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The Influence of the School's Socioeconomic Status on Grade 1 Learners' Performance in Zambezi Region, Namibia

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Abstract

Rural and urban schools have two different contexts with unique socioeconomic opportunities which may, as a matter of fact, enhance or dis-enhance learning opportunities. This is due to the belief that urban schools perform much better than rural schools due to favorable learning prospects they enjoy. This article thus explores the influence of the school's socioeconomic status on Grade 1 learners' performance in Zambezi Region, Namibia. The study is qualitative in approach and is a case study in design. Data were generated through interviews and the emergent Early Grade Reading assessment (eEGRA) test done by Grade 1 learners at the two schools. Four lower primary school teachers were interviewed, two rural and two urban respectively. A sample of teachers was drawn using a purposive sampling technique, and Grade 1 learners who participated in the eEGRA test were selected using a stratified random sampling technique. Data were analyzed thematically. The study found that the school's socioeconomic context is not a reliable yardstick to be used to determine and/or measure schools' performance as rural schools can also outperform urban schools, and recommends that pedagogical activities of both urban and rural schools should be strictly monitored and funding and teacher placement formulae should be revisited.

Keywords

Socioeconomic Status, Grade 1, Rural Schools, Urban Schools, eEGRA

1. Introduction and Background

Namibia, like any developing country, commits and invests huge amounts of financial resources on education. This is evidenced by the N$84, 6 billion National

Budget for the Financial Year 2023/24, where the Ministry of Education got a total allocation of N$16, 8 billion (Namibia Ministry of Finance, 2023). This is in line with Du Plessis and Mestry's (2019) thinking that "Education requires significant investment …and that development in a country is determined by the level and growth of its human resources, to which investment in education contributes greatly" (p. 2). Furthermore, the Government of the Republic of Namibia (1999: p. 71) in its sanctioned Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training reports that "Namibia, by international standards, spends a high proportion of its national income on education" (p. 71). The huge allocation to education is done in an effort to *first*, improve the quality of education across the different school contexts in the country, for example, urban, peri-urban and rural contexts, and *second*, to narrow the performance gap between urban and rural schools in the country, through provision of teaching resources, as allocated teaching resources to the education sector are directed not only to urban schools but to rural schools as well. Therefore in this paper we made attempts to establish the influence of the schools' socioeconomic status on Grade 1 learners' performance in either of the contexts, and proposed some turn around strategies as remedial techniques to the issue under study. The study was specifically on Grade 1 just as it would have been if any grade, apart from Grade 1, was identified as focus grade, and as way to weigh opinion legitimacy in terms of performance between urban and rural schools, and to try and establish whether socioeconomic context is at the heart of or contributes to performance dilemma of schools even at initial grades. In this study, and as a way to establish context, the socioeconomic status defined is that of rural and urban schools and not generic. The researchers also want to state that, Namibia National Development Plans (NDPs), through NDP5 and as guided by the country's four broad goals of access, quality, equity and democracy projected to provide quality and inclusive education to all Namibians of school going age. In support of Namibia's NDPs, Namibia Education Act, Act 16, Sections 38 and 72, on teaching service, commits that the Namibian government shall provide:

All tuition for preprimary, primary, secondary and special education in State schools, including all school books; all educational materials; all related teaching and learning materials, …free of charge to learners until they complete secondary education; that the object of the Teaching Service is to secure the provision of education appropriate to the ages, abilities, aptitudes and needs of the persons receiving it; and to serve the educational needs of all people of the Republic of Namibia (Republic of Namibia, 2001: pp. 25+39).

Nonetheless, Zhang's (2006) study observed that though sub Saharan African countries, of which Namibia is part, have made "significant progress in universalizing primary education in the 1990s, they have however failed to attain Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals despite progress made" (p. 1). This promoted the general perception that urban schools, on the performance plane and because of their socioeconomic status, are significantly better than rural schools, hence this paper investigated "how the school's so-

cioeconomic status influences Grade 1 learners" performance in Zambezi Region, and sought to answer the following research questions:

1) How does the school's socioeconomic status influence Grade 1 learners' performance in Zambezi Region, Namibia?

2) How can this influence be mitigated?

2. Literature Review

It should be noted however that rural schools, unlike urban schools, in most parts of the world are subjected to poor performance as a result of their socioeconomic contexts. This public opinion has been held high by many and thus turning out to be a criterion by which the performance of such schools was and continues to be measured. Therefore, Namibian schools, like those of other sub Saharan African countries, are not spared from the notion that the schools' socioeconomic status or context impacts, either negatively or positively on its performance. According to research, factors such as friends, self-motivation and family background have been found to significantly determine and influence learners' performance. Despite these factors, the school's socioeconomic context seems to take center stage, based on public opinion, as key driver in defining learners' performance (Fauzi et al., 2020). According to du Plessis and Mestry (2019), rural schools are underdeveloped; education provision is of a low standard or of a substandard nature and that the schools are poverty stricken with a low volume of classroom resources. It is also believed that rural schools are characterized by communities overwhelmed by socioeconomic hardships (Litheko, 2012) thus finding it challenging to respond to the education demands of the school in *general* and those of the learners in *particular*. Litheko (2012) further claims that rural schools are "underrepresented and lack economic *muscle* and support from businesses and corporations" (p. 3). This may be attributed to rural schools' incapacity to mobilize both financial and material support from both communities and financial institutions based on their context, underrepresentation as well as their socioeconomic placement or context, resulting in performance anomalies between rural and urban schools.

This perception is despite recent research data not providing clear evidence that the school's socioeconomic context has an undesirable or a negative bearing on its performance and progress (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). The data's non-provision of coherent and consistent evidence was due to the fact that the same data analyzed produced two sets of conflicting results. For example, "one study (*using the same data*) found that learners in rural schools perform less well than their urban counterparts, but other studies using the same national data set have reached divergent conclusions" (Reeves & Bylund, 2005: p. 1). This suggests that all schools, irrespective of their socioeconomic standings and placement, are destined to and are capable to perform well if measures such as evaluation of teachers' activities, which is a teacher monitoring tool, as it culminates in teacher support, are embraced. This is not only the case for Namibia, but one of the best practices worldwide. This is supported by Reddy and Dudek (2014: p.

71) who claim that "the evaluation of teacher performance and classroom practice, which in a way helps to monitor teacher performance, is a common praxis worldwide". Research further revealed that "teachers who are not monitored tend not to adequately prepare for lessons" (Lungu & Daka, 2022: p. 181). This results in the school underperforming. This implies that when teachers are supervised and their work monitored, they get the support they need through intervention strategies, and possibly the schools' performance or output turns to be desirable (Vipene & Kerene, 2021). It has also been established that if an institution desires both value addition and improvement, then the activities of its workforce should be monitored or supervised (Vipene & Kerene, 2021). This is despite the fact that there is "variation in teacher quality, which as a result correlates with teaching activity in the classroom" (Cilliers & Taylor, 2017: p. 1). Also insufficient supervision of teacher activities leads to "inadequate provision of quality education by the school" (OECD, 2012: p. 18), and thus disadvantages learners as they will not develop the much needed knowledge and skills.

Urban schools on the hand are believed to be adequately stocked with teaching and learning resources consequently putting them in a better state to outperform rural schools as per the public perception. This suggests that for rural schools to perform optimally like urban schools there is a need for the Namibian government to do more in equipping the rural classroom with desired instructional resources so as to maintain the same standard with the urban classroom and as a stride to complement performance; *second*, to strengthen policy on incentives for qualified teachers posted to teach in rural schools; and *third*, introducing school libraries, complemented by mobile libraries, as well as developing policy on internet connectivity to all of the schools regardless of context. We also feel it is important to point out here that at some schools during School Based Studies (SBS) learners and trainee teachers in both rural and urban schools suffered the same fate of being left on their own without support by their Support Teachers (STs) thus depriving them of acquisition of knowledge and quality teaching skills meant to better the education of a Grade 1 child both in an urban and rural school.

In addition to rural schools' lack of necessary teaching amenities and a weak human capital, research claims that children find it hard to come to terms with Eurocentric contents which overwhelm the curricula in developing countries (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). This is critical as alien content; content that does not speak to the environments and backgrounds of children is in no way beneficial to them as it works against learners' understanding, the basis of explorative teaching and learning. Furthermore, experience has established that children in rural schools struggle to make ends meet. For example, they walk long distances to and from school, and by the time they arrive to start with classes are weary and hardly in a position to concentrate. In the same manner, after school when they arrive at home are not able to revise what they did at school as they do not have the *muscle* and *strength* to resist the fatigue incurred during the course of the day. On the contrary, such challenges as incurred by rural school Grade 1

learners are maximally turned into opportunities by urban school Grade 1 learners. It has also been observed that the best teachers are earmarked for urban schools, with weak, untrained and problem teachers meant for rural schools which in our view constitutes deliberate advances that aim to promote a high failure rate in rural schools thus "penalizing a child for life" (OECD, 2012: p. 3). All of these factors may attribute to perceived rural schools' weak performance. It is on this basis that Du Plessis and Mestry (2019: p. 2) claim that "although governments are increasingly concerned with issues of teacher development, the focus is often more on urban schools, resulting in rural schools being neglected". Therefore, if the Namibian government's approach to dealing with urban and rural schools in terms of bridging the performance gap was to be objectively revisited, the status quo would be different from the current one. In compliance with the above, research found that "equity in education pays off and that the highest performing education systems worldwide are those that combine high quality and equity" (OECD, 2012: p. 14). On this basis we strongly believe that parity between rural and urban schools in terms of quality and equity can be gradually achieved, though with challenges, if the Namibian government strikes a balance by being 1) consistent in appointing [good] teachers to both urban and rural schools, as well as 2) supporting teachers and intensifying monitoring of their work. We also see this as multi-sectoral that seeks efforts and interventions from and by different sectors of the economy in an effort to redress this critical phenomenon. It is our understanding that if there are no resources in the schools, then our claim for quality education (OECD, 2012) is not valid, as resource availability is tied to and promotes both quality education and good performance by all schools regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Research further advises that in order to keep qualified teachers to rural schools, governments should come up with teachers' motivating strategies like "financial incentives and appointing teachers to their home schools" (Shikalepo, 2019: p. 6). Appointing teachers to their home schools is critical, and may be a teacher retention mitigating strategy as such teachers are used to their unique home environments in rural schools (Barley, 2009), and feel better placed there as they understand the complexities of their environments better than anybody else.

3. Statement of the Problem

The performance gap between rural and urban schools and how this can be addressed have been an ongoing debate, not only in Zambezi Region in Namibia, but across the African continent and worldwide. Interventions have been proposed but performance disparities continue unabated. While a deficiency of teaching resources like Grade 1 textbooks and Grade 1 qualified teachers, as a result of context, exert a negative bearing on such learners' performances, Namibian rural schools are not an exception to such shortcomings and implications thereof. This is because of the role school teaching resources play in *augmenting* schools' progress irrespective of their socioeconomic statuses, and may

be a turn-around strategy Namibia can use to encourage positive learners' performance in Grade 1 across all of the schools. In sub Saharan African countries in general, and in Namibia in particular, poor learners' performance is perceived to be contextual, and is in most cases regarded to be rife in rural schools, where it is believed to be engineered to a larger extent by disequilibrium in the allocation of teaching facilities, and qualified human resources thus resulting in poor performance by those schools (Sumida & Kawata, 2021). Sad to mention is that when Grade 1 learners perform poorly, more especially in final examinations, they, regardless of their schools' socioeconomic statuses or contexts, enter a world of uncertainty (OECD, 2012), a world which does not only impact negatively on their future and on the socioeconomic landscape or standing of the country but also on their psychosocial being. The challenge however is that persistence of non-performance by Grade 1 learners in Namibia due to their schools' socioeconomic statuses, empowers the Namibian government's policy of *automatic promotion* (*Namibia Ministry of Education* [*Namibia MoE*], 2015) which does not, in any way, address the challenge of poor performance but rather exacerbates it.

4. Methods

Approach and Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach and is a case study. Through the qualitative approach, the researchers explored interview data and narrated the results of the eEGRA test which Grade 1 learners from two different socioeconomic school contexts took at the beginning of their Grade 1 year.

Participants

Four teachers, *two* from an urban school and *two* from a rural school, drawn purposively, participated in this study. Nine Grade 1 learners per each one of the four schools, drawn through stratified sampling, participated in the eEGRA test. The idea to have *four* teachers from two different school contexts, and nine learners per school (9 learners × 4 schools = 36 learners) for the eEGRA test was a measure to access more, undisputable and credible socioeconomic based context data that define whether or not the school's socioeconomic status, in this case *rural* and *urban*, directly influences Grade 1 learners' performance, and to ensure data validity and data representativeness in the said contexts.

Data collection

Data was generated by interviewing *four* Grade 1 teachers; an interview tool with predetermined interview items was used; probing based on participants' answers to the interview items was done to further strengthen, sustain and substantiate the collected data. Data was also generated through an e-EGRA test (See **Figure 1** below) which Grade 1 learners from the two different socioeconomic school contexts took at the beginning of their Grade 1 year. The test focused on areas of *handling a book*; *writing own name*; *letter naming*; *letter sounding*; *syllables*; *initial sounds*; *end sounds*; *rhyming words*; *comprehension* and scored 135 marks. Therefore, this study only reports on the overall performance of the

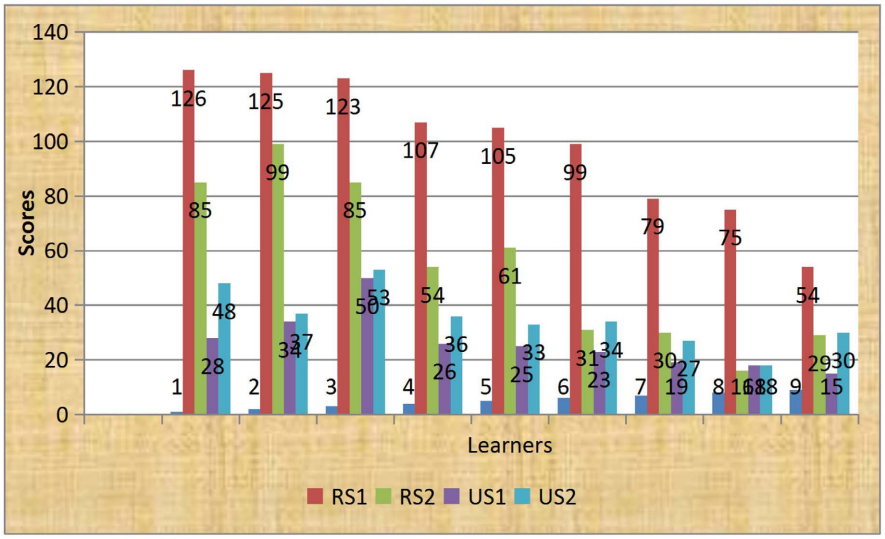

Figure 1. Urban and Rural Schools' performance in the eEGRA test.

schools, classified under rural and urban to show if indeed the socioeconomic context or status of the school influences its learners' performance in Grade 1.

Ethics

Permission was sought from school management to collect data at their schools. Secondly, the researcher explained the objective of the study to the participants; since the study involved minors, the researcher obtained informed consent from Grade 1 children's parents and teachers as their immediate gatekeepers for participating in the eEGRA test. All participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without being harmed.

4.1. Results and Analysis

In response to the research questions of this study, we presented findings on the extent to which the school's socioeconomic context or status influences, whether positively or negatively, Grade 1 learners' performance and how such a situation can be discouraged or perfected. We used *Pseudonyms* to refer to participants in this study. The four teacher participants were referred to as T1 for Teacher1; T2 for Teacher 2; T3 for Teacher 3; and T4 for Teacher 4. We presented *interview data first* with the *eEGRA test data* coming *last. The* presentation was done in relation to Research Questions 1 and 2 of this study and under two parts, *data from interviews* and *data from the eEGRA test.*

4.2. Data from Interviews

Research Question 1: How does the socioeconomic status of schools influence Grade 1 learners' performance in Zambezi region, Namibia? The interview question which participants answered was "how do urban and rural schools differ in terms of performance?"

Participants, as per their experiences of teaching Grade 1 in both rural and urban school socioeconomic contexts, expressed various views in responding to

the above question. We were *particularly* overwhelmed by the manner and interest they demonstrated in sharing their experiences with the researchers regarding the question. In response to the above question, they expressed that indeed urban and rural schools were not the same and thus differed in terms of performance as they existed in two different socioeconomic environments. All of the 4 teachers stated that these two schools differed in performance and had the following to say: *They differ because the further the school is away from town, the higher the performance risk* (T1); *They differ, urban schools know and perform better than rural schools* (T2); *Yes they differ, urban schools their learners perform better compared to rural schools* (T3); *They differ in terms of services, urban schools have better services than rural schools* (T4).

All the teachers overwhelmingly believed that rural schools differed from urban schools. The difference between urban and rural schools in terms of performance alluded to by the interviewees implies that urban schools outperform rural schools. This is evident in T1's response which subjects poor performance of rural schools to them being further away from town thus not getting the much needed and better teaching services and thus labelling them as "*performance risk schools*". It is clear that T1 juxtaposes performance with distance, and concludes that rural schools fail to perform as a result of distance away from town where services are perceived to be better. On the other hand, however, T3 echoed the difference between rural and urban schools saying urban school learners performed better than rural school learners, with this sentiment of "better services" being further acknowledged by T4, in expressing the significance of these services which result in rural schools under-performing. When we asked a follow up question to establish why they thought urban schools were better off than rural schools, all the respondents cited a lack of resources to be the main reason. For example, "*rural schools don't have facilities*" (T2), etc.

Research Question 2: How can these performance challenges be addressed?

Interview data show that interviewees proposed various mechanisms and interventions that can be used to address the schools' bottlenecks to good performance. These interventions are both government based through *provision of resources* and school based through *teacher monitoring and support*. In view of and being well aware of learning conditions in both rural and urban schools contexts or geographical locations, participants shared that "the ministry should implement strategies of monitoring teachers on a regular basis, and that parents, through the school board should make means to acquire books for their schools" (T3); "lost textbooks should be replaced by specific learners; parents should talk to their children about school matters, and that teachers should be dedicated to their work" (T1) due to that while there are qualified teachers in rural schools, these same qualified teachers may lack dedication to their work if necessary steps to keep them focused are not applied. The third participant proposed that "each school should be connected to internet; should have computer labs, lower primary teachers should be encouraged to create teaching aids themselves, and teachers to think positively about themselves despite where they teach" (T4) instead of

looking down on themselves as this may have a direct negative impact on their performance and that of their respective schools.

4.3. Data from the eEGRA Test

As already stated, information on how urban and rural schools fared in the eEGRA test was collected. This was done in an effort to establish how the socioeconomic status of the school influences the progress of learners in that school. We thus presented the schools' results on a bar graph (Figure 1). In presenting the eEGRA test results/data (see Figure 1), we were careful to indicate how each one of the schools (rural or urban through its learners) performed in the test which finally added up to the overall performance of that school. The maximum score for the test was 135 marks.

Figure 1 shows that the performance of the two urban schools was decimally low compared to that of the two rural schools. For example, US1 scored from 15 to 53 points and US2 scored from 15 to 50 points respectively. On the contrary, the performance of the two rural schools (RS1 and RS2) was substantially high with Rural School 2 (RS2) scoring from 29 points to 99 points and Rural School 1 (RS1) scoring from 54 points to 126 points respectively. In other words the scores imply that contrary to popular belief, urban schools were outperformed by rural schools despite their socioeconomic status, and a common thread from interviews classifying them (rural schools) as regular under-performers. The scores in Figure 1 also demonstrate that there are huge gaps between urban schools' scores (both *minimum* and maximum scores) and rural schools' scores (*minimum and maximum* scores), suggesting that urban schools *decimally* failed to move closer to rural schools in terms of performance. There is therefore a pressing need for urban schools to put more efforts to catch up and close this existing gap. Now, altogether this information on performance continue to dispel the myth that urban schools always perform better than rural schools due to their contextual advantage over rural schools.

Therefore, informed by *interview* data and the *eEGRA* test data (as in Figure 1), three cross cutting themes, explored in the next section, emerged. For example, *rural schools can equally outperform urban schools*; *Pedagogical activities in both urban and rural schools should be strictly monitored and diagnosed* as well as *funding and teacher placement formulae should be revisited* so as to close performance disparities between Grade 1 learners in urban and rural schools in Namibia.

5. Discussion

In this section we discussed the three themes that emerged from the two data sets. The data sets herein referred to are interview data with the four teachers and the eEGRA test data taken by Grade 1 learners. Where necessary, data were quoted to strengthen context of discussion.

Rural schools can equally outperform urban schools

The above perception was sealed and confirmed by the Grade 1 learners' eE-

GRA test results of four schools (US1; US2; RS1, and RS2). The results established that nothing can stop rural schools from performing better than urban schools if necessary and if effective mechanisms like teachers' maximum use of available teaching resources, etc., are put in place. As already presented in the previous section, US1 got a minimum score of 15 (Learner 9) and a maximum score of 50 (Learner 3) with RS1 getting a minimum score of 54 points (Learner 9) and 126 points (Learner 1). This positive performance by the rural school (RS1) is significantly amazing and can be attributed to various factors, for example, creative and committed Grade 1 teachers at the said rural school; teacher support through monitoring by school management; and measurable teaching targets which were comprehensively linked to class activities for attainment of expected learning outcomes.

The above positive achievement by RS1 is despite interview data establishing that urban schools enjoy better services than rural schools due to teaching resources and facilities rural schools may not have (*urban schools they use ICT and they have more resources that rural schools*, *for example*, *libraries and laboratories* (T3); *More resources in urban than in rural schools* (T4). While there may be some level of truth to/in this perception or belief, this is contrary to what this study established. We want to reason that being rural or urban school does not in any way deter the school from excelling as this is solely an issue of teachers' level of professionalism, commitment, their preparedness, appreciation of their work and the extent to which they are monitored (OECD, 2012) as another participant expressed, "*ministry should implement strategies on monitoring teachers on a regular basis*; *teachers should be trained to use learner centered approach*" (T3).

We strongly believe that commitment, monitoring and teachers' level of professionalism are powerful management ingredients that [can] help schools to turn the performance clock around, and have to be consciously enforced if positive results are to be realized. We further believe that positive performance is not determined by the school's context or geographical location but the extent to which the school is organized. This is in line with recent research data not providing clear evidence that the school's socioeconomic context has an undesirable or negative bearing on its learners' performance and progress (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019), resulting in the study providing two sets of conflicting results. For example, "one study (*using the same data*) found that learners in rural schools perform less well than their urban counterparts, but other studies using the same national data set have reached divergent or conflicting conclusions (Reeves & Bylund, 2005: p. 1). Results of the eEGRA test also suggest and confirmed that while teaching resources can be managed and sorted at school level, there exists absolutely no performance boundary between rural and urban schools as the issue of resources is purely administrative and managerial.

Pedagogical activities in both urban and rural schools should be strictly monitored

Any work done aims to achieve desired results, but if not properly monitored,

the desired results become unrealizable. In the same vein, if teachers, rural or urban, are not supported and their work not monitored, the final results will always be deemed undesirable, disheartening and disappointing. Therefore, the researchers saw it fit that mechanisms be put in place to ensure that school activities are monitored, so as to identify setbacks for necessary remedial action through support efforts. This is because it has been found beyond reasonable doubt that teachers, and not teachers alone, who are not monitored, are reluctant and thus deliver sub-standard lessons as Lungu and Daka (2022) put it. This is true as it goes with the understanding that if teachers are not monitored, they will live with their shortfalls with no support at all and vice versa (Vipene & Kerene, 2021). Monitoring thus serves as an external mediator that drives quality into ones work as more time is spent on preparing for teaching and learning. Research further noted that monitoring is the basis to accomplish nonstop learner and teacher improvement, and that it adds value to the teacher's lesson delivery efforts (Vipene & Kerene, 2021).

Funding and teacher placement formulae should be revisited

Performance of schools, both rural and urban, is driven by and incumbent upon equitable resource distribution and how this is done. In this article, resources refer not only to teaching and learning resources, but to human capital as well and the manner in which distribution thereof is done. Therefore appointment of teachers to schools matters and thus remains an issue of great concern and consideration. If more teaching and learning resources as well as qualified teachers are only subjected to urban schools, it automatically disadvantages rural schools as it puts their performance at stake, and not necessarily that they cannot perform. In other words, resources should be equitably distributed to all the schools as it is through the equitable distribution of resources that positive progress of any school can be measured and achieved. This is true with the understanding that absence of teaching resources in the schools invalidates the claim of quality education (OECD, 2012). We thus argue that the power and ability to perform is not determined by the school's location but rather by the availability of relevant teaching resources (Reeves & Bylund, 2005). We also believe that a lack of resources in a rural school class is a deliberate move to punish a rural school learner as the same resources urban schools enjoy could be shared equitably with rural schools (OECD, 2012) to strengthen and add value to teaching and learning (Vipene & Kerene, 2021). Therefore, quality education should not only be expected to be discharged by urban schools but by rural schools as well through the provision of the available meagre resources.

6. Conclusion

It is clear from the research findings that good performance is *neither* determined by *nor* solely dependent on context but is associated with hard work and inventiveness. Any effort that divorces creativity is likely to fail in attaining desired results and targets, which in this case is "good performance". This study has thus, through rural schools outperforming urban schools, demonstrated

beyond reasonable doubt that with teacher commitment, it is possible to shift performance goalposts of any school irrespective of its socioeconomic status. It also suggests a paradigm shift or change of public mindset in the manner rural schools are perceived thus downplaying the potential they have over urban schools, and that pegging good performance to urban schools alone without any due consideration for rural schools' abilities is the equivalence of "*missing the point*".

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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