

Factors that Contribute to Poor Academic Achievement in English Language in Kerio-Valley Schools in Kenya

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Abstract

In Kenya secondary schools, English is the main language of instruction, and compulsory in secondary school curriculum. In many degree programmes a minimum of grade C+ is required in English subject. However, the performance in the subject nationally is poor, and Kerio-Valley is no exception. The study set out to investigate the psychological factors that contributed to poor academic achievement in English Language in Kerio Valley Secondary Schools. 5 schools were randomly selected to provide the sample of 160 form three students as well as 10 English teachers. Descriptive survey research design was used in the study. The psychological factors contributing to English achievement was the independent variables and English achievement was the dependent variable. Data was collected by use of questionnaires and observation schedule. Descriptive statistics were used in data analysis. The results show that negative cultural attitudes are major cause of poor achievement in English language. The study therefore recommends that there is need to formulate urgent measures to curb cultural negative attitude that has contributed significantly to poor achievement in English.

1. Introduction

Behaviour unlike attitude can be observed. An attitude held can only manifest itself through behaviour (Farrant, 1986). The attitude influences either positively or negatively the teachers' classroom perception, professional training and experience. This could likely result in a motivated teacher or de-motivated one; the result of which would be felt in students academic achievement. Sadker and Sadker (1994) points out that teacher competency and training plays a big role in English achievement. He observes that teachers should help students realize the need to spend more time pursuing course content. To him, students who spent time pursuing content learn more and receive higher achievement scores. In a language classroom the activities include listening, participating in class discussions, writing a composition and working on daily exercises.

Adeyanju (2003) found a significant and consistent strong achievement effects from teachers' English proficiency on students' language achievement. He points out that this factor influenced students' language achievement more strongly than did students' social class background and school ability. Length of teachers' experience is associated with student achievement but only among teachers who received more in-service training courses (Adeyanju, 2003). Kariuki (2005) observes that teachers rarely read in their libraries at all and this has made teachers not sustain a debate outside the subjects they teach. Anderson (1992) observes that a well-designed training can provide teachers with sufficient skills to be effective. Ndirangu (2004) further points out that the knowledge, intelligence and professional skills that teachers possess have a direct bearing on the quality of education provided by schools in any country.

Cultural constraints also negatively impacts on achievement level among students. Children who come from insecure environments caused by socio-cultural practices such as cattle rustling, early marriages and female genital mutilation (FGM) show emotional problems at school, they lack concentration in class and lack confidence in whatever task they are given to perform (Durojaiye, 1976). Excessive control of girls by their parents, too many rules at home, excessive family chores and threat of physical punishment are a recipe of poor achievement in schools by the girls. Parents

for fear of their girls being pregnant impose such strict regulations to their daughters unaware of the subsequent effect of this on their children classroom achievement (Chepchieng & Kiboss, 2004). Kwesiga (2002) further observe that traditional role of women is an important factor both in the family and the wider society. It influences parents' decisions on educational investment. Some parents convinced that girls will end up in marriage refuse to take their girls to school; they pay less attention to and provide less support for girl's education than boys. These attitudes have operated in favour of boys over the girls. Carrier (1990) asserts that schools exert a greater influence on achievement of its students in any discipline after accounting for the effect of students' background. This view is also shared by Chepchieng (1995) who observes that availability of and quality textbooks in secondary schools is strongly related to achievement among children from lower-income families especially those in rural boarding schools.

2. Statement of the Problem

Achievement in English, which is a compulsory subject in secondary schools, has been poor over the years. A pass in language is mandatory for admission in institution of higher learning in Kenya. The study sought to determine the psychological factors that contribute to poor academic achievement in English language in Kerio- valley schools.

Descriptive survey research design was used, where questionnaires and observation schedule were used to provide the needed data. A sample of 160 students and 10 English teachers participated in the study from 5 schools.

3. Results and Discussions

The schools that participated in the study were 1 boys', 1 girls' and three mixed schools. In each of these schools, thirty two form three students were involved leading to a total of 160 participants where 80 were boys and 80 girls. Also eight male and two female teachers participated.

4. Psychological factors contributing to poor achievement in English language.

The major objectives of this study was to identify the psychological factors that contributed to poor achievement in English language in Kerio Valley secondary schools. The independent variables were the psychological factors such as student level of motivation, students' attitudes towards the subject and teacher perception of the classroom practices while the dependent variable was English achievement. Table 1 shows the results obtained from the participants.

Table 1: Psychological Factors that Contribute to Low Achievement in English Language

Psychological factors contributing to low achievement in English language	n=160 students	n=10 teachers
Low student motivation	40%	30%
Negative attitude towards English language	35%	50%
Poor attitude towards Education	51%	
Poor perception of classroom practices	25%	20%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Level of motivation

Low motivation was cited by the respondents as contributing to low achievement in English language. 40% of the students and 30% of the teachers cited this factor. Motivation is a powerful tool for energizing one to work towards accomplishing a given task. Adair (1990) observe that where motivation is lacking, job performance and production is bound to be affected. Motivation serves to exert the energy necessary for higher achievement. And where this is lacking, achievement is bound to be low. This could be the case in Kerio Valley.

Negative attitude

The findings shown in Table 1 reveal that in Kerio Valley schools, negative attitude towards the subject by the students contributes significantly to the low achievement in English language. 35% of the students and 50% of the teachers cited this as a factor. Studies show that people's attitude towards something strongly influences the way they work and commit themselves on the task. Students' attitude towards a given subject consequently influences their aspirations and commitment to the subject. Harris (2004) observe that students who have negative attitude towards a given subject tend to perform poorly in the subject. This view is also shared by Ingule (1996) who observe that the attitude that people have towards a specific discipline has a direct bearing on the performance of that discipline. Kwesiga (2002) observe that poor attitude towards sciences among students in Gulu – Uganda contributed significantly to their low achievement in the discipline and their subsequent poor access to education. She observes that negative attitude affect the level of participation and commitment to the subject. This seems to be the case in Kerio Valley secondary schools where students' poor attitudes have affected their level of achievement in English language.

Poor attitude towards schooling is cited by both boys and girls as contributing to poor payment of school fees (67.86%) and (32.14%) respectively. Non-payment of fees is common where parents are uneducated and still hold on to retrogressive attitudes that negate educational practices (Ndirangu, 2004). This is the case in Kerio Valley. The poor fees payment seems to emanate from cultural prejudice that gives education a secondary place. The study observed that most parents were illiterate and held retrogressive attitudes that did not provide room for children to pursue academic excellence.

Negative perception

Perception was mentioned by the respondents as a contributing factor to low achievement in English language in Kerio Valley secondary schools. 25% of the students and 20% of the teachers observed that poor perception of classroom practices affected the achievement level of English language. Adeyanju (2003) argues that the way we perceive our work affects positively or negatively the performance level of the task. To him, where people perceive their work positively, their achievement level will be high and where they perceive it negatively, the achievement level will be low. The negative perception that students seem to have towards classroom practices could be attributed to peer influence, non supportive school environment and lack of support from the family background.

Parental laissez-faire attitude did not auger well with academic pursuits especially over the holidays. The implication here is that parents have subjugated their roles and do not pay close monitoring of their children's academic work. This had adverse effects on their subsequent classroom achievement levels.

Economic factors contributing to low achievement in English language

One of the objectives of this study was to identify if payment of school fees contributed to poor achievement in English Language in Kerio Valley secondary schools. Poor or non-payment of fees affects students psychologically due to the disturbances involved. The respondents were asked if their parents found it hard to pay school fees and percentages calculated as shown in figure 2. 149 (93.125%) responded Yes and 11 (6.875%) said No. Additional data on this aspect was collected by asking the students to list the reasons that made it hard for their parents to pay school fees (Figure 2). The most common factors cited by both boys and girls were listed separately for each gender.

Table 2: Factors perceived to be the cause of poor fees payments

Causes of poor fees payment factors	Percentages	
	Girls	Boys
Poverty – caused by drought related factors	30.04	61.95
Other siblings in various secondary schools	54.04	45.96
Single parenting	73.08	26.92
Unemployment	53.92	46.08

The findings show that both girls (54.04%) and boys (45.96%) feel that the presence of other siblings in various secondary schools is a major factor as to why their fees is not paid in full. Girls emphasized that Single parenting is a major factor in low fees payment (73.08%) compared to boys (26.29%), and unemployment as a serious cause of non-payment of fees (53.92%) compared to (46.08%) for boys. Whereas boys singled out poverty related factors is the highest reason for poor fees payment (61.95%) compared to (30.04%) for the girls.

Girls cited single parenting as a major reason for poor fees payment (73.08%). This is consistent with research findings. Where families are dependent on one parent, who is perhaps unemployed or whose financial strength is limited, financial problems is bound to set in. This is a serious issue especially where the family is extended and the family income does not stretch enough even to cater for the basic needs (Chepchieng, 2004). Kwesiga (2002) agrees with this view. She says that single parenting denies children access to quality education. Single parents especially those who are not economically strong suffer a multiple of psychological, social and emotional problems. Some especially widowed women use the little resources at their disposal to maintain the family at the expense of educating the children in high school.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the psychological factors that contributed to poor achievement in English Language. From the results, the major cause of low achievement in English in secondary school is poor attitude towards education and cultural practices that impede educational goals. Cultural stereotypes that gave preference to the boy-child at the expense of the girl-child equally contributed to low achievement in English Language. Parents for fear of girls dropping out of school due to pregnancy were reluctant to pay school fees for their daughters. They restricted them, giving them heavy domestic responsibilities and by so doing, denied them fertile opportunities for academic pursuits.

Another serious cultural concern the study found out was the practice of circumcision among young boys and girls. Most teacher respondents lamented that the high number of school drop outs could be attributed to this cultural rite. They observed that initiated boys and girls were not academically receptive. They did not like being ordered by teachers as they saw themselves as "mature" and when the rule was strictly followed at school, most opted to drop out and engage in anti-social activities such as drug and substance abuse.

Parental laissez-faire attitude did not auger well with academic pursuits; they subjugated their roles and do not pay close monitoring of their children's academic work. This has adverse effects on their subsequent classroom achievement levels.

6. Implication of the study

The study was conducted to highlight the role of psychological factors on students' academic achievement in English language. This may form the basis through which urgent and appropriate measures would be taken by parents, school administrators, government policy makers and other educational stakeholders in addressing the case of poor achievement in English language at National Examinations particularly in Kenyan schools. The study further sought to address the need for parents to root out cultural barriers that do not facilitate the child to have good education.

7. Recommendations

In addressing psychological factors that affect English achievement in schools recommends that; attitudinal change be addressed towards positive learning. High motivation among learners is a recipe for higher achievement. The teachers should serve as positive models for their students. Motivation is not taught, it is caught. Aggressive sensitization programmes on the effects of cultural practices to help root out retrogressive cultural practices is necessary. Parents should and monitor closely their children academic progress, and serve as positive models. Finally, the government should come in and embark on reforms based on vibrant educational training geared towards overall teacher professional development. Teachers should also embrace classroom practices that are result oriented.

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