Do Students' Backgrounds in the Language of Instruction Influence Secondary School Academic Performance?

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Abstract

In Tanzania, two types of primary schools exist, based on the language of instruction used. These are English medium schools and Swahili medium schools. Students who complete their studies from both types of schools join secondary schools where the language of instruction is solely English. This study investigated the influence of students' backgrounds in the language of instruction on secondary school academic performance. The specific objectives of the study were two: First, to compare form one annual examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level and, secondly, to compare the form two national examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level. The study involved 524 students from eight secondary schools in Mbeya region. The data were collected through review of documents containing students' admission lists and examinations results. The analysis of the collected data was done using computer software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 18, in which an independent samples t-test was conducted to test the hypotheses advanced for this study. The findings were as follows: First, students whose medium of instruction at primary school level was English, performed better in form one annual examinations than their counterparts who had used Swahili and the difference was statistically significant at $p<0.05$, in a two-tailed test. Secondly, students who had used English as the medium of instruction at primary school level, performed better in form two national examinations than those who had used Swahili and the difference was also statistically significant at $p<0.05$, in a two-tailed test. It was thus, concluded that the language of instruction used by students at primary school level influenced significantly students' academic performance at secondary school level.

Keywords: students' backgrounds; language of instruction; secondary school; academic performance, Tanzania.

1. Introduction

In Tanzania, primary education is a circle of education which takes seven years. Primary education is compulsory in enrolment and attendance to every child. According to URT (1995), the aims of primary education include: to enable every child understand and appreciate his or her human person; to acquire values, respect and enrich common cultural background and moral values, social customs and traditions as well as national unity, identity, ethics and pride. This level of education is also expected to prepare the child for the subsequent levels of education (i.e. secondary, vocational, technical, continuing education etc.).

Before the 1995 Education Amendment Act No. 5, primary education provision was a government monopoly, and official policy required all seven years of primary education be provided in Swahili, the national language. However, following the 1995 Education Amendment Act, primary education started being offered in either Swahili or English as a language of instruction (URT, 1995). Subsequently, the primary school pupils (with different backgrounds on the language of instruction used at primary school level) join secondary education where the language of instruction is solely English. Literature indicates that a relationship exists between pupils' proficiency in the language of instruction and academic performance (Mtana, 2013; Komba, Kafanabo, Njabili & Kira, 2012; Cantoni, 2007). In the light of this relationship, the researchers were interested to investigate whether or not the primary school pupils who join secondary education differ significantly in their academic performance based on their languages of instruction used at primary school level.

As pointed out earlier, students who join secondary schools are primary school leavers who have studied using either English or Swahili as the medium of instruction. At secondary school level, where the medium of instruction is solely English language, some students have been performing well in their subjects while the performance of other students has not been impressive. One of the arguments advanced to explain the difference in performance among secondary school students in Tanzania is proficiency in the language of instruction, which is English language (Malekela, 2003). Many studies have been conducted on the relationship between students' proficiency in the language of instruction and their academic performance (Kinyaduka & Kiwara, 2013; Komba *et al.,* 2012; Wilson & Komba, 2012; Dorasamy, 2012; Mlay, 2010). Most of these studies have indicated the

existence of relationship between students' abilities in the language of instruction and their academic performance. However, there is inadequate information on whether or not students' backgrounds in the medium of instruction (i.e. English or Swahili language) used at primary school level in Tanzania influence their academic performance at the subsequent levels of education. Therefore, this study was designed to bridge such a knowledge gap. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following specific objectives: First, to compare form one annual examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level; and secondly, to compare form two national examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level. In order to achieve these objectives, two null hypotheses were postulated as follows:

   i. H_o: There is no significant difference between form one annual examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level.
   ii. H_o: There is no significant difference between form two national examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level.

2. Literature Review

Language of instruction (LoI) is the language used for the purpose of imparting knowledge in education system and normally selected by the government of the country to meet the demands of the dynamics of knowledge growth and expansion (Mkude, 1999). In Tanzania, missionaries and the successive German and British colonial administrations laid the foundation for the use of Swahili as an official language and language of instruction (LoI) (Swilla, 2009). For instance, during the German colonial era, Swahili was used as a medium of instruction and as an official language though few schools were permitted to teach German (Swilla, 2009). From 1919 to 1961, the British colonial administration maintained Swahili as the LoI in the first four years of primary school education for Africans. A gradual transition to English-medium instruction took place in the fifth year, and English became the sole LoI from the sixth year through secondary and post-secondary levels (Swilla, 2009). Since independence in 1961, both English and Swahili have remained official languages and LoI.

From 1961 to 1966, the government maintained the colonial curriculum and languages of instruction, using Swahili as LoI in the first five years of primary education, and English from the sixth to secondary and post-secondary levels (Swilla, 2009). In 1967, the country adopted socialism and nationalized schools not owned by the government and abolished racially and religiously segregated schools at all levels through the enactment of the education Act No. 50 of 1969 and Swahili was made a sole language of instruction in primary school level (Swilla, 2009).

Language of instruction plays a significant role in students' academic performance (Kagwesage, 2012) and a good number of studies have been conducted worldwide on this topic. For example, Komba *et al*., (2012) conducted a study which sought to compare students' abilities in written English language skills and their academic performance in Tanzania. The main objective of this study was to find out whether or not there was a correlation between students' abilities in written English language skills and their academic performance. The findings indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between the students' abilities in the English Writing Skills Test (EWST) and their University GPAs (r = 0.314, p<0.01). In their study, Komba *et al*., (2012) focused on the comparison between the students' abilities in written English language skills and academic performance while this study focused on the investigation of whether or not students' different backgrounds in the medium of instruction used at primary school level influence academic performance at secondary school level.

In addition, Mlay (2010) conducted a study on the influence of the language of instruction on students' academic performance in secondary schools in Tanzania. The main objective of this study was to examine the impact of the language of instruction on urban and rural students' academic performance in the subjects of History and English language. The findings indicated that students in urban secondary schools performed better than students in the rural schools because of better English language skills. Whereas Mlay's study focused on the impact of the language of instruction on urban and rural students' academic performance, the current study focused on whether or not students' different backgrounds in the medium of instruction used at primary school level influence academic performance at secondary school level.

Furthermore, Kinyaduka and Kiwara (2013) conducted a study in Morogoro region of Tanzania mainland on language of instruction and its impact on the quality of education in secondary schools. The purpose of this study was to assess teacher, student and parent opinions on the impact of language of instruction on students' understanding during classroom instruction. In addition, the researchers sought to find out whether or not teachers, students and parents preferred a different language (rather than English language) to be used as a

medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools. In this study, it was found that 69.5% of students could not understand lessons when taught in English language. Moreover, 78.9% of the teachers stated that English language was a drawback in student academic achievement as the majority of students could not understand classroom instructions. In the same vein, 71.4% of students felt that it was better for teachers to use both Swahili and English during classroom instructions. One of the conclusions drawn from the findings of this study was that using English language as a medium of instruction contributed to poor academic performance among students, thus resulting in poor quality education. However, Kinyaduka and Kiwara, (2013) did not compare the academic performance of students with different backgrounds in the medium of instruction (i.e. Swahili or English) used at primary school level, which was the focus of the current study.

Moreover, Wilson and Komba (2012) conducted a study on the link between English language proficiency and academic performance. The main objective of the study was to investigate whether or not there was any relationship between English Language Proficiency (ELP) and academic performance in Tanzanian secondary schools. The findings of this study revealed that there was a significant weak positive relationship between ELP and students' academic achievement. However, their study was different from this study because its focus was on the link between English language proficiency and academic performance while the current study sought to find out whether or not students' different backgrounds in the medium of instruction used at primary school level influence academic performance at secondary school level.

Another study was conducted in Nigeria by Aina, Ogundele and Olanipekun (2013) on the relationship between proficiency in English language and academic performance among students of science and technical education. The findings of this study revealed that there was correlation between proficiency in English language and academic performance of students in science and technical education. In their study, Aina *et al*., (2013) focused on whether or not students' proficiency in English language correlated with academic performance while the current study focused on whether or not students' different backgrounds in the medium of instruction used at primary school level influenced their academic performance at secondary school level. In addition, Kong, Powers, Starr and Williams (2012) conducted a study in the United States of America. In this study, the authors sought to investigate the use of student performance on English language proficiency assessments and academic reading assessments in predicting the future academic success of English Learners (ELs). The findings of this study revealed that English language proficiency was an important factor of prediction for future academic success because learning English prepared students for meaningful instruction and academic performance in academic subjects taught using the English language. However, their study did not focus on whether or not students' different backgrounds in the medium of instruction used at primary school level influenced academic performance at subsequent levels of education.

Other similar studies have been conducted by Addow, Abubakar and Abukar (2013), Phiri *et al*., (2013), Kong, Powers, Starr and Williams (2012), Dorasamy (2012), and Sahragard, Baharloo and Ali, (2011). These studies have focused on various aspects of language of instruction and how they are related to academic performance. However, none of the studies had investigated on whether or not students' different backgrounds in the medium of instruction used at primary school level influence academic performance at secondary school level, particularly in Tanzanian context.

In planning and subsequently carrying out this study, a model with 3 categories of variables namely background variables, intermediate variables, and outcome variables was adopted. Rubin and Babbie (2011) define a variable as any factor that can take on different values and influences the outcome of experimental research. A background variable is an aspect of subjects' background that may influence other variables, but will not be influenced by them. It could be age, sex, ethnicity, language proficiency level, and education level, just to mention but a few. In the context of this study, the background variable was the type of language of instruction used by students at primary school level (i.e. Swahili or English) which is considered to influence students' academic achievements at secondary school level. This consideration was based on the evidence from empirical studies which indicate that there is a positive significant relationship between proficiency in the language of instruction and academic performance (Aina *et al*., 2013; Phiri *et al*., 2013; Addow *et al*., 2013; Kinyaduka & Kiwara, 2013; Komba *et al.,* 2012; Wilson & Komba, 2012; Dorasamy, 2012; Kong *et al*., 2012; Mlay, 2010 & Sahragard *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, an intermediate variable is the one in a causal pathway which causes variation in the outcome variable and is itself caused to vary by the background variable. In this study, the intermediate variable was proficiency in English language which was used as a language of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools. It was assumed that students who were taught in English language at Primary school level would be more proficient in English language than their counterparts who were taught in Swahili language. An outcome variable is the outcome measure in a study. It is a factor that can be measured and it can

change over time. In this study, students' academic performance in secondary schools, expressed in terms of average grades obtained by each student in form one annual examinations and form two national examination, constituted the outcome variable.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach because it sought to employ statistical analysis (i.e. testing hypotheses) to ascertain whether or not students' different backgrounds in the medium of instruction used at primary school level influenced academic performance at secondary school level. In view of this, two stages were involved: First, numerical data on students' performance in examinations were collected. Secondly, the existence or absence of difference in students' academic performance between students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was determined with the aid of statistical analysis. On the other hand, a cross-sectional research design was adopted, based on the fact that it allows data to be collected once at a single point in time. In addition, the collected data using this research design can be used in either statistical or descriptive analysis (Gall, *et al.,* 1996). As pointed out earlier, this study sought to employ statistical analysis to ascertain whether or not students' different backgrounds in the media of instruction used at primary school level influenced the academic performance at secondary school level. The study was conducted in Mbeya Region, one of the regions of Tanzania mainland. The collection of data needed to address the objectives of this study was done through a document review method in which examinations results for 524 students, including 262 Swahili medium students and the other 262 English medium students from 8 randomly selected schools, were reviewed. This method was employed because the information on variables of this study had to be obtained from documents containing students' admission lists and students' examinations results. The variables included the type of school the students had attended at primary school level (i.e. Swahili or English medium) and students' average grades the students had obtained in the form one annual examinations and form two national examinations. All the collected data were quantitative and were analyzed using computer software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 18. In this analysis, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The choice of this statistical tool was based on the nature of the study which sought to test hypotheses to ascertain whether or not there was a significant difference in secondary school academic performance between students who had used English and those who had used Swahili language as the medium of instruction at primary school level. In the overall interpretation, the significance of the difference was tested at $p < 0.05$ level, in a two tailed test.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Comparison of Students' Form One Annual Examinations Results based on the Medium of Instruction used at Primary School Level

The first objective of this study was to compare form one annual examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level. In collecting data to achieve this objective, average grades for 524 students, including 262 Swahili medium students and the other 262 English medium students, were obtained from academic offices of the selected schools. After analysing the data, the results were as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Academic Performance Grades for Swahili Medium and English Medium Students in Form One Annual Examinations

Grade	Swahili Medium		English Medium	
	Frequency	**Percent**	**Frequency**	**Percent**
1	11	4.2	1	0.4
2	37	14.1	13	5.0
3	72	27.5	49	18.7
4	91	34.7	123	46.9
5	51	19.5	76	29.0
Total	**262**	**100.0**	**262**	**100.0**

Key: 1=F; 2=D; 3=C; 4=B; 5=A.

Table 1 shows that 19.5% of students who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level had obtained A grade in the form one annual examinations results while those who had obtained the same grade from English medium primary schools constituted 29%. It is worth noting that the grade with the highest concentration for both groups was B in which 34.7% of students who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level had obtained B grade and those from English medium schools who had obtained the same grade were 46.9%. In addition, 27.5% of students who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level had obtained C grade while those who had obtained the same grade from

English medium primary schools constituted 18.7%. Futhermore, students who had obtained D grade were 14.1% and 5.0% from Swahili medium primary schools and English medium primary schools respectively. It was also revealed that while 11 students (equivalent to 4.2%) from Swahili medium primary schools had failed their form one annual examinations, only one student (equivalent to 0.4%) from English medium primary schools had failed the examinations.These findings imply that there was a difference in academic performance between students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level. It was evident that students whose language of instruction at primary school level was English performed better than their counterparts who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level. Furthermore, means for the two categories of students were computed and the results were as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Academic Performance Means for Swahili Medium and English Medium Students in Form One Annual Examinations

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	262	3.51	1.085	0.067
2	262	3.99	0.844	0.052

Key: 1=Swahili Medium; 2= English Medium.

As shown in Table 2, the means for the two categories of students were different. The mean performance of students who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was 3.51 while students who had used English had the mean performance of 3.99. This further confirms the earlier observation that there was a difference in academic performance between the students who had used Swahili and those who had used English as the medium of instruction at primary school level. In addition, the standard deviation for the two categories of students indicated that there was more variability in performance among students who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level than their counterparts who had used English language. This is indicated by the values for standard deviations which were 1.085 and 0.844 for Swahili Medium and English Medium students respectively.

In order to find out whether or not the difference in performance between students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was statistically significant, a t-test for students' academic performance grade means was computed. The results were as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: T-test for Students' Academic Performance Grade Means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Form One Annual Examinations Results for KM and EM Students	Equal variances assumed	40.547	.000	-5.661	522	0.000	-0.481
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.661	492.171	0.000	-0.481

Key: KM=Swahili Medium; EM= English Medium.

Table 3 shows that the computed t-value was -5.661 which was associated with the p-value of 0.000 in a two tailed test. Probabilities (p-values) less than 0.05 indicate that the null hypothesis should be rejected. Since the p-value of 0.000 was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis that *there is no significant difference between form one annual examinations results for students who used English and those who used Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level* was rejected. Instead an alternative hypothesis that *there is a significant difference between form one annual examinations results for students who used English and those who used Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level* was accepted. Therefore, based on these findings it was concluded that the difference between form one annual examinations results for students who used English and those who used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was statistically significant at p<0.05, in a two-tailed test.

4.2. Comparison of Students' Form Two National Examinations Results based on the Medium of Instruction used at Primary School Level

Another objective of this study was to compare form two national examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level. Average grades for 524 students, including 262 from Swahili medium primary schools and 262 from English medium schools were analysed. The results were as presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Academic Performance Grades for Swahili Medium and English   Medium Students in Form Two National Examinations

Grade	Swahili Medium		English Medium	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	25	9.5	2	0.8
2	36	13.7	23	8.8
3	71	27.1	44	16.8
4	86	32.8	128	48.9
5	44	16.8	65	24.8
Total	**262**	**100.0**	**262**	**100.0**

Key: 1=F; 2=D; 3=C; 4=B; 5=A.

As shown in Table 4, 16.8% of students who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level had obtained A grade in form two national examinations. Students from English medium primary schools who had obtained the same grade were 29%. Furthermore, students who had obtained B grade were 32.8% from Swahili medium primary schools and 48.9% from English medium primary schools. It should be noted that the B grade in form two national examinations results had the highest concentration as was the case with form one annual examinations. The results further indicated that 27.1% of students who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level had obtained C grade while those who had obtained the same grade from English medium primary schools constituted 16.8%. Futhermore, students who had obtained D grade from Swahili medium primary schools and English medium primary schools were 13.7% and 8.8% respectively. Lastly, while 9.5% of students from Swahili medium primary schools had failed the form two national examinations, only 0.8% of students from English medium primary schools had failed the examinations.

When performance means for the two categories of students were computed, the results were as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Academic Performance Means for Swahili Medium and English Medium Students in Form Two National Examinations

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	262	3.34	1.188	0.073
2	262	3.88	0.908	0.056

Key: 1=Swahili Medium; 2= English Medium.

Table 5 indicates that the mean performance of students who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was 3.34, which was lower than that of students who had used English, which was 3.88. This means that students who had used English as the medium of instruction at primary school level performed better in form two national examination than those who had used Swahili, as was the case with the form one annual examinations. The difference in performance was also revealed by the values for standard deviations which were 1.188 and 0.908 for Swahili Medium and English Medium students respectively, which means that there was more variability in performance among students who had used Swahili than those who had used English as the medium of instruction at primary school level.

The researchers were also interested to find out whether or not the difference in performance between students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was statistically significant. To achieve this, a t-test for students' academic performance grade means was computed and the results were as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: T-test for Students' Academic Performance Grade Means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Form Two National Examinations results for KM and EM Students	Equal variances assumed	34.831	0.000	-5.907	522	0.000	-0.546
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.907	488.403	0.000	-0.546

Key: KM=Swahili Medium; EM= English Medium.

As shown in Table 6, the computed t-value was -5.907 which was associated with the p-value of 0.000 in a two tailed test. The rule has it that when the observed p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis should be rejected. Since the observed p-value of 0.000 was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis that *there is no significant difference between form two national examinations results for students who used English and those who used Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level* was rejected. In this regard, an alternative hypothesis that *there is a significant difference between form two national examinations results for students who used English and those who used Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level* was accepted. Therefore, it was concluded that the difference between form two national examinations results for students who used English and those who used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was statistically significant at p<0.05, in a two-tailed test.

As pointed out earlier in the introductory part of this article, this study sought to compare form one annual examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the media of instruction at primary school level. On the other hand, the study sought to compare form two national examinations results for students who used English and those who used Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level.

There were two important observations regarding the findings of this study. The first observation was that there existed a significant difference in students' academic performance between the two categories of students. Students who had been taught in English at primary school level performed better than their counterparts whose language of instruction at primary school level was Swahili. The findings of this study seem to be logical because at secondary school level, the language of instruction is English. Language of instruction is the one in which basic skills and knowledge are imparted to students, and the medium in which the production and reproduction of knowledge are transacted (Komba *et al.,* 2012). Therefore, students who had an exposure to English language prior to joining secondary education were better placed to perform well at secondary school level than those who had not. This is because students who had the exposure to English language were more likely to understand better the materials they interacted with during the teaching and learning process than those whose background in the language of instruction was poor. This is supported by Malekela (2003) who argues that if the learner is handicapped in the language of instruction, learning may not take place since both the instructor and learners will not be communicating.

In addition, literature shows that there is a link between the academic performance and proficiency in the language of instruction (Aina *et al*., 2013; Phiri *et al*., 2013; Addow *et al*., 2013; Kinyaduka & Kiwara, 2013; Komba *et al.,* 2012; Wilson & Komba, 2012; Dorasamy,2012; Kong *et al*., 2012; Mlay, 2010 & Sahragard *et al.*, 2011; Brock-Utne, 2002; Roy-Campell & Qorro, 1997). For example, a study conducted by Dorasamy (2012) in South Africa revealed that among many factors which contributed to students' academic performance, English language as a medium of instruction contributed significantly to students' academic performance. In this study, it was further found that students who had poor English language background spent a lot of time striving to understand the meaning of English words rather than the subject contents. Consequently, they failed their examinations. Therefore, the obsereved difference in performance between students who had used Swahili and those who had used English as the medium of instruction at primary school level could be attributed to their differences in comprehending English language, which is the language of instruction at secondary school level in

Tanzania.

The second observation, based on the findings of this study, was that the difference in academic performance between students who had used Swahili and those who had used English as the medium of instruction at primary school level kept on increasing as students progressed from form one to form two. For example, while the mean difference in form one annual examinations was -0.481, the mean difference increased to -0.546 in form two national examinations results for the two categories of students. Therefore, it seemed that students who had used English as the medium of instruction at primary school level had an important tool (English language) which enabled them to perform significantly better than their counterparts whose background in English language was poor.

As stated in the literature review section, the background variable in this study was the type of language of instruction used by students at primary school level (i.e. Swahili or English) which was considered to influence students' academic performance at secondary school level. The findings of the study revealed that the language of instruction used by students at primary school level influenced significantly students' academic performance at secondary school level.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In light of the objectives and findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn: First, the difference between form one annual examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was statistically significant at p<0.05, in a two-tailed test. Secondly, the difference between form two national examinations results for students who had used English and those who had used Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was also statistically significant at p<0.05, in a two-tailed test. This means that the language of instruction used by students at primary school level influenced significantly their academic performance at secondary school level. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the government should ensure that the language of instruction which is used at primary school level is maintained throughout the education system. If English has to be maintained as the language of instruction at post primary school levels, it should essentially be used as the language of instruction at primary school level as well. In addition, English language teachers should be carefully screened to ascertain their suitability to teach English language at both primary and secondary school levels. Lastly, students who have difficulties in comprehending the language of instruction at secondary school level should be assisted to enable them cope with the language. This could be done by conducting English language remedial sessions for students whose background in English language is poor in all secondary schools, in order to enhance their academic performance.

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