

Determinants of Senior High School Students' Performance in Social Studies in the Central Region of Ghana

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Abstract

The study is an exposition on the determinants of student' performance in social studies in the Central Region of Ghana. Literature was reviewed on the teacher, school and home as determinants of students' performance in Senior High Schools. Past social studies results covering 2006-2009 and 2011 from WAEC on students' performance in Ghana were analysed and used as the basis for the review of literature. It was concluded that many variables contribute to students' performance in social studies across schools in Ghana. Based on the conclusions drawn, it has been recommended for the consideration of relevant stakeholders and researchers in Ghana, to carry out further research into the real and perceived factors that could contribute to students' performance in social studies.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been huge public investment in the school system especially at the basic and secondary school levels of education in Ghana. The importance of knowledge creation to the development of education has long been acknowledged. This explains why individuals and governments the world over invest various resources into education. Education generally is a costly venture for nations and the individual families. It is therefore important for stakeholders to understand the factors affecting the provision and the performance of learners.

The Senior High School (SHS) is the second level of the educational ladder after the basic school in Ghana. At this level, most parents begin to appreciate what their wards will get out of it to become worthwhile citizens. Many subjects are taken at the SHS level. No matter the programme, a student is undertaking, there are a number of core subjects common to all students. Among these core subjects is the study of social studies. The other core subjects are English Language, Mathematics, and integrated science.

To move to a higher level for tertiary education in Ghana, a student is expected to pass the core subjects. It makes sense therefore, that failure to perform creditably in any of the core subjects may end the academic aspirations of both parents and students. It is because of this that all responsible parents invest in different ways including extra tuition for their wards to perform well. However, in spite of the investments put in by parents and governments over the years, the performance of students in the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSSCE) in social studies appear not to be very satisfactory especially to parents. Many factors account for the poor, good and excellent performance in schools across Ghana. Determinants of students' performance have been the subject of ongoing debate among educators, academics, and indeed policy makers and implementers (Harb & El-Shaarawi, 2006). According to Harb and El-Shaarawi, there have been many studies that sought to examine the issue of determinants of students' performance and the findings point out hard work and discipline, previous schooling, parents' level of education, family income and self-motivation as factors that could explain differences in students' grades. This paper unfortunately cannot and in fact will not be able to tackle all the possible factors that determine a student's performance at the SHS level especially in social studies. It will however be appropriate to give a scenario of students' performance in social studies in Ghana over a couple of years and proceed to identify possible explanations for the trend of performance.

Table: 1 Senior High School Social Studies Results Analysis 2006-2009 and 2011 in Ghana Showing Total Number of Candidates, Percentage Passes and Failures

YEAR	A1- C6,		D7		E8		F9	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
2006	121,323	82.36	14,080	9.55	7,037	4.77	4,691	3.18
2007	100,818	75.86	11,387	8.56	9,707	7.30	10,474	7.88
2008	82,038	60.06	21,083	15.56	15,319	11.31	16,608	12.26
2009	120,999	77.06	14,262	9.08	12,395	7.89	8,154	5.19
2010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2011	121,937	82.29	14,183	9.57	7,127	4.81	4,746	3.20

Source: Extracts From WAEC Ghana National Office, Accra: 2011.

The analysis from Table 1 has indicated that in 2006 more than 17% (25,808) of the SHS students' who participated in WASSSCE could not gain admission into any tertiary institution because they had grades outside the recommended grades of **A1-C6**. However, for one to gain admission into any Post Secondary tertiary Institution in Ghana, the grades in any core subject should be between **A1-C6** as prescribed by the National Accreditation Board (NAB) and the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) of Ghana. In the same way, more than 24% (31,568), 39% (53,010), 22% (34,811) and 17% (26,056) in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2011 respectively could not make it to any tertiary institution in Ghana because they got grades outside the recommended **A1-C6** in social studies. No examinations were conducted in 2010 by The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) in Ghana because of the extension of the duration of SHS from three to four years as contained in the Ghana Government White Paper on the 2007 Education Reform Programme. Therefore, students who ordinarily would have taken their examinations in 2010 had to do that in 2011.

From the performance displayed above, there is no way any person can look at the results and conclude authoritatively that the displayed performance was because of a particular factor. Unfortunately, in Ghana the teacher is always at the receiving end of students' performance. Parents, other stakeholders and indeed the government in most cases perceive the teacher to be the cause of the apparent or perceived poor performance of students generally and social studies cannot be an exception. To some extent, the assumption that teachers are the cause of the poor performance in school could be buttressed by the conclusion drawn by Barber and Mourshed (2007), when they concluded from their study that "the quality of an education system cannot be higher than the quality of its teachers" p16. According to them, "evidence is accumulating from around the world that the single most significant means of improving educational systems is through excellent teaching" p12. Again, to bolster the assertion of Barber and Mourshed, Arain (2010) argues that, teacher profile and characteristics are not weightless because student achievements are heavily teacher dependent. According to Kane, Taylor, Tyler and Wooten (2011), student-test based measures of teacher performance are receiving attention in part because there are, as yet, few complimentary or alternative measures that can provide reliable and valid information on the effectiveness of a teacher's classroom practice. By implication, the quality of schools system rest on the quality of its teachers. However, Kennedy and Tay (1994) in an earlier study, on the factors affecting students' performance in economics pointed out students' aptitude as the most important determinant of learning.

Going by the arguments put up so far, the issue of students' performance in SHS social studies cannot really be attributable to a particular variable. There are several ways to evaluate a student's "quality" attributable to formal education but the most tractable indicator is how he or she performs in tests (World Bank, 2003). This according to Nzabihimana (2010), is why teachers are central to any consideration of schools, and majority of education policy discussion focus directly or indirectly on the role of teachers

This paper will attempt to explore some of the possible determinants of students' performance. These determinants will be discussed under three areas: Teacher related determinants, school related determinants and home related determinants of students' performance.

2. Teachers as determinants of students' performance in schools

The role or impact of teachers on the performance of students' in schools across all subjects can hardly be doubted. Sanders (2000), in a study concluded that "differences in teacher effectiveness are the single largest factor affecting academic growth of the population of students" p8. According to Betts, Zau and Rice (2003), arguably the most important school resource is the teacher and the many dimensions of their training, including years of teaching experience, their official teacher certifications and subject authorizations, their highest academic degree, and their field(s) of study at college. The teacher related determinants to be discussed in this paper are gender and teacher academic qualifications.

The gender of teachers appears to be one variable thought to play a role in the performance of students in schools. Unfortunately, most of the studies carried out on the influence of gender and students' performance appear to be concentrated in Mathematics and Science. Over the years however, a number of studies have shown that the perception that males do better in virtually every field than females is fast been rethought (Eniayeju, 2010 and Abubakar 2011).

In the field of social studies, Fitchett (2010) found that, demographically, teachers working in the field of social studies remained disproportionately male compared to practitioners in other subject areas. He states further that, previous researches on gender within social studies have intimated that the male orientation of the social sciences dissuades many young women from entering the field. From the point of view of Fitchett therefore, it may not be fair to compare the influence of female gender on social studies students' performance when there is numerical advantage to the male gender. The discussion so far has not given any clear indication of the influence gender has on students' performance. Besides, it appears all the studies conducted to determine gender influence bother on mathematics and science. It may therefore not be adequate, based on this to state that a particular gender has a better influence on the performance of students in secondary schools.

Data on the influence of gender on the performance of students' in the field of social studies is virtually non-existent in Ghana. According to Arain (2011), the importance of teachers is widely accepted because of their impact on students' performance. He contended further that, research has shown that improved teacher variables were most likely to produce substantial gains in students' performance.

One of these teacher related variables that could lead to gains in students' performance is teachers' academic status. In a study to determine the effects of different teacher certification levels on students' achievement, Goldhaber and Brewer (2000), found that the type of certification a teacher held was related to students' outcomes. For instance, they found that students of teachers with standard certification in Math did better than students with teachers that had either no certification or private school certification in Math. In another study, Goe and Stickler (2008) supported earlier findings of Frome, Lasater and Cooney (2005) which indicated that completion of an undergraduate or graduate major in mathematics was associated with higher students' achievement in high school and middle schools. This may not apply to social studies because social studies integrates a number of otherwise distinct subjects of history, geography, economics, government among other subjects and therefore it may prove difficult to have adequate mastery in all these otherwise distinct subject areas. In addition, these findings may not be conclusive as there are private SHS in Ghana who employ relatively unqualified teachers in terms of certification and yet their students' in some instances perform better than some public SHS students with very qualified (certification wise) teachers. This therefore indicates that, certification aside there are other teacher related variables that account for students' performance in SHS in Ghana.

In Ghana, there are many teachers of social studies who are single social science/arts specialists. In most cases, they have academic qualifications in subjects such as history, economics, geography, political science, integrated development studies among others. Therefore their approaches to the teaching of social studies still follow the way they teach the content of history, geography, and economics. Meanwhile, social studies require an integrated approach whereby all the single social sciences/arts subjects making up social studies lose their distinct orientation or identity. This is most likely to affect the performance of students. It is important to add that, the problem of non-specialists' teachers teaching social studies is not peculiar to Ghana. According to Adeniyi (1982), 81.3% of social studies teachers randomly selected in secondary schools in the Ilorin Local Government Area of Kwara State in Nigeria, were professionally unqualified to teach social studies at the time of the study. In the same way, Adinoyi (1986), in a similar study, also found in randomly selected secondary schools that 76% of social studies teachers in Okene/Okehi Local Government Area of Kwara State now Kogi State also in Nigeria had no teaching qualifications in social studies.

3. School related variables as determinants of students' performance in social studies

The school and the classroom are the laboratories from where the teacher operates. Therefore, the skills and knowledge a social studies teacher carries to the classroom would make further impact if the school and classroom(s) from where he/she teaches were conducive for teaching and learning. According to Lai, Sadoulet and Janvry (2009), common sense suggests that school quality should affect students' performance; however, there is limited rigorous supporting evidence. According to Lai, Sadoulet and Janvry (2009), in explaining students' performance, they are predominantly done by explaining teacher characteristics, leaving very little role for other school resources and peer quality. There have therefore been great challenges in rigorously assessing the impact of school quality on students' academic performance.

According to Asikhia (2010), the importance of the location of the school, the appearance of the physical structures of the school cannot be overemphasised in accounting for the performance of students in schools. The location of the school according to Asikhia (2010), will determine the patronage and to some extent the calibre of students and teachers, it will attract. It is common knowledge that students who perform very well at the Junior High School (JHS) level may not be tempted to go to schools in an obscure location with poor physical structures. Indeed schools such as those will most probably not attract highly qualified students and teachers. Betts, Zau and Rice (2003) found in an earlier research that, schools in less affluent areas tended to have less experienced, less educated teachers who were less likely to hold full academic credentials and these were schools likely to have the lowest test scores.

Highly qualified and experienced teachers are more likely to move to schools with good-looking infrastructure and located in an area that is easily accessible. When this happens, the probability is that unqualified teachers and students' with poor grades at the JHS level will be compelled to go to schools that are outlandish and have poor infrastructure. This will further de-motivate both teachers and learners leading to poor academic performance. Although from research, teacher experience and qualifications are not the only determinants of students' performance, they play vital roles in determining the level of a student's performance in social studies across schools.

The quality and level of teacher motivation will determine largely the performance of the students. A school that for one reason or the other has a crop of uncommitted teachers will suffer in terms of academic performance of the students. The school plant determines largely the level of commitment and cordiality that exist between

teachers and students', teachers and teachers and finally also between students and students. Where the school is run in a manner that teachers are dissatisfied it will be difficult to give of their best no matter the location and quality of the school infrastructure. The students then become the ultimate losers because for now, teachers are longer paid by the results of their students as it used to happen in Ghana in the 1930's and 1940's where teachers payment was linked to the percentage pass of students/pupils in schools.

One other school factor that could trigger poor performance from students is the classroom environment. Sometimes when a school is reputed to be a good school because of the location, quality of teachers, appearance of the physical infrastructure among others, enrolments tend to be very high. With time, if not well managed, the learning environment will become unconducive as there will be overcrowding in the classrooms. In a study, Porter (2002) found that, students made gains that were more academic when instruction was effectively connected to assessment. However, where there were large classes' teachers moved away from giving adequate assignments to students' because of the work load of marking. It also affects classroom management and class discipline. Teachers cannot also individualise in their teaching. This according to Nzabihimana (2010), teaching subjects that need great concentration like Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Math among others, are likely to be negatively influenced by a high pupil-teacher ratio. When this happens, students' are not properly assessed and this affects them ultimately. Having explored some of the teacher and school related variables as determinants of students' performance in social studies in SHS; it will be worthwhile looking at the extent to which some home factors also determine students' performance in social studies in SHS.

4. Home Related Variables as Determinants of Students' Performance in Social Studies

The home of the student as a determinant of his/her performance in school is apparent. A close look at the types of home, the Socio-Economic Status (SES) of the family among others, will indicate that, there is a relationship between the home and students' performance. Brecko (2010) contended that, a key goal of education is to ensure that every student has a chance to excel, both in school and in life. She argued further that, children success in school determined their success as adults, determining whether and where they go to College, what profession they enter and how much they earn. According to Loop (2012) the actual schooling is not the only contributing factor that could assist a child's learning and achievement in school. Loop (2012) contended further that, although the academic environment is important, each student's individual home situation greatly influences educational goals and progress. Therefore, school performance in secondary and primary schools do not depend on a student's mental and physical abilities alone. The family and social background of students greatly influence school performance (Paul, 2012).

The relationship between the child and the parent is a crucial home factor that influences the child learning and achievement. Parents who are responsive to their children needs can influence the performance of their children in schools. Parents' educational aspirations exert a significant influence on students' achievement. Therefore, all other things being equal, parents who have aspiration that challenge, inspire and motivate their children should correlate with their children performance in school. If a child comes from a home where parents are not responsive to their physical and emotional needs such students become depressed and if the situation is not handled well it will go a long way to affect their performance. Students belong to homes of different socio-economic backgrounds and this affects them in diverse ways (Paul, 2012, Loop 2012).

The school according to Paul (2012) is no doubt important in a student's achievement. Recent researches however indicate that, parents are even more important in terms of students' performance in schools. According to Paul, recent researches has shown that, parental involvement in checking the homework of their children, regular attendance of school meeting, discussing school activities with their children has more powerful influence on students' academic performance than anything about the school the student attend.

Students of varied family backgrounds attend educational institutions in Ghana like other countries. These differences range from parents' level of education, interests in education, material support to their children among others. It is most probable that educated parents will be more inclined to giving good education by providing the needs of their children. It must however be added that, there are some parents who are well educated yet pay very low attention to the education of their own children. If this scenario persists, students' of parents who pay little attention to their children education will perform poorly in schools. It must also be added that, there are situations where illiterate parents pay more attention to their children education even though they are illiterate themselves. To such illiterate parents, they do not want their children to suffer the deprivations they had to endure. It may therefore be true that parents' level of education is a strong determinant of students' performance in school. A home that encourages learning is perhaps the most accurate predictor of success at school.

5. Conclusions

The existing literature on the teacher as a determinant of students' performance in social studies allows one to draw a few conclusions. These are:

1. There are many teacher variables that contribute to students' performance in social studies across schools although it is difficult to quantify the absolute contribution of each variable.
2. Some teacher variables cannot easily be measured, yet it appears it is these hard to measure variables that contribute significantly to students' performance in social studies in school as far as teacher variables are concerned.
3. On the school as a determinant of students' performance in social studies, it can be concluded that there are still many unexplored school factors that other researches may need to find out.
4. The influence of school factors in determining students' performance in social studies are not sacrosanct as the same school factors that could be a determinant in students' good performance may not necessarily lead to the same level of performance in the next school.
5. The home is the most important determinant in students' performance. The student spends more time at home than at school and therefore benefits relatively more in the home than the school. Apart from the natural intelligence that a student may possess in social studies, most of what he needs to perform well in school are home based.
6. No single home factor could be singled out as the most important in terms of determining students' performance in social studies across schools.

6. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn on the determinants of students' performance in social studies in schools the following suggestions are made for the attention of relevant stakeholders in education:

1. Since the determinants of students' performance in social studies cannot be put in watertight compartments, Educational Researchers should carry out a holistic research on perceived factors that contribute to students' performance in social studies.
2. There should be more research in the area of hard to measure teacher qualities that contribute to students' performance in schools by the Ministry of Education and other educational researchers.
3. The Guidance and Counselling Units of the various SHS, should make Students appreciate the fact that their destinies are in their own hands as far as their performance in social studies are concerned since their teachers, the school and parents/home are only facilitating their studies.
4. There should be further research by Educational psychologists on the influence of the attitudes of students' towards the learning of social studies and the role of peer influence on the academic performance of students' in social studies.

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