



Cracks in support for two Tanzanian rural primary schools with high performance on national exams



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ABSTRACT

National examinations are the principle method for tracking school quality and selecting students for successive educational levels in Tanzania. A qualitative approach is used to investigate the effects of high-stakes testing at two government primary schools with high passing rates in rural northern Tanzania. Extensive interviews and observations reveal that teachers' interactions with students including their instruction and management strategies are compromised by national exam preparation. In follow-up interviews, the majority of participants desired changes in the content and structure of national exams and the teaching methods used to prepare students for exams.

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1. Introduction

Despite recent reform, educational quality within Tanzanian government schools remains highly problematic. To address these constraints, in 2005 Tanzania's Ministry of Education & Vocational Training replaced its national primary school curriculum. While its previous curriculum was structured around the use of teacher-centered instructional methods like rote instruction, drilling and content-based methods of evaluation, its new Primary School Education Curriculum (PSEC) reform requires teachers to apply instructional methods where students actively participate in their learning. This intensive qualitative study began by examining how teachers responded to the reform in two high-performing government primary schools in rural northern Tanzania and then elicited community members' reactions to the educational services provided. Although there was considerable variation in the desire for educational reform, what became apparent was the conflict between tradition and the need to change, suggesting that the existing Tanzania structures for its teaching profession remain at odds with community members' desires and those of the government.

Through ethnographic research carried out during the 2011 and 2012 academic years in two government primary schools in rural northern Tanzania where more than 95% of students passed

national exams, this study examines the underlying realities of how educational services are delivered and draws on community perspectives, writ large, to examine their views on these existing schooling practices. The particular focus is how the discourse is enacted at the community-level on the value of national exam test preparation as well as conventional schooling norms in comparison to the recent PSEC reform's objectives. It employs an on-the-ground perspective to examine whether teachers, rural community members and their children support certain public school services and procedures in their villages.

1.1. Context of educational reform in Tanzania

Like many other sub-Saharan African (SSA) nations, under the Dakar Framework for Action of Education for All Tanzania adopted a national goal of increasing access to schools and enrollment rates (Tanzania Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (TMEVT), 2010). However, in the wake of two post-millennium reforms, the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP) and the Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP), which sought to raise student enrollment rates through increasing the number of schools and teachers, research within Tanzania has shown an imbalanced attention to quantity over quality (Anangisye, 2010; Davidson, 2005; Kuder, 2005; Sifuna, 2007; Wedgwood, 2007). Justifying this criticism is the now-famous Uwezo report (2011) that underscored that the majority of students in Tanzania in year 2 of primary school or higher (ages 10–16) failed year 2 math and literacy exams developed by Uwezo, in spite of these resources and change in direction. Why was this the case?

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One reason for this is the material constraints that Tanzanian teachers face in their work and living conditions. Similar to other SSA countries, teachers in Tanzania face common problems in trying to cope with the lack of basic resources like relevant texts, sufficient classrooms and desks, water in order to maintain proper sanitation, access to reliable transportation and good housing (Baker, 2011; Barrett, 2005; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012; Weber, 2007). For example, school construction efforts through the PEDP and SEDP reforms were found to be inadequate: (i) buildings were not constructed quickly to accommodate the increased enrollment of students and (ii) there was a lack of financial commitment by the ministry – only 63 of the promised 150 billion shillings were dispersed and only 62% was allocated to teacher housing and school facilities (Baker, 2011; HakiElimu, 2012; Mbelle, 2008). Also, through PEDP there was an increase in teacher supply by 13% compared to a 44% increase in pupils (Davidson, 2004). Consequently, teachers struggled to develop meaningful interactions with their students due to the large classroom sizes (Barrett, 2007). The lack of response by the ministry and local governments suggests that many of the challenges Tanzanian teachers face are outside of their control.

There are other conditions also affecting the challenges teachers face including insufficient teacher training, low teacher salaries, chronic student absenteeism, low teacher status, lack of teacher benefits (e.g., healthcare) and a high workload (Barrett, 2007; Davidson, 2007; Mkumbo, 2012; Yu and Thomas, 2008). These problems are exacerbated in rural areas where teacher/student ratios are 1:59 in comparison to a national average of 1:40 (Baker, 2011). In addition to the challenges of accommodating students in insufficient buildings (Salema, 2009), teachers also have other assigned responsibilities at their schools other than teaching that they struggle to fulfill (e.g., school committee, school farm supervisor, school lunch coordinator, exam preparation and grading, daily rituals like the ringing of the school bell, announcements, school uniform inspection and assemblies) (Vavrus and Salema, 2013). While teachers may struggle to fulfill these multiple responsibilities assigned to them, further educational opportunities are seldom provided through the ministry, district or ward (a sub-region of Tanzanian districts) in how to manage these additional roles and apply the new content of the PESC reform appropriately (HakiElimu, 2012). Furthermore, due to their meager salaries, teachers are unable to address the challenges they face in the workplace through paying for further education and training. Therefore, they commonly opt to generate income through other employment, which often overlaps with their teaching responsibilities (Bennell and Mukyanuzi, 2005).

1.2. Standardized exams in Tanzania and the PESC reform

One of the pressures facing teachers in Tanzania is standardized tests. Standardized exams began in Tanzania during the British colonial system as early as 1926. These exams became competitive for placements into higher levels of education in 1947. After independence in 1961, Tanzania's first president, Julius Nyerere, established the (National Examination Council of Tanzania, 2004) (NECTA) in 1972 and sought to redesign the national exams to develop more alignment with his government's socialist ideologies and the particular needs of his nation's citizenry (NECTA, 2004). One effect was the replacement of the exams' writing portions with test items of factual knowledge. It was decided that national exams would continue to be utilized for determining the placement of students in higher levels of education (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2013). In recent times, high-stakes testing in Tanzania and other low-income countries has been reinforced in support of UNESCO's 'Education for All' learning targets through pressure

from international agencies who attach aid to achievement of measurable learning outcomes (Goldstein, 2004).

The national curriculum has reinforced teacher-centered methods of instruction to prepare students for national exams (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2013). As a likely consequence to international pressure calling on Tanzania to improve its educational system, in 2005 the ministry called on dramatic change in the pedagogical methods used by Tanzanian teachers through the PSEC reform (Vavrus et al., 2011). The reform calls on teachers to use participatory and cooperative learning instructional methods as well as competency-based assessment strategies. In addition to supplying new textbooks, manuals and materials to teachers which incorporate activities that engage students in the learning process, teachers are required to apply instructional methods where students think critically, use inquiry-based learning and develop problem solving skills through real-life scenarios (Mushi, 2009).

1.3. Challenges to the PESC reform

Despite the reform, it appears that Tanzanian teachers still commonly rely on teacher-centered instructional methods like rote instruction, drilling and content-based methods of evaluation in order to prepare students for national exams. This has occurred for a number of reasons. First, Tanzanian teachers have been provided with insufficient training by the ministry. Even when training for teachers is offered in how to implement active methods of instruction by outside actors, teachers and students may oppose the use of such methods because of the lack of correspondence between what is being learned and the content on national exams (Vavrus, 2009). Second, prospective teachers have scant opportunities to observe firsthand how such methods are appropriately implemented in teacher training colleges (Vavrus et al., 2011). Education faculty rely on lecture and also struggle to supervise pre-service teachers in their practicum experience due to long distances, limited vehicles and inadequate gas reimbursement (Robinson et al., 2002). Third, the reform measures are not reinforced in schools because: (i) students are less able to move their desks to do group work in overcrowded classrooms, (ii) head teachers are not provided with sufficient training in how to mentor their teachers and (iii) head teachers prefer their teachers to maintain quiet classrooms where students copy information (Leyendecker et al., 2008; Vavrus, 2009). Fourth, a learner-centered pedagogy calls for the co-construction of knowledge by teachers and students; in Tanzania such a process contests the teacher's authority as the one who possesses expertise about the content (Vavrus et al., 2011). Fifth, Tanzanian teachers often lack strong language proficiencies to facilitate dialogue, debate and utilize open-ended questions effectively because the main language of instruction used – Swahili for primary school and English for secondary school – may be their second or third language (Brock-Utne, 2007). Given the myriad of challenges Tanzanian teachers face which is delineated in the literature, the researcher began this study by focusing on two highly regarded primary schools and contextualizing how teaching and learning practices are enacted at these schools in the wake of the PSEC reform.

2. Methodology

The research design was an in-depth eight-month qualitative enquiry at two primary schools with high passing rates on exams. Teacher instructional practices were observed for the academic year 2011–12. Community members, operationalized as parents, students, elders and teachers, were interviewed to seek their responses to these practices. The sample was selected through two

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