

Exploring factors influencing the performance of high-achieving secondary schools in Lesotho

Mapheleba Lekhetho

University of South Africa

The Lesotho education system is largely ineffective, as evidenced by high failure rates in the school-leaving examinations. The situation is linked to ineffective primary education, due to poor teacher quality, weak school management, and a lack of resources, which have carry-over effects on secondary education. Despite these, some secondary schools consistently produce good Grade 12 results. To probe this phenomenon, data was collected through questionnaires from 374 Grade 12 students at 13 high-performing secondary schools. The findings revealed that the main reason for their excellent performance was the stringent selectivity of students in Grade 8, effective school leadership, and teacher efficiency. To improve the effectiveness of Lesotho secondary schools, it is recommended that teacher quality, school management, monitoring, and professional development be intensified aggressively in primary and secondary schools as the two sectors are interlinked.

Introduction

The Lesotho education system is often criticised as ineffective, as evidenced by students' high wastage and failure rates, particularly in the Grade 12 school-leaving examinations (Lekhetho, 2013; World Bank, 2019). To address these, Lesotho adopted the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) (O-level) curriculum in 1961, after dropping the South African Joint Matriculation Board examinations (Letsie, 2019). However, due to continuing high failure rates, high examination costs incurred under the Cambridge Examination Syndicate, and the phase-out of O-level in many countries, COSC was localised gradually, starting in 1989 with the marking of *Sesotho* (local language) (Examinations Council of Lesotho [ECOL], 2014). This was prompted by public awareness that the COSC curriculum was elitist, designed for the top 20 percent, and beyond the reach of the majority of students (ECOL, 2014; Letsie, 2019).

The final localisation process was restarted in 2013 until 2016 with the phased introduction of the Lesotho General Certificate of Secondary Education (LGCSE) curriculum replacing COSC, which based performance on a "group award system" or a combination of specific subject grades (ECOL, 2014). LGCSE was intended to accommodate students' different abilities, abolish English as a passing subject, and recognise performance in each subject. However, higher education institutions (HEIs) have maintained the old stringent admission criteria that require a credit (60% upwards) in English in all degree programs, including the Faculty of Science at the National University of Lesotho (Raselimo & Thamae, 2018). Even though English is a medium of instruction in Lesotho schools, it is a serious barrier for most students. This signals that LGCSE has failed to improve content relevance, educational quality, and student outcomes. The school-leaving examination results are a vital measure of the country's education quality, particularly primary and lower secondary education levels.

In mathematics, only less than 12% of students can score up to 50% in the LGCSE examinations, and much fewer are admissible in HEI programs that require a credit, particularly in science and technology (Mogari, Kriek, Stols & Ogbonnaya, 2009; Stols, Kriek & Ogbannaya, 2008). Stols et al. (2008) ascribed this to teachers' lack of adequate training and content knowledge since teachers with bachelor's degree majors in mathematics tend to produce better LGCSE results than those with lower or unsuitable qualifications. Poor performance in mathematics hampers the country's efforts to improve student achievement and promote job creation. It can be addressed through practical training and continuous upskilling of teachers in content knowledge and pedagogical competence needed to guide meaningful learning (George, Kolobe & Moru, 2018; Mogari et al., 2009).

Lesotho's poor quality of secondary education can be linked to weak primary education, as many teachers are still unqualified, particularly in under-resourced rural primary schools where multi-grade and ineffective teaching are widespread (Lekhetho, 2018; World Bank, 2019). As the World Bank (2019, p. 2) noted, "poor children living in the deep rural, mountainous areas are particularly affected by weak learning in the early grades." Consequently, Lesotho has consistently recorded the lowest achievement levels in the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) assessments for Grade 6 students evaluating the quality of primary education in 14 countries (Makua, 2011; World Bank, 2019). During the 2000 and 2007 assessments, it obtained mean scores below the SACMEQ mean of 500 in reading and mathematics (Makua, 2011), partly because some primary school teachers had content knowledge below the level they were teaching (Ngema & Lekhetho, 2019; Spaul, 2013). Worryingly, even when they are qualified, most primary school teachers lack sufficient content knowledge in mathematics and science and often skip classes for these subjects (George et al., 2018; Mulkeen, 2010). George et al.'s (2018) study at a teacher training institution (ITI) in Lesotho revealed that some primary school teachers have never passed mathematics and science at any level examined nationally, which made it difficult for them to teach these subjects competently.

The effects of weak primary education are carried over to secondary schools, as prior achievement strongly influences students' later achievement (Wenger, Gärtner & Brunner, 2020). As Hattie (2003) posited, what the student brings to the table in terms of socioeconomic background factors and ability is the best predictor of achievement and leads to roughly 50% of the variance in achievement. Low-quality primary education received by students from low-income families causes permanent disadvantage vis-à-vis their counterparts attending affluent, high-performing schools (Spaul, 2013; Wenger et al., 2020). This is because poverty is geographically aggregated in communities, leading to high-poverty schools and student underachievement (Padilla, Guerra & Zamora, 2020).

Statement of the problem

Lesotho's secondary education is generally ineffective, as evidenced by students' high wastage and failure rates, particularly in the school-leaving examinations (Letsie, 2019;

World Bank, 2019). This constitutes a considerable loss of economic resources to individual families, government, and society, as they do not get value for money. The Ministry of Education and Training ([MOET], 2005, p. 42) highlighted that of the student cohort starting junior secondary in Grade 8, only 21% reach Grade 12, merely 8% pass LGCSE, and many fewer qualify for university admission, particularly in science-based programs, “giving a phenomenally high overall wastage.”

Despite Lesotho’s generally poor quality of education, some secondary schools, mainly in the urban areas, manage to buck the trend and consistently perform above the national average in the LGCSE examinations. Despite resource constraints and other challenges, they produce good academic results, possibly due to stringent student selectivity, strong leadership, teacher commitment, and strong school culture. This study sought to answer the following research question: Why do Lesotho’s high-performing secondary schools consistently perform well in the school-leaving examinations when most schools underperform?

Teacher quality and selectivity

Effective teachers are central to quality education and the success of a nation as they are often the first role models that young people meet outside the home. Therefore, they should be adequately equipped to teach content effectively, shape students’ attitudes, and build their self-esteem (Béteille & Evans 2019). Since teacher effectiveness influences student achievement, prospective teachers should be selected carefully for initial training and employment (Klassen & Kim, 2019), mainly because high-quality teachers are irreplaceable (Béteille & Evans, 2019). Fittingly, the *No Child Left Behind* law in the US identified having highly qualified classroom teachers as an effective strategy to improve teacher productivity and the quality of education (Harris & Sass, 2007). Accordingly, it instituted consequential accountability or sanctions for schools that failed to meet performance targets on high-stakes tests (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). Similarly, a study in Chile found that teachers who were evaluated as competent by trained observers and their students consistently obtained better results in their teaching practices and student outcomes than those assessed as basic (Taut, Jiménez, Puente-Duran, Palacios, Godoy & Manzi, 2019).

A lack of stringent selectivity or low academic performance of aspiring teachers applying to teacher education institutions and entering the profession contribute to Lesotho’s poor education quality (George et al., 2018; Mulkeen, 2010). The secret behind high-performing education systems such as Finland, Japan, and Singapore is often said to be their rigorous selection processes, which ensure that the ‘right’ applicants are selected, provided with a high-quality teacher training program, and enter the teaching profession to build a lifelong career (Béteille & Evans, 2019; Klassen & Kim, 2019).

Facilities in secondary schools

A critical shortage of facilities and educational resources in Lesotho schools also contributes to poor educational quality (Masakale, Bell & Halsey, 2016). There are wide

disparities in facilities such as laboratories, libraries, and technological infrastructure between secondary schools leading to unequal educational opportunities and outcomes. Laboratories are under-utilised since teachers perform far fewer experiments than those prescribed in the syllabus and woefully lack necessary materials (George, 2017). The distribution of facilities follows the country's geographic and socioeconomic patterns as urban schools are generally better-resourced than rural schools, which operate in deplorable facilities (Lekhetho, 2018).

Theoretical framework and literature review

This study is framed by contingency theory which postulates that there is “no one best way” to manage or do things because situations differ (Morgan, 2006). Therefore, different approaches should be used to manage and solve issues as they emerge. It views an organisation as an “open system”, which should embrace anomalies that require ‘adaptable’ and ‘situational’ solutions to emerging problems (Morgan, 2006). It underscores that there is no universal best way of organising or leading, since a style that works in one situation may not work in another. An organisation should, therefore, adapt meaningfully to its environmental circumstances. The best way to manage depends on the task at hand and the prevailing situation to which an organisation should relate (Scott & Davis, 2015). Since they operate in a dynamic environment, schools should always remain open to changes brought by internal and external forces.

According to contingency theory, an organisation like a school should organise its program and processes in a manner that is cognisant of, and favourable to, its task environment. As Betts (2003, p. 123) stated, “the better the fit, the higher the performance”. By implication, the low achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be ascribed to the disjuncture between the school curriculum and their home/social environments. Therefore, the school management should strive to bridge this gap and harmonise internal and external forces to ensure unity of purpose among different stakeholders. This could create a favourable situation where followers accept a leader, and there is a clear task structure or well-defined roles (Scott & Davis, 2015). It could cultivate a conducive school climate and well-coordinated operations that enhance productivity, creativity, and learning significantly.

Overview of effective schools' characteristics

Over the years, school effectiveness research has generated sustained interest among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners eager to know the causes of failing schools, and how to fix them. Coleman et al.'s (1966) pioneering school effectiveness research study on the causes of underachievement of disadvantaged students in the US concluded that family background, not the school, was the primary determinant of school success. The school was regarded merely as a conduit that could do little to add value to the deficiencies suffered by the child from home. While acknowledging the home influence on student success, some sceptical researchers believed that the school could make a significant difference to students' learning (Edmonds, 1979; Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995). Ultimately, Edmonds (1979, p. 23) asserted, “We can, whenever and

wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to do that". Effective schools achieve this by combining excellence characterised by high levels of learning with equity, which is marked by little differences in the levels of learning between students from different backgrounds (Townsend & Bayetto, 2021).

While social disadvantage generally leads to lower school achievement, some schools still manage to "buck the trend" (Muijs et al., 2004), and add value to students' learning and achievement. However, to achieve and sustain improvements, schools in challenging circumstances must exceed "normal efforts" (Muijs et al., 2004). Teachers must work much harder than their counterparts in more favourable socioeconomic circumstances since success can be short-lived and slippery (Muijs et al., 2004), particularly in resource-deprived countries like Lesotho. Muijs et al. (2004) contended that many schools perceived to be underperforming in high-stakes tests add value to their inadequate intake. In critiquing this, this study explores the following eight characteristics of effective schools identified by scholars such as Sammons et al. (1995), and Shannon and Bylsma (2007):

- A clear and shared focus;
- High standards and expectations for all students;
- Effective school leadership;
- High levels of collaboration and communication;
- Frequent monitoring of teaching and learning;
- Focused professional development;
- Supportive learning environment;
- High level of family and community involvement.

Firstly, effective schools have *a clear and shared focus*, and everybody involved in them: principals, teachers, students, parents, and others comprehend their core purpose, aims, and values fully, and works towards achieving them (Jarl, Andersson & Blossing, 2021; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Successful organisations know what their members are working towards, and vigorously pursue that mission and vision in a collegial and collaborative spirit (Jarl et al., 2021; Sammons et al., 1995). They have unity of purpose or a single organising idea that unites and guides all actions. They put students' learning at the centre of their actions, and create a learning environment that supports it (Jarl et al., 2021). A focus on learning improves their performance and cultivates strong program coherence, which enhances student achievement more than uncoordinated systems.

Secondly, effective schools *set high standards and expectations for all students* because teachers believe that they can learn, overcome challenges, and meet high academic standards (Jarl et al., 2021; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Teachers offer a rigorous study program that prepares students educationally and socially. They advocate *effort-based ability*, as they believe that all students can meet high standards if given adequate support and time regardless of circumstances (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Ultimately, teachers' expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy since students that teachers expect to do well, tend to

achieve better, while those expected to perform poorly also tend to fulfil their teachers' expectations (Muijs, Kyriakides, van der Werf, Creemers, Timperley & Earl, 2014).

Thirdly, effective schools have *effective school leadership* since leaders play a critical role in creating and maintaining school improvement (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). As Sammons et al. (1995) argued, it is hard to find effective schools with weak leadership. Therefore, leaders should assess how their role and leadership style relate to the school's vision, values, and goals. This is critical since principals who focus more on instructional leadership have a more significant impact on student learning and outcomes than those who emphasise other aspects (Jarl et al., 2021; Mugendawala & Muijs, 2020). Influential leaders develop an instructional program and school culture that promote learning and professional development. This requires distributive leadership throughout an organisation rather than residing in the designated leader (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). It seeks to empower teachers, students, and others to assume leadership roles based on their capabilities and interests, which increases their self-esteem and a sense of purpose.

Effective schools also have *high levels of collaboration and communication*. There is strong collaboration among teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in their collective endeavours to identify problems affecting schools and find solutions (Sammons et al., 1995; Jarl et al., 2021). They have regular, clear two-way communication to avoid ambiguities. Students' learning is enhanced when schools, families, and communities work together for their success and well-being, communicate regularly, and demonstrate mutual respect and trust. This develops a learning community, which encourages schools and communities to help students and families meet their challenges. Collaboration cultivates cooperation and support among colleagues, enhances job satisfaction, leads to effective instruction, and improves learning outcomes (García-Martínez, Montenegro-Rueda, Molina-Fernández & Fernández-Batanero, 2021; Jarl et al., 2021).

Moreover, effective schools *monitor the performance and progress* of students, teachers, classes, the entire school, and the improvement program to address performance gaps (Sammons et al., 1995). Monitoring involves analysing what one is doing against the results that one is getting (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). It requires regular review and refinement of the processes that contribute directly to intended results. Continuous assessments identify students who need help and provide necessary support and instructional time during or after school hours (Jarl et al., 2021). Monitoring students' performance helps determine the extent to which the school's goals are being met, and assists students, teachers, and parents to focus their efforts on such goals. Teachers may adjust their plans, teaching, and assessment, which assures students that they are concerned about their academic progress and welfare.

Effective schools support continuous training of staff in critical areas to increase their competence levels (Muijs et al., 2014). *Professional development (PD)* offers on-the-job learning opportunities for teachers following pre-service training (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Job-embedded PD is considered the best form of in-service training to enhance student learning, and to be more effective than the "go and get" training approach where teachers are sent out to attend training by outside experts as "passive recipients" (Sparks

& Hirsh, 1997, p. 14). When viewed as competency-based rather than deficit-based, PD promotes teachers' efficiency more effectively because it relies on internal expertise where teachers are active participants in a gradual change process. To improve student attainment, PD should be continuous, collaborative, secure teachers' buy-in, and use a practice-based, subject-specific approach that seeks to increase content knowledge (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2020). However, in some instances, external expertise may complement internal expertise, rejuvenate interest, and inject knowledge.

Furthermore, effective schools have a *learning environment that is safe, healthy, and intellectually stimulating* (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Students feel valued, connected with staff, and participate in learning because instruction is personalised and optimises their contact with teachers. This requires acceptable behaviour, consistent application of rules, and responsive relationships among teachers and students. Classrooms are warm, learning activities are stimulating, and students are supported to learn rigorous content regardless of their background.

Finally, effective schools have a *high level of family, and community involvement*. They involve parents in their school plans and forge collaborative relationships among teachers, parents, and communities (Mugendawala & Muijs, 2020) to enhance student learning and academic success. Family involvement recognises the central role that parents play in their children's education and the power of working together. Productive parental involvement affirms knowledge and instruction provided at school and promotes achievement across all levels (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Method

This study adopted a quantitative methodology and a group-administered survey to establish the factors contributing to the performance of Lesotho's high-achieving schools in the LGCSE examinations. Questionnaires consisting of both closed and open-ended questions were used to collect data from Grade 12 students at 13 urban secondary schools in five lowland districts. As guided by the school principals, the questionnaires were administered after school hours to avoid disrupting the standard school program. This yielded a high response rate because the questionnaires were administered and collected in one process (Denscombe, 2010; Young, 2016).

Sampling and data collection

The study was conducted at 13 purposively selected secondary schools based on their 'good' performance in the LGCSE examinations over five years (2016-2020). Twelve of these were in the urban areas while one was in a rural area from the following lowland districts: Botha Bothe (1), Leribe (4), Maseru (5), Mafeteng (2), and Mohale's Hoek (1). On close examination, it was discerned that these schools' levels of effectiveness differed; hence, they were classified as follows: high-effective (4), average-effective (7), and improving (2). In the high-effective category, two schools were distinctly on top of the league, and they are occasionally singled out when reporting the results. Grade 12 was considered ideal as these students were in their final year of the five-year secondary

education (three years of junior secondary and two years of senior secondary). The total population was 1452 Grade 12 students ranging from 69 to 241 per school. Study samples from each school were selected randomly, ensuring that every member of the target group had an equal chance of being selected (Young, 2016). Data was collected through questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions, which enabled respondents to rationalise their responses.

Data analysis

Microsoft *Access* was used to capture data and convert it into *Excel*, which enabled sorting and filtering participants' responses and developing frequency counts. Data from open-ended questions was analysed quantitatively by coding the responses and developing frequency counts (Young, 2016). Frequency count is the most basic approach to quantitative data, especially if the intention is not to perform comparisons and correlations between different variables (Denscombe, 2010). In some instances, the respondents' narratives are used and synthesised to present textual data.

Findings

Data was collected through questionnaires from 374 randomly selected Grade 12 students who provided information on their prior achievement, the quality of primary schools they attended, and perceptions of their schools, teachers, and principals. Percentages are used to present numerical data, while textual data is presented narratively using pseudonyms to conceal the schools' identities.

Prior achievement effects at the primary school level

In determining the effects of prior achievement and selectivity on the success of high-achieving secondary schools, students were asked to indicate their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) passes as indicated in Table 1. This is critical since the public focuses on these schools' LGCSE results without looking critically at the quality of their students.

Table 1: Students' quality of passes in primary school (Grade 7)

School category	No. of schools	First class	Second class	Third class	Total
High-effective	4	110 (94%)	7 (6%)	0	117
Average-effective	7	147 (74.6%)	45 (22.9%)	5 (2.5%)	197
Improving	2	26 (43.3%)	29 (48.4%)	5 (8.3%)	60
Total	13	283 (75.7%)	81 (21.6%)	10 (2.7%)	374

According to Table 1, 283 (75.7%) students in all school categories passed in the First Class in the PSLE, while only 21.6% and 2.7% obtained Second and Third Class passes, respectively. A breakdown of school categories shows that high-effective schools had the most significant proportion of top achievers as 94% and 6% of their students reported

that they had obtained first- and second-class passes. In contrast, the average-effective, and improving schools had relatively fewer good quality students. Thus, stringent student selectivity in Grade 8 or selecting the *crème-de-la-crème* seems to be the main reason for the consistently good performance of Lesotho's top-performing secondary schools in the LGCSE examinations.

Type of primary school attended

Concerning the type of primary schools they attended, 110 (29.4%) respondents in all school categories said they went to the elite English-medium schools known locally for good quality education, particularly in English language, mathematics, and science. At 41%, high-effective schools had the most significant percentage of students from these schools, followed by average-effective and improving schools at 25% and 22%. This is a significant percentage, given that these elite primary schools are few and located in towns. It shows that the quality of a primary school the student attends predetermines the quality of a secondary school they will attend and that quality attracts quality.

Although 59% of students in high-effective schools indicated that they had attended ordinary primary schools, it was deduced that these were good schools known locally for academic excellence. Some of these have gradually transformed into elite public schools because of effective leadership, quality teachers, adequate facilities, and favourable urban locations. Average-effective and improving schools drew most of their students from ordinary primary schools at 75% and 78%. Possibly because most respondents were good students, 313 (84%) indicated that they never repeated any classes in primary school, meaning that they were age-appropriate for all the grades, while 61 (16%) said they repeated some grades. As in most countries, children in Lesotho officially start school at the age of six, and complete Grade 12 at the age of 17 or 18 (Lekhetso, 2013). Again, this measure of student quality favoured high-effective schools as 87% of their students reported that they never repeated any grades followed by improving schools at 83%, and average-effective at 82%.

Selectivity at the junior secondary level

Student selectivity at Lesotho's top secondary schools is a two-stage process that occurs in Grade 8 and Grade 11 when students move into senior secondary school level after sitting the Junior Certificate (JC) examinations. These schools use public examination results to sift, sort, and channel students into appropriate curricular streams.

Table 2: Students' quality of passes in Junior Certificate examinations (Grade 10)

School category	No. of schools	Merit	First class	Second class	Third class	Total
High-effective	4	16 (19%)	30 (35.7%)	38 (45.3%)	0	84
Average-effective	7	9 (14.7%)	75 (38.1%)	93 (47.2%)	0	177
Improving	2	1 (1.7%)	7 (11.7%)	48 (80%)	4 (6.6%)	60
Total	13	26 (13.5%)	112 (32.8%)	179 (52.5%)	4 (1.2%)	321

As Table 2 reflects, high-effective secondary schools applied stringent second-stage selectivity mechanisms to sift students after writing Grade 10 public examinations. To maintain a reputation of academic excellence, they weeded out weaker students as they progressed from grade to grade. For instance, of the 84 student respondents from these schools, 16 (19%) indicated that they had passed with merit, 30 (35.7%) in first class, 38 (45.3%) in second class, and none in third class, which are above the national average. The continuous culling of weaker students as they progress towards the high-stakes LGCSE examinations inevitably puts tremendous pressure on students to work hard to stay in these schools, and forces parents to support them educationally. Similarly, average and improving schools use the same sifting strategy with less stringency because of their narrower student pool.

Student transfers between secondary schools

Student transfers are negligible in Lesotho's effective secondary schools, as 329 (96%) of students reported that they had been in the same schools from Grade 8 with only 14 (4%) who reported that they had transferred from other schools. Out of 85 students from high-effective schools, only one reported that he had transferred from another school. Student transfers were slightly higher at average-effective and improving schools at 4% and 8%. Student transfers can disrupt learning due to changes in the school curriculum, teachers, and learning environment. Due to selectivity, effective schools generally retain their cohorts up to completion as there is no pressure for students and parents to change schools.

Table 3: Students' rating of their schools' performance in LGCSE

School category	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very good	Total
High-effective	0	0	10 (8.6%)	26 (22.2%)	81 (69.2%)	117
Average-effective	1 (0.5%)	5 (2.6%)	16 (8.1%)	67(34%)	108 (54.8%)	197
Improving	1 (1.7%)	2 (3.3%)	10 (16.7%)	21 (35%)	26 (43.3%)	60
Total	2 (0.5%)	7 (1.9%)	36 (9.6%)	114 (30.5%)	215 (57.5%)	374

Table 3 shows that all respondents rated their schools' performance highly in the LGCSE examinations, with students from high-effective schools rating them highest, followed by average-effective, and improving schools. Arguably, a confluence of high-ability students, dedicated teachers, adequate school facilities, and high expectations combine to create a rich academic environment that supports learning and motivates students to work hard. The most dominant reason given by 178 (48%) respondents for their schools' good performance was that teachers were highly dedicated to their work, attended classes regularly, and completed the syllabus in time. Some 137 (37%) said this was because students worked very hard, were motivated, and did not wait for teachers to push them. Thirdly, 56 (15%) respondents attributed their schools' good performance to the cooperation between teachers and students and their collective commitment.

Students' perceptions of their teachers' efficiency

When asked whether their teachers were doing their jobs well, 338 (90.4%) respondents said they were, while 35 (9.3%) said they were not. The most dominant reason given by 310 (82.9%) respondents was that they were dedicated to their jobs and taught effectively. As one student named Thabo from a high-effective school put it, "They attend classes practically every day unless there is a valid reason." They stated that when they did not attend classes on rare occasions, their teachers requested their colleagues to replace them or gave them work to do. The second dominant reason (112 [30%]) was that they worked collaboratively with other teachers and students. These reasons show that there is generally strong teacher commitment, teamwork, and cordial relations between teachers and students in high-performing schools.

Those dissatisfied with their teachers reported that they concentrated unduly on students' personal lives rather than on their academic work. While they accepted that teachers should act *in loco parentis*, they expected them to respect students' rights, and not be intrusive. They revealed that some teachers used strong language that affected students negatively. To maintain a healthy work environment, teachers must always display professional conduct in their interactions with students.

Students' perceptions of principals' efficiency

Concerning principals' efficiency, 326 (87.2%) respondents said they were doing their jobs well, while 40 (10.7%) said they were not. The main reason given by 167 (44.7%) respondents was that their principals were highly committed to their work, and ensured that teachers attended classes regularly and taught effectively. Teboho, from a high-effective school, disclosed,

He goes around classes during the school day checking whether there is a teacher in every class and that a register is kept for the absentees.

Lerato, from the same school confirmed, "He also supervises study in the morning, evening and weekends". These excerpts show that students generally value a devoted principal who monitors teaching and learning, promotes their educational interests, and maintains visibility at school. The second popular reason given by 157 (42%) respondents was that their principals were kind and considerate. Palesa from an average-effective school revealed,

She attends to the social needs of needy students, allows them to pay fees later, and raises funds for them. She also allows them to come to school even if they cannot pay fees, and always listens to students even though she does not solve their problems sometimes.

Students' views on what principals could do to manage schools better

Regarding the strategies that principals could employ to manage schools better, 86 (23%) suggested that they should consult teachers before making decisions to foster teamwork,

and solicit students' opinions on relevant issues since some might be helpful. Others said that principals should be considerate when making decisions and treat students as their children. Some suggested that principals should be fair to all students, respect their rights because they paid fees, and create a friendly school environment that would make them feel at home. Some 34 (9.1%) respondents suggested that principals should enforce strict discipline, suspend and expel students who misbehaved to maintain order at school. According to Tšepo from an improving school, this was necessary because "...taking them to the disciplinary committee does not scare them".

Some 64 (17.1%) respondents suggested that principals should cater for students' general welfare and leisure. Moeketsi from a high-effective school said the principal should "provide sports and entertainment to refresh students' minds". Others concurred that such activities would energise them, and broaden their horizons and knowledge of current affairs. To create a fear-free school environment, some suggested that corporal punishment should be banned as it was ineffective. Thapelo from an average-effective school said teachers should "stop corporal punishment as it does not help in any way; they beat us, but it does not solve anything." Tholong from the same school corroborated,

I think they should stop this thing of beating children because beating makes us worse. The principal should make us feel at home, not like we are in prison, and stop being a bully.

Though corporal punishment has been outlawed in Lesotho in terms of *Education Act, 2010*, it is still rampant in schools. This is due to teachers' resistance to abandoning it, and the government's lack of capacity to end it, and provide teachers with some alternatives to maintain student discipline.

When asked whether their rights were respected at school, 41% answered affirmatively, while 58% responded negatively. Of those who said they were not respected, 86 (23%) cited severe beating by teachers. One male student named Thabiso from an average-effective school disclosed,

Students are sometimes beaten unacceptably. They are sometimes punished unnecessarily. The privilege of corporal punishment is highly abused. Students suffer unfair punishments where a suspect is punished before being proven guilty and is expected to explain afterwards; sometimes only to find that he is innocent.

A further 87 (23.3%) stated that their opinions were neglected; they were forced to confess to something they did not do and were even sent out of classrooms for minor transgressions.

Discussion

The significant finding of this study is that Lesotho's top-performing secondary schools consistently produce good results in high-stakes LGCSE examinations because of high selectivity in their Grade 8 and Grade 11 intakes, particularly in Grade 8 on entry from

primary school. This confirms an earlier finding by Vulperhorst, Lutz, de Kleijn and van Tartwijk (2018) that prior achievement has reliable predictive power on later achievement. These schools also draw most of their intakes from elite primary schools located in well-resourced urban centres. Although this study was conducted in five districts, several schools had many students from Maseru, the capital city, possibly because of their high SES and good primary education. Research has shown that schools with a high percentage of affluent students have a similar set of correlates that enhance student learning and school effectiveness, which is not the case in low SES schools (Padilla et al., 2020). Most children from low SES families do not overcome the disadvantage of lower initial attainment (Harris, Christopher, Muijs, Russ & Stoll, 2006).

Furthermore, Anderson, Gong, Hong and Zhang's (2016) study in Beijing found that students benefit from attending more selective elite secondary schools with good quality teachers, better facilities, and high-ability peers, which increase their chances of academic success. Similarly, the school climate and student body influences school processes, learning, and student outcomes (Demirtas-Zorbaz, Akin-Arikan & Terzi, 2021; Wenger et al., 2020). Due to differences in the mean levels of prior achievement, secondary schools perpetuate educational and socioeconomic inequalities, leading to low-performing schools with a scholastically and socially disadvantaged school composition, and vice versa (Wenger et al., 2020).

The findings further revealed that student transfer patterns followed the schools' effectiveness categories, with high-effective schools having the lowest student transfers, evidently because of their high selectivity and effectiveness, which have a retaining effect on students and teachers. This allows students to follow a regular school curriculum and optimises learning and achievement. Effective schooling requires stability since schools operate on routines, following a set course of study (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). As Sutton, Muller and Langenkamp (2013) noted, high school transfers cause curricular and extracurricular disruptions, affect students' learning and achievement, and reduce their tertiary education prospects.

Students at top-performing schools generally had high regard for their schools and rated their academic performance highly. As Dhaqane and Afrah (2016) observed, students' satisfaction influences their intention to stay in a school and positively affects academic achievement. Most students said they were satisfied with their teachers because they were diligent and taught effectively. They appreciated teamwork among teachers and their cooperation with students, which enabled effective teaching and learning. García-Martínez et al. (2021) confirmed that collaboration among teachers known as communities of practice promotes trust and respect, cultivates shared values and standards, and enables them to achieve their academic goals. Teacher efficiency promotes quality education and occurs when teachers engage students in instructional activities. Teachers who create more opportunities for students to learn and spend more time on curriculum-related activities influence achievement significantly (Mugendawala & Muijs, 2020). Black and Wiliam (1998) characterised the classroom as the *black box* where inputs from the outside such as students, teachers, resources, and parental anxieties are fed in and shape teaching and learning. Students who were dissatisfied with their teachers complained about their

unprofessional conduct, beating, use of strong language, and intrusiveness or focusing on their personal lives rather than their studies.

Most students said their principals were diligent, moved around the classrooms to ensure that teachers were teaching, and arrived early to prepare for the school day. Admittedly, classroom and instruction environments have the most significant impact on student outcomes. However, through their interactions with different role-players at school, purposeful and hardworking principals enhance school effectiveness by ensuring that teachers do the best job and acting as the standard-bearers of their schools' visions (Jarl et al., 2021). Effective principals shape students' attitudes to school and improve student engagement, learning, and outcomes (Mugendawala & Muijs, 2020; Townsend & Bayetto, 2021). Some respondents disclosed that their principals were sympathetic to needy students and assisted them, which shows that they were altruistic, prioritised their education, and adapted their leadership approaches to their schools' unique circumstances.

Concerning strategies that principals could employ to run schools better, some respondents proposed stricter disciplinary measures for students who misbehaved. Though not advocating strict discipline, Sammons et al. (1995) concurred that a calm, orderly, and task-oriented school environment is necessary for effective schooling, and this requires teachers to encourage students to develop self-control. A positive school climate raises academic achievement, which involves achieving the desired learning targets, capabilities, and grades (Demirtas-Zorbaz et al., 2021). Some respondents suggested that their schools should create more time for sports and entertainment so that students could refresh and unwind. Possibly because of a strong academic focus, high-performing schools do not support extracurricular activities adequately. Some suggested that corporal punishment should be stopped as students were often punished severely without justification, which constituted a gross abuse of power by teachers.

Conclusion and recommendations

The significant finding of this study is that stringent student selectivity in Grade 8 and good feeder schools, particularly elite primary schools, are the main contributing factors to the consistently good performance of Lesotho's top-performing secondary schools in the school-leaving examinations. They select the *crème-de-la-crème*, who are typically high SES students, and continuously weed out weaker students before they reach Grade 12. Inevitably, a confluence of high-ability students creates a competitive and rich learning environment that motivates students and teachers and raises academic standards. Additionally, most students were satisfied with their schools, teachers, and principals because of their high commitment and efficiency. Ultimately, all these factors coalesce to improve the quality of education offered in these schools and their LGCSE results.

From the study's findings, it is evident that to improve the quality of secondary education and school-leaving results, the quality of primary education should first be improved comprehensively through effective teaching and learning across the country. This could be achieved through high selectivity of aspiring teachers into teacher training and teaching

service to ensure that the best teachers are appointed into the system and supported professionally to improve their content knowledge and efficiency. Schools should also be supplied with adequate facilities, resources, and well-equipped laboratories to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Finally, the severe beating of students by teachers and other acts that violate their rights should be eradicated in schools, and a conducive, student-friendly school environment should be nurtured.

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Appendix 1: Students' questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain information on the management and effectiveness of secondary schools in Lesotho. The information provided will be used purely for my research and treated anonymously and confidentially to protect your identity and privacy as the research participant. So, I humbly request you to respond to the questions below as candidly as possible.

Biographical information

1. Name of school: _____
2. Date of birth: _____
3. Gender: Male [] Female []

Primary school factors

- 4. In which class did you pass Standard 7 (PSLE)?
First Class [] Second [] Third []; Year: ____
- 5. Which primary school did you attend? _____
District: _____
- 6. Did you repeat any classes in primary school? Yes [] No []
- 7. If yes, which classes did you repeat? _____

Secondary school factors

- 8. In which class did you pass Form C? _____; Year: _____
- 9. How many secondary schools have you attended so far? _____

Perceptions about the performance of your school

- 10. How would you rate the performance of your school in the LGCSE examinations?
Please tick an appropriate option below.
(a) very poor []; (b) poor []; (c) average []; (d) good []; (e) very good []
- 11. What do you think are the reasons for this?

Satisfaction factors

- 12. Do you find your teachers to be doing their jobs well? Yes [] No []
- 13. Please give reasons that support your answer above. Please state briefly.

- 14. Do you think the principal is doing his/her job well? Yes [] No []
- 15. Please give two reasons that support your answer to question 14 above.

- 16. What do you think the principal could do differently to run this school better?

Order and discipline

17. Are the problems of student misconduct common in this school? Yes [] No []
18. Tick **two** most common strategies used to deal with cases of students' misconduct in your school.
- | | | | |
|----------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|
| (a) Verbal reprimand | [] | (b) Corporal punishment | [] |
| (c) Manual work | [] | (d) Calls parents | [] |
| (e) Suspension | [] | (f) Expulsion | [] |
19. Do you think students' rights are respected in this school? Yes [] No []
20. Please provide reasons for your response above.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Professor Mapheleba Lekhetho is an associate professor of education management in the Department of Educational Leadership and Management within the College of Education at the University of South Africa. His research interests include school effectiveness, quality assurance, professional development, and distance education.
Email: lekhem@unisa.ac.za

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