



The role of education officers and parents teachers associations (PTA) in improving Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) performance in Tharaka County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Improving primary school examination performance requires effective collaboration between government education officers and community-based organizations such as Parents Teachers Associations (PTAs). In Tharaka County, Kenya, persistent performance disparities among primary schools in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations raised questions about the effectiveness of stakeholder involvement. This study aimed to establish the role of education officers and Parents Teachers Associations (PTA) in improving KCPE performance in Tharaka County schools. A qualitative-dominant mixed methods design was employed. Participants included education officers (TAC Tutors, Personnel Education Officer, Zonal Inspectors, and Assistant Education Officers), the District Commissioner, PTA members, head teachers (n=8), and Standard 8 teachers (n=37). Data were collected using interview schedules (2–3 hours each) and questionnaires. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were used. Education officers conducted regular seminars (55% of teachers confirmed), organized external examinations to prepare candidates (59.4% confirmed), and interacted with teachers (51.4% agreed). However, severe teacher shortages persisted: Karangari Primary School had 6 classes with only 1 teacher; the Maragua zone had 28 classes with only 10 teachers (teacher:class ratio 1:2.8). The district faced a shortage of 250–350 teachers. PTAs in high-performing schools employed temporary teachers (at Ksh 2,000/month), provided breakfast and lunch for teachers, organized night classes with parental pickup at 9:30 PM, and held prize-giving days where rewards included goats and utensils. In low-performing schools, PTA meetings were dysfunctional, “turned to quarrels,” and produced no tangible solutions. Education officers’ effectiveness is severely constrained by teacher shortages, particularly in remote, arid areas. PTAs are most effective when they cooperate with school administration, provide teacher incentives, and actively participate in academic activities. Strengthening both government oversight and community engagement is essential for improving KCPE performance in underserved districts.

Keywords: Education Officers, Parents Teachers Association (PTA), KCPE Performance, Teacher Shortage, Stakeholder Involvement, Tharaka County, Kenya

I. INTRODUCTION

Examinations are used by employers as indicators of student ability and help individuals determine their abilities and make career decisions (Bray, Clarke, & Stephen, 1986). In Kenya, the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination serves as a yardstick to measure the achievement of curriculum objectives, with the Kenya National Examination Council awarding certificates (Okechi & Asiachi, 1992). The Republic of Kenya (1998) emphasizes that primary schooling improves economic productivity, reduces fertility and infant mortality, improves family health, and is the basis for further formal education.

Given the high stakes of KCPE performance, the roles of various stakeholders – particularly government education officers and community-based PTAs – become critical. Education officers provide professional oversight, inspection, curriculum support, and teacher deployment. PTAs, composed of teachers and parents, make major decisions about schools, including employing temporary teachers and mobilizing resources (Republic of Kenya, 1998).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In Tharaka County, some primary schools consistently performed well in KCPE over five years (1995–1999), while others persistently performed poorly. The role of education officers and PTAs in explaining this variation had not been empirically investigated. Without evidence regarding stakeholder effectiveness, interventions to improve low-performing schools remained unfocused. This study therefore sought to establish the role of education officers and PTAs in improving KCPE performance.

1.3 Objectives and Research Questions

The specific objectives guiding this study were:

(c) To find out the role of Education Officers in improving KCPE performance in the district.



(d) To establish the role of the Parents Teachers Association in improving the performance.

The following research questions were formulated:

1. What role do the education officers play to improve the performance of KCPE in the district?
2. Does active participation of the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) and school committees in developing the schools lead to good KCPE performance?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The findings are intended to benefit education officers by ensuring that children in low-performing schools receive the same opportunities as those in high-performing schools, and to encourage parents and the community to be more involved in pupils' learning. Education policy makers and planners may also use the findings to identify determinants of poor performance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Role of Education Officers

Head teachers work under government officials such as education officers who bridge the gap from top leaders down to schools. According to Bray, Clarke, and Stephen (1986), the "impotence" aspect among teachers is a serious issue that goes beyond school organization. The government must pay attention to what takes place in schools instead of focusing only on quantity of education. Qualitative aspects should not be forgotten. Teachers in Africa are forced to do other things contrary to their abilities, leading to feelings of "impotence" (p. 152).

Coombs and Hallack (1972) argue that examination results are indicators of efficiency or inefficiency in education. Instead of blaming poor performance as a symptom, the real problem should be sought. Education officers must collaborate with head teachers to improve what examinations have pointed out as inefficiency (p. 80).

Orlosky et al. (1984) advise school administrators to work hand in hand with the central office and ensure good pupil-teacher ratio. Where facilities are lacking, head teachers should coordinate and convince the government to supply learning facilities (p. 75).

In Kenya, the Ministry of Education (1994) affirms that due to financial constraints, most of the financial burden in primary education is borne by parents and communities, who provide physical facilities and instructional materials. This shifts some responsibilities from education officers to PTAs.

Buluma (1998) reveals that Teachers Advisory Centers (TAC) should organize courses and seminars for teachers aimed at improving performance in national examinations (p. 145). This is a direct role of education officers.

2.2 The Role of Parents Teachers Associations (PTA)

The PTA is an association composed of teachers and members of the school community, mainly parents. It makes major decisions about the school and sometimes employs temporary teachers (Republic of Kenya, 1998). According to Mbiti (1978), a good school administrator must motivate staff, pupils, and parents to produce excellence in work performance (p. 49). This implies active PTA involvement.

Bell (1988) emphasizes that power and responsibilities within a school should be divided among as many staff as possible, and new policies are more likely to succeed if arrived at through consultation and discussion. PTAs provide the forum for such consultation between school and community.

The US Department of Education (1986) notes that effective principals help teachers create a climate of achievement by encouraging new ideas and building morale. PTAs can support this by providing resources and recognition.

2.3 Teacher Deployment and Shortages

The pupil-teacher ratio is a critical factor involving education officers. Kathuri (1984) identified staff meetings as important, but without adequate teachers, meetings cannot compensate for understaffing. Eshiwani et al. (1988) found that schools that performed poorly spent less money on teaching resources, often due to lack of community support.

In Kenya, the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) is responsible for employing and deploying teachers. However, remote arid areas often face severe shortages because teachers resist postings to hardship zones (Ministry of Education, 1994).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the theory of motivation and learning (Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Thorndike's stimulus-response theory as outlined in Paper 1). For education officers and PTAs, motivation extends to teachers and parents. When teachers teach well and show concern, learners get motivated and pass well. Good performance motivates



parents to reciprocate by buying learning resources and giving prizes, which further motivates school administration. Thus, motivation in learning is cyclical.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative-dominant mixed methods design was employed, combining questionnaires (quantitative) with in-depth interviews and observations (qualitative). This design allowed triangulation of findings from different stakeholder perspectives.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Tharaka County, Eastern Province, Kenya. The district has three educational divisions (Tharaka South, Central, and North), twelve zones, and approximately 130 primary schools. The area is semi-arid, with high temperatures (average 33°C), poor road networks, and widespread poverty. Most residents are peasant farmers and pastoralists.

3.3 Target Population and Sample

The target population included all primary schools in Tharaka County (N=105 schools that sat for KCPE in 1999). Using stratified random sampling, four consistently high-performing and four consistently low-performing schools were selected. Participants included: 37 Standard 8 teachers (completed questionnaires), 8 head teachers (interviewed) Education officers: TAC Tutors, Personnel Education Officer, Zonal Inspectors, Assistant Education Officers (AEOs), District Commissioner (DC) Parents and former Standard 8 pupils (interviewed).

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire for Teachers: A 9-section questionnaire included items on support from education officers (Section G) and community support/PTA involvement (Section F).

Interview Schedules: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with: Education officers (including AEO of Tharaka North Division, Gatunga based), District Commissioner, Head teachers of sampled schools, Parents and former pupils, Interviews lasted 2–3 hours each and explored: frequency of officer visits, seminars, examination preparation, teacher deployment, PTA functionality, resource mobilization, and challenges.

Observation Schedule: The researcher observed school climate, physical facilities, teacher punctuality, and PTA-related activities (e.g., meetings, parent involvement).

3.5 Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was reviewed by experts for content validity. Reliability was established through pilot testing ($\alpha = 0.501$). Interview questions were triangulated across respondent categories to ensure consistency.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher personally delivered questionnaires to schools. For education officers, prior appointments were made and interviews conducted in their offices. The District Commissioner was interviewed at his office. Observations were conducted during school visits starting at 6:30 AM.

3.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires were coded and entered into SPSS; descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were computed. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically using inductive coding.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained. Permission was secured from the District Education Officer and the District Commissioner. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was assured, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Role of Education Officers

Seminars for Teachers: Table 1 shows that 55.0% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that education officers conduct regular seminars to educate teachers. However, 37.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating inconsistency.

**Table 1***Education Officers Conduct Regular Seminars to Educate Teachers (N=37)*

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	3	8.1
Disagree	11	29.7
Undecided	3	8.1
Agree	5	13.5
Strongly Agree	15	40.5
Total	37	100

Interaction between Education Officers and Teachers: Table 2 reveals that 51.4% of teachers agreed that there were few interactions (meaning interactions were insufficient), while 43.2% disagreed (meaning they perceived adequate interaction). This split suggests uneven officer visitation across schools.

Table 2*Interaction between Education Officers and Teachers (N=37)*

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	1	2.7
Disagree	15	40.5
Undecided	1	2.7
Agree	19	51.4
Strongly Agree	1	2.7
Total	37	100

Note: “Agree” indicates that interactions were few (insufficient).

Cooperation between Education Officers and Teachers: Table 3 shows that 62.1% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that cooperation existed, while 29.7% disagreed.

Table 3*Cooperation between Education Officers and Teachers (N=37)*

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Disagree	11	29.7
Undecided	3	8.1
Agree	17	45.9
Strongly Agree	6	16.2
Total	37	100

Preparation for KCPE (External Examinations): Table 4 indicates that 59.4% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that education officers organize regular external examinations (divisional continuous assessments or district mocks) to prepare candidates for KCPE.

Table 4*Education Officers Organize External Exams for Pupils (N=37)*

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	2	5.4
Disagree	6	16.2
Undecided	3	8.1
Agree	17	45.9
Strongly Agree	9	24.3
Total	37	100

Teacher-Pupil Ratio Adequacy: Table 5 shows that 56.7% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the teacher-pupil ratio in their school was adequate (1:45 or below). However, interview data contradicted this perception, revealing severe shortages in some zones.

**Table 5**

Teacher-Pupil Ratio in My School is Adequate (1:45 or below) (N=37)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	2	5.4
Disagree	14	37.8
Undecided	0	0
Agree	11	29.7
Strongly Agree	10	27
Total	37	100

4.2 Interview Findings: Education Officers

Interview with Assistant Education Officer (AEO), Tharaka North Division (Gatunga based):

The AEO revealed that some schools in Maragua zone faced “very serious problems of understaffing.” He identified Karangari Primary School as the most severe case: “This school with six classes has existed for a long time with only one teacher, the headmaster.” He explained that when teachers are posted there, they seek transfers because the area is remote, dry, hot, inaccessible by road, with no shopping centers. “Walking from the Marimanti-Gatunga road to reach Karangari school is five hours walk.” He noted that even the one teacher had applied for a transfer, which was turned down to retain the school.

Table 6

Most Understaffed Schools in Maragua Zone, Tharaka North Division

School	Number of Classes	Number of Teachers
Karangari	6	1
Nthoa	6	2
Kirimbu	8	3
Iruma	8	4
Total	28	10

The AEO attributed the situation to: (1) local administration having no interest in promoting education; (2) the Ministry of Education doing little; (3) no role models of education in the area. He noted that people from the area migrate after getting money or education, buying land elsewhere, leaving children with no role models.

Interview with the District Commissioner (DC), Tharaka County:

When asked about Karangari Primary School, the DC stated he was “not aware of any school in the district with one teacher.” However, he admitted a shortage of teachers in Tharaka, with an average of 5 teachers per 8 classes. On roads, he said the government planned to improve road networks. On teacher shortages, he said teachers from “developed highlands of Tunyai” were never ready to go to remote areas like Maragua. He indicated plans to balance teachers but declined to specify timelines.

Interview with District Personnel Officer (DEO’s office):

The Personnel Officer revealed that the district was understaffed by 250–350 teachers. He confirmed that Karangari Primary School had only one teacher; two more had been posted in December 2000 but had not reported by February 2001. He pointed out other understaffed schools, such as Nkomam Primary School in Marimanti zone with 7 classes and only 3 teachers.

Interview with TAC Tutor, Ntugi Zone (Tharaka Central Division):

The TAC Tutor reported that regular meetings are conducted with teachers and parents on how to uplift KCPE performance. He stated that “constant and frequent inspection by education officers helped a great deal to promote KCPE performance in Tharaka County.”

4.3 Role of Parents Teachers Associations (PTA)

PTA Activities in High-Performing Schools: Interviews with head teachers of high-performing schools revealed extensive PTA involvement:

Employment of temporary teachers: PTAs employed temporary teachers at approximately Ksh 2,000 per month to supplement government-appointed staff.

Teacher welfare: Schools provided breakfast and lunch for teachers. One head teacher noted: “These schools provide breakfast and lunch for the teachers to ensure all their time is utilized in teaching.”



Night classes: PTAs organized night classes, and parents cooperated to pick their children by 9:30 PM back home.

Prize-giving: At the end of every term, the best pupils were rewarded, and an annual Prize-Giving Day was organized. One school gave prizes ranging from utensils to goats to both best pupils and best teachers.

Parent-teacher meetings: After every examination, parents were called to discuss results. Cooperation between teachers and parents contributed greatly to good results.

One headmaster stated: “My greatest secret on high performance is to bring teachers together, then organize, guide, and have them see the importance of teaching.” Another noted: “The children are conditioned to good discipline. Circumcision before completing primary school is not allowed in school since it affects discipline.”

PTA Dysfunction in Low-Performing Schools:

In contrast, low-performing schools exhibited:

- No cooperation between parents and teachers
- No organized prize-giving exercises or term-end prizes
- Parent-teacher meetings that “turned to quarrels and ended up with no tangible solutions”
- No provision of breakfast or lunch for teachers

Classes starting at the normal government time (8:00 AM) and closing by 4:00 PM with no extended learning. Passing or failing not being an issue of great concern.

One former pupil who failed KCPE stated: “Teachers were idle and never cared. They gave a lot of exercises from the work which they never taught. After failing, the pupils were thoroughly beaten. To avoid the beating, the pupils borrowed answers from their neighbors.”

4.4 Community Support and PTA Effectiveness

Table 7

Teachers’ Perceptions of Community Support (Selected Items)

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
The community supports the school financially	48.6	35.1
Parents attend school meetings regularly	70.2	18.9
PTA employs temporary teachers where needed	62.1	24.3
Lack of community support leads to poor performance	54	32.4

(Source: Questionnaire data, N=37)

The data indicate that while a majority perceived community support, a substantial minority (32–35%) did not, reflecting the disparity between high- and low-performing schools.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Effectiveness of Education Officers

The finding that 55% of teachers confirmed regular seminars and 59.4% confirmed external examination organization indicates that education officers are fulfilling some of their professional development and assessment coordination roles. This aligns with Buluma (1998), who emphasized that TACs should organize courses and seminars for teachers. The TAC Tutor’s interview confirmed that frequent inspection and meetings helped promote performance.

However, the severe teacher shortages uncovered – Karangari with 6 classes and 1 teacher, a district-wide deficit of 250–350 teachers – represent a catastrophic failure of the education officers’ deployment function. The Ministry of Education (1994) acknowledges that financial constraints limit government supply of facilities, but teacher deployment is a core function of the Teachers Service Commission and education officers. The fact that Karangari had existed “for a long time” with one teacher, and that two posted teachers had not reported by February 2001, suggests systemic breakdown.

The DC’s lack of awareness about Karangari indicates poor communication between education officers and district administration. The AEO’s attribution of the problem to “local administration having no interest” suggests that education officers may have abdicated responsibility rather than advocating for these schools.

The paradox in teacher-pupil ratio perception (56.7% of teachers said ratio was adequate) versus the objective shortages can be explained by sample selection: teachers from low-performing remote schools (where shortages are acute) may have been underrepresented, or teachers may have normalized extreme understaffing as “adequate” given the context. Alternatively, the 37.8% who disagreed likely represent those from severely understaffed schools.



This finding echoes Bray, Clarke, and Stephen's (1986) observation that teachers in Africa feel "impotence" when forced to do things contrary to their abilities. The Karangari head teacher (the sole teacher) would be unable to teach six classes effectively – a clear case of system-imposed impotence.

5.2 PTA Effectiveness: High Performers vs. Low Performers

The contrast between PTA functionality in high- versus low-performing schools is stark. High-performing schools exhibited what Bell (1988) described: power and responsibilities divided, consultation and discussion, and commitment to negotiation. PTAs employed temporary teachers – a practice acknowledged by the Republic of Kenya (1998) as a necessary coping mechanism given government financial constraints. The provision of breakfast and lunch for teachers is particularly noteworthy; it addresses teacher welfare directly and enables extended learning hours, consistent with motivation theory.

The prize-giving system (utensils to goats) reflects Thorndike's stimulus-response theory: rewarding desired behavior strengthens it. By rewarding both pupils and teachers, high-performing schools created a cyclical motivation system.

Low-performing schools exhibited dysfunctional PTA meetings that "turned to quarrels." This aligns with the US Department of Education's (1986) emphasis on the principal's role in creating a climate of achievement. Without effective leadership, PTA meetings become conflict forums rather than collaborative planning sessions. The absence of teacher meals, night classes, and prize-giving reflects a breakdown in the motivational cycle.

5.3 The Interplay between Education Officers and PTAs

The findings suggest that education officers and PTAs have complementary but distinct roles. Education officers are responsible for macro-level functions: teacher deployment, professional development, examination coordination, and policy oversight. PTAs handle micro-level, school-specific functions: supplementary teacher employment, teacher welfare (meals), infrastructure, and motivational programs.

However, when education officers fail in their deployment function (as in Maragua zone), PTAs cannot compensate fully because temporary teachers (paid Ksh 2,000/month) may not be as qualified or committed as government-employed teachers. Moreover, PTAs in the poorest areas lack the financial capacity to employ temporary teachers or provide meals. Thus, education officer failure disproportionately harms the poorest schools, widening performance disparities.

The AEO's comment that "the ministry of education has done little" and "there are no role models of education in the area" suggests a vicious cycle: lack of teachers → poor performance → no educated role models → low value placed on education → continued lack of demand for teachers. Breaking this cycle requires coordinated action by education officers (deploying teachers, providing hardship allowances) and PTAs (creating demand, supporting teachers).

5.4 Theoretical Implications

The findings support the cyclical motivation model presented in the theoretical framework. In high-performing schools, education officers' seminars and inspections motivated teachers, PTAs motivated teachers through meals and prizes, teachers motivated pupils, and pupil success motivated parents to continue supporting. In low-performing schools, this cycle was broken at multiple points: absent education officers, dysfunctional PTAs, demotivated teachers, and discouraged pupils.

Maslow's hierarchy is relevant: teachers cannot be motivated to perform creatively when their basic needs (fair pay, reasonable workload, housing) are unmet. The Karangari teacher, alone with six classes, cannot achieve self-actualization in teaching. PTAs that provide meals address lower-order needs, enabling higher-order motivation

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that education officers in Tharaka County perform important functions including seminars, external examination coordination, and school inspections. However, their most critical function – equitable teacher deployment – has failed catastrophically in remote areas such as Maragua zone, where schools operate with as few as one teacher for six classes. The district-wide shortage of 250–350 teachers undermines any possibility of equitable KCPE performance.

PTAs are most effective when they cooperate with school administration, provide teacher incentives (meals, prizes), employ temporary teachers, and organize extended learning (night classes). High-performing schools exemplify



these practices. Low-performing schools suffer from dysfunctional PTA meetings that produce quarrels rather than solutions, compounded by poverty that limits their capacity to provide meals or hire temporary teachers.

The interplay between education officers and PTAs is critical: education officers must provide the basic infrastructure of adequate teacher deployment; PTAs can then supplement with local resources and motivation. When education officers fail, PTAs in poor areas cannot compensate, and performance disparities widen.

6.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that the Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission urgently deploy teachers to understaffed schools, particularly Karangari, Nthoa, and Nkomam, while also introducing substantial hardship allowances for teachers serving in remote and arid areas such as Tharaka North Division to improve attraction and retention. A transparent and data-driven deployment system should be developed to ensure equitable teacher distribution across schools, supported by regular monitoring and reporting by education officers. At the community level, PTAs should strengthen conflict resolution skills, mobilize local resources to support teacher welfare, organize low-cost motivation initiatives such as prize-giving, and actively advocate for staffing improvements using evidence-based data. The District Commissioner should undertake school visits and strengthen coordination forums among education stakeholders, while also addressing security and infrastructural challenges that discourage teacher deployment. At the policy level, reforms should include improved funding for disadvantaged schools, a review of teacher deployment policies to consider compulsory rotation or stronger incentives for hardship areas, and the establishment of a dedicated ASAL education task force. Future research should focus on the cost-effectiveness of PTA interventions, the reasons behind teacher reluctance to serve in hardship schools, the impact of hardship allowances on retention, and the role of local administrative support in improving school performance.

6.3 Limitations

This study's limitations include: (a) the nine-month timeframe prevented a district-wide census of teacher shortages; (b) some schools (e.g., Karangari) were inaccessible, so data on those schools came from AEO interviews rather than direct observation; (c) teachers in low-performing schools feared the research would lead to sacking, potentially biasing responses; (d) the DC's lack of awareness about Karangari suggests information asymmetry that may have affected other data; (e) findings may not generalize to other Kenyan districts with different socioeconomic conditions.

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