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Availability of Secondary School Vacancies and Transition Rates of Pupils from Primary to Secondary Education in Mbarali District, Tanzania

Atu Charles Sanga¹, Dr Egidio Chaula², Dr. Lucas Mwahombela³

¹Department of Education, University of Iringa, Tanzania Email: atuboniphace@gmail.com

²Department of Education, University of Iringa, Tanzania Email: egidio.chaula@uoi.ac.tz

³Department of Education, University of Iringa, Tanzania Email: lucas.mwahombela@uoi.ac.tz

ABSTRACT

This study assessed how the availability of secondary school vacancies affects the transition rates of pupils from primary to secondary education in Mbarali District, Tanzania. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study adopted a descriptive and inferential design using mixed methods. Data were collected from 20 teachers, 40 parents, and 40 students through structured questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive statistics revealed that 80% of respondents identified inadequate classrooms and long distances as major barriers to transition, while regression analysis confirmed that availability of school vacancies ($p = .035$) significantly predicts transition rates ($R^2 = 0.621$). The findings demonstrate that limited school capacity remains a structural bottleneck hindering educational progression in Mbarali District. The study recommends that policymakers expand secondary school capacity and review admission policies to enhance equitable access to education.

Keywords: Transition rates, Secondary school vacancies, Educational access.

1.0 Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role in national development by shaping human capital and promoting socio-economic transformation. In Tanzania, the transition from primary to secondary education is a critical juncture, as it determines pupils' continuity in learning and future opportunities. While government initiatives such as the Free Basic Education Policy (FBEP) have increased primary school enrolment, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to secondary education. In Mbarali District, a significant number of primary school graduates fail to transition due to limited secondary school vacancies, insufficient classrooms, inadequate teaching staff, and long distances to schools. These constraints force education administrators to ration available spaces, leaving many qualified pupils unplaced, thereby undermining the national goals of universal access, equity, and educational efficiency as outlined in the Education Sector Development Plan (URT, 2021). Empirical studies by Lewin (2009) and UNESCO (2020) show that limited school infrastructure directly affects transition rates, particularly in rural areas, where students are most likely to be denied admission.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that human development is influenced by interactions across multiple environmental systems, from immediate family and school settings to broader societal policies and institutional structures. In this context, pupils' transition from primary to secondary education in Mbarali District is shaped by microsystem factors such as family support and teacher guidance, mesosystem interactions between schools and local authorities, and exosystem and macrosystem influences, including government policies and national secondary school infrastructure. By examining how the availability of secondary school vacancies interacts with infrastructural and logistical challenges, the study provides empirical evidence on structural determinants of educational progression. The findings aim to inform policymakers, local governments, and stakeholders on strategies to improve equitable access to secondary education and promote inclusive, sustainable educational development in Tanzania.

Empirical review

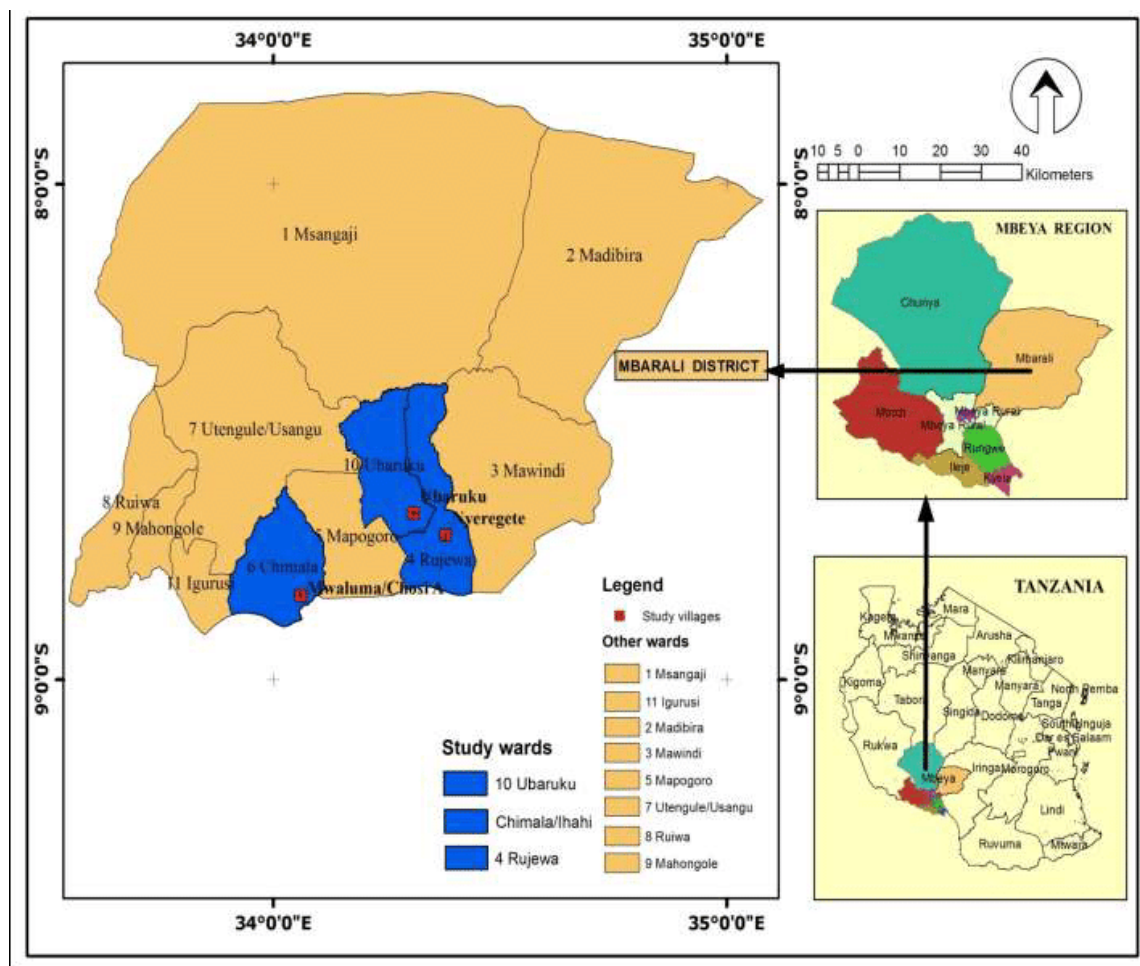
Several studies have highlighted the critical role of secondary school vacancies in shaping student transitions from primary to secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa. Fidelis and Mwila (2022) found that while capitation grants in Muleba District, Tanzania, significantly increased enrollment sometimes by up to 50% many schools still had to turn away up to 20% of eligible students due to insufficient form one vacancies. Bagnall (2023)

emphasised that guaranteed school placements improved students' emotional well-being during transitions, whereas uncertainty increased stress and reluctance to progress. Lewin (2009) noted that despite rising primary enrollments, secondary school capacity lagged, creating "bottlenecks" that prevented qualified pupils from advancing. Lincove (2012) showed that even with tuition-free primary education in Uganda, hidden costs continued to limit secondary enrollment, highlighting the financial and structural constraints on progression. Ngware, Oketch, and Mutisya (2010) demonstrated that increased local concentration of secondary schools improved enrollment, particularly for low-income households, but rapid primary completion still pressured secondary capacity. Across these studies, including the follow-up by Fidelis and Mwila (2022), the consistent finding is that insufficient secondary school availability remains a major barrier to smooth transitions, emphasising the need for systemic infrastructure expansion and equitable access policies.

Materials and Methods

Study Area

The study was carried out in Mbarali District, Mbeya Region, located in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. Mbarali covers an estimated area of 16,632 square kilometres and is predominantly agricultural, with rice being the main economic activity. The district experiences a tropical climate, with distinct wet and dry seasons that influence schooling activities. Administratively, it is divided into divisions, wards, and villages, with both public and private schools serving its population. Despite educational reforms, Mbarali continues to experience disparities in access to secondary education due to inadequate infrastructure and the uneven distribution of schools across rural areas.



Research Design and Approach

A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to teachers, parents, and students, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. This convergent design enabled triangulation of findings to enhance validity.

Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The study targeted teachers, parents, and students within selected primary and secondary schools. A total of 100 respondents participated, including 20 teachers, 40 parents, and 40 students. Stratified random sampling ensured representation across gender and geographical locations, while purposive sampling was used to select schools based on their enrolment rates and infrastructure conditions.

Data Collection Methods and Tools

Data were collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Structured questionnaires were administered to teachers, parents, and students to obtain quantifiable data on perceptions of school vacancy availability and transition experiences. Interviews with education officers and school heads provided qualitative insights into systemic challenges affecting school placement. Observation checklists were also used to assess physical infrastructure conditions, while documentary reviews supplemented primary data. This triangulation of methods ensured comprehensive data coverage, allowing for cross-verification and a deeper understanding of the relationship between school capacity and pupil transition outcomes in Mbarali District.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 30 for both descriptive and inferential statistics, with regression analysis applied to examine the predictive influence of secondary school vacancies on transition rates. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify patterns related to vacancy constraints and school placement challenges. Validity was ensured through expert review of research instruments and pre-testing in a nearby district to refine clarity and relevance, while reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.83$), indicating high internal consistency and ensuring that the collected data were credible and dependable.

Findings

Demographic Profile

This section on the demographic characteristics of respondents interprets the study findings, as such attributes often influence perceptions, experiences, and reported challenges related to students' transition from primary to secondary education. In this study, demographic data were collected from 20 teachers serving as key informants due to their professional experience and direct involvement in the educational process. The analysis covers variables such as gender, age, academic qualifications, years of teaching experience, and length of service in the current schools. Examining these characteristics provides valuable context for understanding how teachers' profiles may shape their perspectives on barriers to transition, the adequacy of school resources, and the broader educational environment. Moreover, the distribution of respondents across different categories ensures that insights are drawn from a diverse pool, enhancing the credibility and representativeness of the study findings.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	12	60.0
	Female	8	40.0
Age Bracket	20–30 years	5	25.0
	31–40 years	7	35.0
	41–50 years	6	30.0
	51–60 years	2	10.0
	61+ years	0	0.0
Highest Academic Qualification	Diploma	6	30.0
	Degree	9	45.0
	Masters	4	20.0
	PhD	1	5.0
Professional Experience (Years)	1–5 years	5	25.0
	6–10 years	6	30.0
	11–15 years	4	20.0

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Length of Service in Current School	16 years and above	5	25.0
	0–2 years	7	35.0
	2–4 years	5	25.0
	4 years and over	8	40.0

The demographic analysis of 20 teachers reveals notable diversity across gender, age, academic qualifications, and teaching experience. Males comprised the majority (60%), though females represented a substantial proportion (40%), suggesting balanced gender participation in teaching. In terms of age, most respondents fell between 31–40 years (35%) and 41–50 years (30%), indicating a workforce in its prime productive years, with relatively fewer young entrants (25% aged 20–30) and seniors (10% aged 51–60).

Regarding qualifications, nearly half (45%) of the respondents held a bachelor's degree, followed by diploma holders (30%), while only 25% had postgraduate qualifications (Master's or PhD). This shows a teaching workforce with moderate professional capacity but limited advanced specialisation. Teaching experience varied widely, with 30% having 6–10 years of service and 25% each with either early-career (1–5 years) or veteran (16+ years) experience, reflecting both fresh entrants and seasoned educators in the district.

Finally, the length of service in the current schools showed moderate mobility: 35% had recently joined (0–2 years), while 40% had been in the same schools for over 4 years, indicating a fair balance between stability and turnover in staffing.

Availability of Form One Vacancies

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Predictor (Independent Variable)	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.095	0.408	–	2.682	.019
High demand leads to missing enrollment	0.242	0.103	0.355	2.350	.035*
The Government provides sufficient slots	-0.185	0.098	-0.276	-1.878	.081
Strict admission criteria limit transition	0.216	0.109	0.301	1.981	.068
High tuition fees in private schools	0.288	0.120	0.395	2.400	.031*
Lack of form one vacancies causes dropouts	0.264	0.112	0.363	2.357	.035*
Limited vacancies negatively affect transition	0.192	0.105	0.272	1.829	.089

* $p < .05$ = statistically significant

The regression results in Table 2 indicate that three predictors were statistically significant at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, high demand for secondary school places ($p = .035$), high tuition fees in private schools ($p = .031$), and lack of form one vacancies ($p = .035$) showed meaningful effects on student transition rates. This means that these factors have a reliable influence and are unlikely to have occurred by chance.

By contrast, government provision of slots ($p = .081$), strict admission criteria ($p = .068$), and limited vacancies ($p = .089$) did not reach the conventional threshold of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). Although their coefficients suggest a positive or negative effect, the evidence is not strong enough to confirm that these variables consistently predict transition outcomes. In this study, therefore, a p -value less than 0.05 was taken as evidence of statistical significance, indicating that the predictor variable makes a genuine contribution to explaining differences in primary-to-secondary school transition.

Even when pupils qualify, demand exceeds available slots, pushing late-notified or lower-scoring pupils out. Families in the interview sessions describe “lists” changing and multiple rounds of selection that leave students uncertain and disengaged, with some repeating Standard VII or dropping out. Scarcity amplifies stress at the household level and makes transition feel like a lottery rather than a pathway. The cumulative effect is a delayed or foregone transition, especially among poorer households.

Discussion of the Findings

Findings from the teachers indicated that the number of form one vacancies was a key factor affecting whether pupils successfully transitioned from primary to secondary education in Mbarali District. The analysis showed varied teacher perceptions regarding how limited school places, government support, admission rules, and private school costs influenced student enrollment. The results demonstrated a strong correlation, suggesting that the lack of available Form One slots significantly impacted transition rates. High demand for these limited spaces, as confirmed by the regression model, led to

fewer students advancing to secondary school. These findings aligned with earlier research identifying insufficient school places as a major barrier to achieving widespread secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa. Strict admission criteria, including performance standards and catchment area policies, further limited opportunities for disadvantaged students, reflecting systemic inequalities rather than individual capabilities. Teachers also highlighted the impact of private school fees, which prevented many students from seeking alternatives when government placements were unavailable, reinforcing social disparities. Despite Tanzania's fee-free policy promoting secondary education, supply remained inadequate, contributing to overcrowded classrooms and higher dropout rates. The findings suggested practical actions such as increasing form one vacancies, reforming admission policies to consider socio-economic backgrounds, and making private education more affordable, supporting Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory in illustrating the multi-level interactions that influenced educational access.

Analysis from parents and students corroborated these teacher insights. Parents expressed concern that limited form one vacancies and lack of guaranteed spaces forced families either to seek costly private alternatives or delay enrollment, reflecting national reports that primary school completion rates had outpaced secondary school capacity (URT, 2022). Low perceived fairness and transparency in the selection process underscored parental mistrust, echoing Makombe and Kombe (2021), who noted that opaque admissions discouraged applications from marginalised households. Student narratives further showed that high demand, limited slots, and unpredictable selection procedures produced anxiety, delayed enrollment, and even permanent dropout, consistent with Lewin's (2009) concept of "transition bottlenecks." Bagnall (2023) similarly observed that assured places reduced transition-related stress, yet in Mbarali, uncertainty about vacancies undermined timely enrollment and trust in the system. Tanzanian studies in Muleba District by Fidelis and Mwila (2022) also found that capitation grants could not prevent qualified pupils from being turned away due to lagging school expansion. Framed through Bronfenbrenner's perspective, the shortage of secondary places represented a macrosystem failure, highlighting the need for policy reforms that ensured proportional expansion of secondary infrastructure alongside transparent selection mechanisms.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the limited number of form one vacancies in Mbarali District greatly hindered pupils' transition from primary to secondary education. The findings revealed that high demand, strict admission criteria, and costly private schooling created systemic barriers that reduced enrollment opportunities. These challenges reflected broader inequalities within the education system rather than students' abilities. Overall, the study confirmed that inadequate secondary capacity and opaque selection processes discouraged progression, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Recommendations

The study recommended expanding one vacancy through new school construction and improved infrastructure, reforming admission procedures to ensure transparency and fairness, and introducing measures to make private education more affordable for low-income families. It further suggested aligning secondary expansion with primary completion rates to prevent transition bottlenecks. Strengthening education policies and resource planning was viewed as essential to promote equitable access and sustainable student progression in Mbarali District.

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