has a strong influence on the effort that students are prepared to put into their work.

The student respondents reported that there was a high incidence of student absenteeism in schools. One student of an average-performing school said: “*The level of levity in this school is extreme. The performance could improve if we could be serious.*” Two forms of student absenteeism were identified. The first was general, where some students just have a bad habit of skipping classes. The second one was subject-

or teacher-specific, and is triggered by students' inability to cope in a specific subject such as mathematics or science. A school-by-school analysis revealed that absenteeism was more prevalent in the low- and average-performing schools than in the high-performing schools.

Teachers Lack Commitment

The second reason given by a substantial number of student respondents (102 [28%], 13 [31%] principals, 8 [21%] deputy principals, 4 [25%] school board members and 8 [66.7%] school inspectors) was that teachers were not serious about their work, lacked motivation and dedication, and had a negative attitude towards their students. This pattern of responses reflects the fact that the different respondent groups agree on the negative effects created by a lack of teacher commitment.

The student respondents emphasised that teachers were not committed to ensuring that students understood subject content. Some reported that, even though some teachers did attend classes, they did not teach effectively and this meant that students found it difficult to understand their lessons. These respondents also cited widespread teacher absenteeism; the habit of "dodging" classes even when teachers were present at school. One inspector linked the teachers' low morale to their working environment: "... *teachers are demotivated by a number of factors ranging from the unsatisfactory pecuniary rewards to unfavourable working environment*".

Furthermore, there were anecdotal reports of unprofessional conduct on the part of some teachers, which included discouraging students in their academic efforts, and shrugging off their professional responsibility of developing the total person once they were outside the classroom. As one student respondent put it: "*Some teachers believe that their job is to teach only, and not to care about our learning and moral development.*"

Students Do Not Speak English at School

Forty-nine (14%) students, 12 (11%) teachers, 7 (18%) deputy principals, 3 (18%) school board members, 3 (33.3%) school inspectors and 3 (60%) Education Secretaries stated that students do not speak English or "*refuse to speak*

English" and therefore perform poorly in COSC. With the exception of students, all the respondent groups attributed the students' weakness in English to the weak foundation laid in primary schools. Some cited students' lack of exposure to spoken English as another contributory factor to poor COSC performance. The English language deficit, carried over to secondary school, was regarded as a serious handicap to effective learning. One teacher made the following statement: "*Students come into a secondary school environment speaking very little English, when they are expected to be much more fluent.*"

Lack of a Selective Admission Policy

A lack of selective admission policy was also reported by 40 (38%) teachers, 22 (52%) principals, 17 (44%) deputy principals, 7 (44%) school board members and 12 (3%) students as contributing to most schools' poor performance in COSC. However, students' perceptions and the perceptions of other school-level respondents differed on this issue.

The asymmetrical perceptions between students and other respondents on the influence of selectivity on achievement could be attributed to the fact that students usually do not see their own academic deficiencies, while teachers are in a better position to see this. There was agreement across all respondent groups that the poor preparation of students in primary schools also made it almost impossible for them to handle the secondary school curriculum successfully.

One disillusioned teacher respondent of a low-performing school noted:

The school admits rejects from other schools, and third class applicants; no first and second class candidates register for Form A and Form D here. Even when they have passed in first or second class in Form C, they opt for other schools to continue with their Form D.

This quotation highlights the fact that there is a direct relationship between a school's admission policy and its academic and promotion standards. Since the majority of low-calibre, third-class students tend to cluster around low grades in the tests and examinations, teachers of low-performing schools are forced to lower their academic standards or set the pass mark low simply to cater for the majority of their students, and thus keep the school operational.

Parental Poverty and its Effects

Some 30 (29%) teachers, 15 (36%) principals, 10 (26%) deputy principals, and 2 (12%) school board members cited parental poverty as one of the causes of students' poor performance in COSC examinations. From the students' side, however, poverty was hardly mentioned; only 3 (1%) reported it as a reason for poor performance.

The respondents reported that poverty affected students directly in two ways: (1) they lacked the basic study materials; and (2) they were frequently sent back home by the school authorities, sometimes for protracted periods of time, because of their parents' failure to pay fees on time. They bemoaned that this interfered with, and reduced the teaching and learning time. As one teacher respondent stated: *"Most parents do not pay school fees in time, and as a result students don't attend classes to the maximum number of days allocated by the Ministry of Education."*

A school-by-school analysis revealed that the effects of poverty, such as loss of academic learning time, were more pronounced in the low- and average-performing schools than in the high-performing ones. Thus, the maximum time use could arguably be another factor that puts the high-performing schools at a comparative advantage in COSC examinations.

Teacher Turnover and Shortage of Staff

Seventeen (16%) teachers, 9 (21%) principals, 4 (10%) deputy principals, 6 (35%) school board members and 3 (30%) school inspectors identified high staff turnover as another factor that contributed to poor COSC results. One teacher stated that her school suffered from *"a lack of staff who stay permanently, and move step by step as the students move from class to class"*. A high staff turnover is inimical to effective and systematic learning, because it means that students are without teachers for long periods of time, or have to cope with a frequent change of teachers. Schools situated in the remote mountainous areas were the most adversely affected by high staff turnovers, simply because most qualified local teachers were reluctant to teach there. One school board member noted that this scenario forced them to engage expatriate teachers with an English accent that was difficult for students to understand.

Lack of Suitable Libraries and Laboratories

Only an insignificant proportion of respondents (13 (4%) students, 4 (4%) teachers, 7 (17%) principals, 2 (5%) deputy principals and 4 (24%) school board members) cited the lack of physical facilities (for example, libraries and laboratories) as a cause of poor COSC results.

The Examinations are Difficult and Not Relevant to Learners' Social Context

An insignificant number of students (11 (3%)), and 2 (20%) school inspectors cited examination difficulty or failure by candidates to interpret questions correctly as another factor that accounts for poor performance in COSC. They reported that many students are ill-prepared to sit for their final examinations. The school inspectors stated that the curriculum and examinations were irrelevant to the cultural and development context of Lesotho and the shifting demands of the job market. One inspector observed that the COSC examination has changed little over the years and that it is still steeped in British traditions that are alien to teachers and students; as such, students struggle to cope with it. This statement highlights that there is a need to redesign and realign the curriculum and examinations to the cultural and developmental context of Lesotho.

Reasons Provided by Respondents who were Positive about Their Schools' Performance

- Student determination and teacher commitment
- School culture and student discipline

Student Determination and Teacher Commitment

Seventy-four (20%) students, 8 (8%) teachers, 6 (14%) principals, and 6 (15%) deputy principals attributed the good performance of their schools in COSC to student determination and hard work. Additionally, 37 (10%) students, 8 (8%) teachers, 8 (19%) principals, 10 (26%) deputy principals, and 2 (12%) school board members attributed good performance of their schools to teacher commitment and teamwork. As one school board member briefly stated:

“There is good teaching at this school.” In a case study that investigated the factors that caused some South African schools to succeed academically against the odds of poverty, Christie (2001) found that a distinguishing feature of these schools was that they focused on teaching and learning as the primary and central purpose of their existence.

School Culture and Discipline of Learners

Only 2 (2%) teachers, 5 (12%) principals and 2 (5%) deputy principals cited good student discipline and teachers’ enforcement of this as a reason for their schools’ academic success. One principal cited the inculcation of the Christian values or the *“the fear of God”* as a reason behind the success of his school. In general, school culture and student discipline were less associated with academic success.

A Model for Improving Poor Student Performance in COSC Examinations

The model presented in Figure 1 has been developed to capture in a graphical and concise way, what needs to be done and by whom to improve the situation of poor performance of the majority of schools in COSC examinations.

As the model depicts, providing professional support to teachers is vital because they are the implementers of the curriculum in schools, and constitute what Mintzberg (1992) and Lunenburg (2012) call the operating core since they perform the basic and professional work of teaching. In this respect, Harris and Jones (2010) emphasise that an education system cannot outperform the quality of its teachers, and therefore there is need to improve the teachers’ professional practices through participation on professional communities within and across schools. The Ministry of Education and Training and individual schools could intensify continuous professional development (CPD) activities like training workshops and full-time studies, particularly in critical subjects like science, mathematics and English. Muijs et al. (2004) corroborate that improving schools spend more time and effort in professional development than stable schools.

The majority of schools in Lesotho, over 80%, are owned by the churches (MOET 2012), and do not receive any form of financial support from the government except the payment of teach-

ers. Consequently, many of them operate with tight budgets that cover running costs and capital budgets generated from school fees. This financial austerity causes some of them to charge prohibitive fees that exclude and, in some cases, force many students out of school for protracted periods due to inability to pay fees. To address this, the government could provide subsidy to all registered public schools so that they can operate optimally with minimum disruption.

Creating a success-oriented school culture, where everyone, the principal, teachers, students and parents strive for academic excellence is fundamental to enhancing performance in schools. Muijs et al (2004) add that if students know what to expect and teachers deliver high quality teaching in all lessons, academic performance will be enhanced. Shannon and Bylsma (2007) emphasise that having a clear and shared focus where all know their role in achieving a vision is important for channelling the energies of all those involved towards the goal.

CONCLUSION

The study has revealed that most students, teachers and other stakeholders in Lesotho are unsatisfied with the performance of schools in COSC examinations, and rate school performance as poor. As major hurdles to successful learning, they identified lack of professional commitment on the part of teachers, and students’ lethargy or lack of seriousness towards their studies. Limited exposure to spoken and written English in the home, social and school environments was considered to be an impediment to effective learning, and a factor that contributed to poor academic performance. The study also revealed that, owing to widespread multidimensional poverty in Lesotho, many parents, particularly in the rural areas, fail to buy books and other educational materials for their children and to pay fees on time. This leads to students’ protracted absences from school, and reduces their learning time. To improve COSC performance, most respondents indicated that teachers should cultivate a strong academic culture at school. Such a culture would be characterised by a strong work ethic among teachers and students, teamwork, optimisation of students’ time-on-task, effective teaching, productive and supervised study, speaking English as a norm, and a strong reading culture.

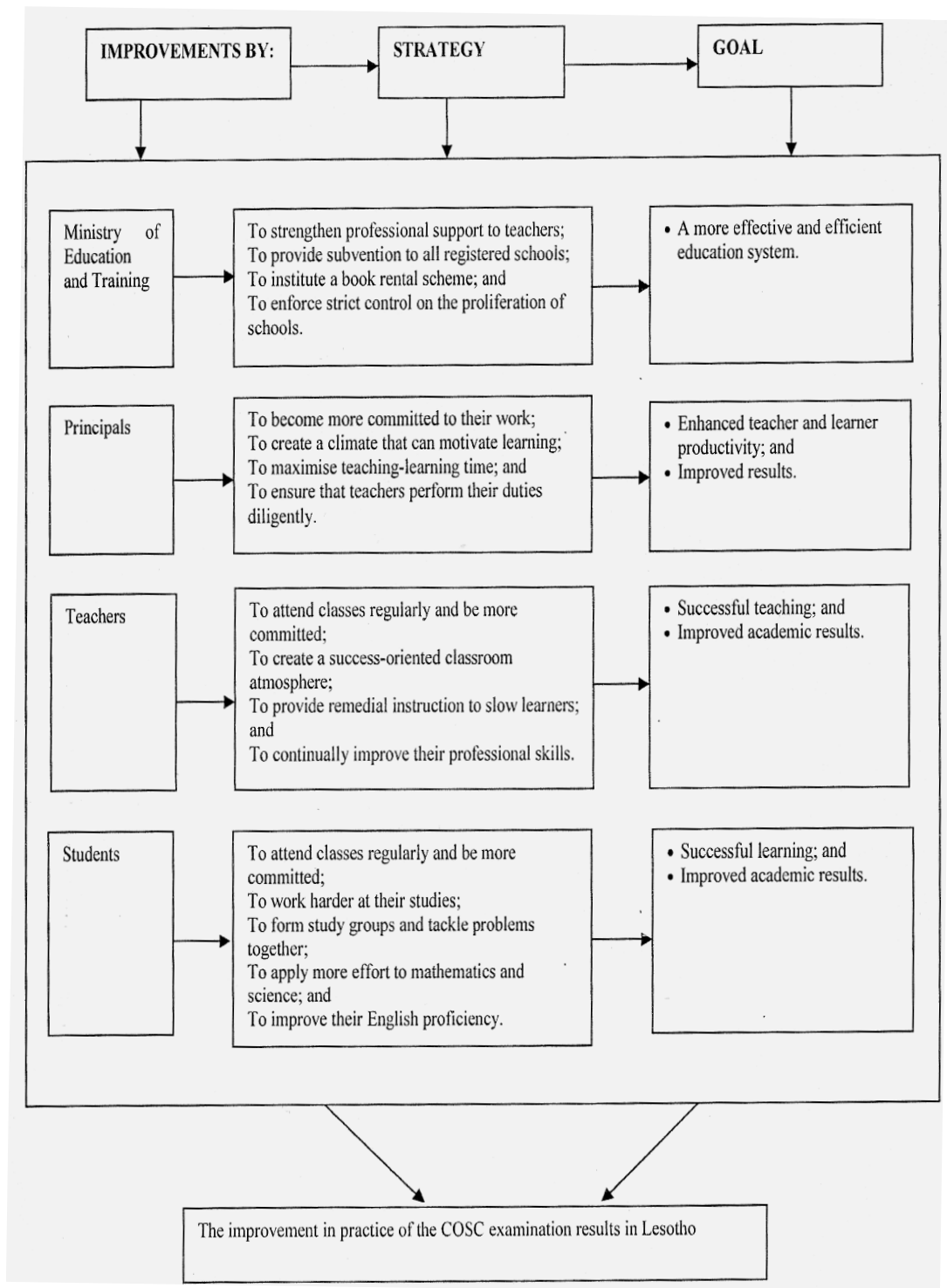


Fig. 1: A model for addressing poor student performance in COSC examinations

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