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EXAMINING THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF THE NEWLY UPGRADED RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MUMBWA DISTRICT OF CENTRAL PROVINCE, ZAMBIA

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Abstract:
This study examined the academic performance of the newly upgraded rural secondary schools in Mumbwa District of Central Province in Zambia. The study had a total of 90 participants. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods as a descriptive survey. Questionnaires and interview schedules were used. The findings of the study revealed that the upgraded rural secondary schools had poor learning and teaching environments due to shortage of classroom space, facilities such as libraries and science laboratories. Apart from that, the study revealed that these rural upgraded secondary schools lacked adequate teaching and learning materials coupled with inadequate and under-qualified teaching staff which contributed greatly to the poor performance of learners in these schools. The study revealed that the academic performance of pupils in the three years was below 50% pass rate. The study recommends that the Ministry of General Education and other stakeholders should build more infrastructure and improve the existing ones in these upgraded rural secondary schools. Apart from that, the Ministry of General Education should provide adequate and prescribed teaching and learning materials to these schools to avoid teaching learners using outdated materials which may be contributing to poor performance. Further, the Ministry of General Education should send more qualified teachers to these upgraded rural secondary schools. This would improve the performance of learners and hence meet the aspiration of the Ministry of General Education for all learners both in urban and rural secondary schools.

Keywords: academic performance, upgraded rural secondary schools, teaching environment, secondary education, classroom space

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1. Introduction

The mission of the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) in Zambia is to provide quality education for all Zambians so that they are able to pursue knowledge and skills, manifest excellence in performance and moral uprightness, defend democratic ideals, and accept and value other persons on the basis of their personal worth and dignity, irrespective of gender, religion, ethnic origin, or any other discriminatory characteristic (Educational statistical bulletin 2016, Educating our future, 1996). However, available statistics indicate that majority of the population is in rural areas and the provision of education is challenging in such areas. The 2010 Census of Population and Housing stood at 13.1 million and out of this number, 7,923,289 were people from rural areas of the country, representing 60.5%. The urban population stood at 5,169,377 or 39.5%. Research evidence demonstrates that the majority of the children in rural areas dropped out of school due to the long distances they cover to attend classes, especially at the secondary school level, Kasonde et al. (2009). Parents normally arrange for boarding houses that are available in a few schools and most learners have often been abused especially girls as they remain to fend for themselves. Accessing secondary education services has been a challenge in many African countries for many years and Zambia is not an exception. In Zambia alone, it is estimated that more than a quarter of a million children are out of school and 47% of those enrolled do not complete their secondary school cycle. The dropout rates are within the 2-3% range and the transition rates of 54.2% for primary education (grade 7 and 8) and 38.5% for secondary education (grade 9-12) are a serious problem (ZEBEC: 2002). To increase access to secondary schools for rural learners, the government upgraded some selected primary schools, especially those which were strategically and centrally located into secondary schools.

The upgrading of rural primary schools into secondary schools posted several benefits to the learners and parents. Besides that, the upgrading of primary schools into secondary schools provided classroom space for the children in rural areas thus increasing access. The upgrading of primary schools into secondary schools in rural Zambia helped to reduce the number of children dropping out of school which stood at 8.0% between 2015 and 2016 (Educational Statistics Bulletin 2016). This is contrary to the previous years when learners were failing to find school places in secondary schools. Illustratively, Mumbwa District had only one (1) secondary school up to the late 90s and partly five (5) secondary schools up to 2013. Presently, the district has eighteen (18) secondary schools thus leading to increased access. What is not known, however, is how the learners are performing in the upgraded rural secondary schools which were initially primary schools.

2. Statement of the Problem

In order to increase access to secondary school education, the government of Zambia through the Ministry of General Education embarked on a programme to upgrade a

number of primary schools into secondary schools across the country. This has improved enrolment levels at the secondary level; it has also brought about a reduced number of dropouts and brought down the levels of child marriages and teen pregnancies (Educational Statistical Bulletin, 2016: 13). What remains to be understood is how these newly upgraded secondary schools in rural areas have been performing especially academically from the time of inception especially since they are coming from the background of primary status to secondary school status. This study therefore aimed at examining the academic performance of learners in the upgraded secondary schools in rural areas.

2.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the academic performance of pupils in the upgraded rural secondary schools in the context of quality education in Mumbwa District of Central Province.

2.2 Research Questions

1) How has been the conduciveness of the learning and teaching environment in the upgraded rural secondary schools?
2) What is the academic performance of pupils in the upgraded rural secondary schools?

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Theoretical Framework

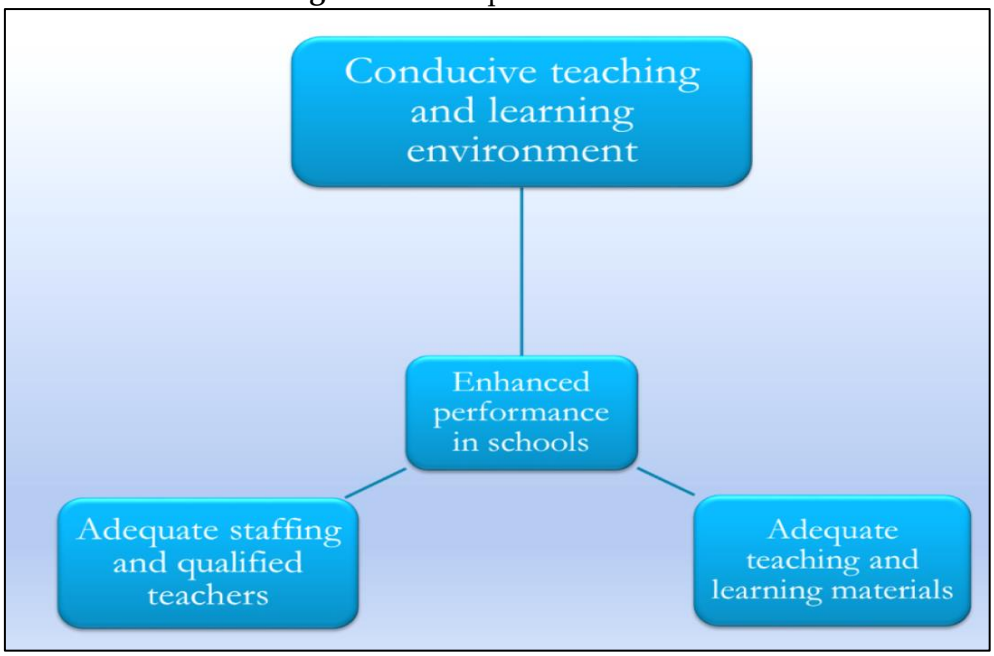
The study adopted the Critical Systems Theory which focuses on the relations between the parts. Critical Systems Theory focuses on the arrangement of and relations between the parts and how they work together as a whole. The way the parts are organized and how they interact with each other determines the properties of that system. The behavior of the system is independent of the properties of the elements. This is often referred to as a holistic approach to understanding phenomena. With respect to management, Flood and Jackson (1991) postulate that Critical System Theory simply refers to a set of different independent parts working together in an interrelated manner to accomplish a whole. It is with this essence that this research adopted this theory because a secondary school, for instance, is an organization that is formed by different departments, sections, and units composed of individuals and groups that are independent but working together to achieve a common goal with the aim of turning organizational vision into reality in this case quality education.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The study focused on the academic performance of newly upgraded secondary schools in rural areas and parts of Mumbwa District. It took into consideration the following areas: the learning environment in newly upgraded rural secondary schools, teaching and learning materials, and the performance of the schools since inception. The study

further focused on the staffing and qualification of teachers in newly upgraded rural secondary schools in Mumbwa District.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Author, 2020.

3.3 Conduciveness of Rural Secondary Schools in the Provision of Quality Education

Research evidence demonstrates that learning takes place within a web of social relationships as teachers and pupils interact both formally and informally (Lown, 1995). Thus, schools are institutional spaces for communities of learners and teachers where learning is expected to take place effectively. Supportively, Jones (2008) reveals that for learning to be effective in schools, the environment needs to be conducive to learning, allowing the pupils' space and time to interact within the learning and teaching process. Similarly, the study by Moulton (2010) appreciates that creating and maintaining stimulating learning environments can be achieved through effective classroom organization, interactive and whole school displays and a climate of innovation. Thus, a conclusion by Mount (2005) that Learning is directly linked to stimulants available in schools.

A study by Moulton (2001) reveals that rural schools need appropriate infrastructure and didactic and technological resources for better learning. This, however, contrasts with Milpo (2002) findings that in Africa, rural schools do not have the implements and equipment to teach classes with relative success. Nelly (2008) adds that rural schools lack furniture, instructional materials and other necessities for the schools to function effectively. Research has shown that in creating an effective learning environment, student concentration and focus during the learning process in the classroom is an important element which needs to be given due attention. Student concentration during the learning process will increase if the learning environment is

conducive and comfortable. Previous studies have found that the physical environment can influence students' psychology and social behavior and thus, significantly influence learning (Moulton, 2001; Milpo, 2002). Many studies conducted show that the learning environment can affect learning outcomes and student development (Serris & Miller, 2011; Evans, 2006; Kabeta et al., 2015). The study also revealed that there is a relationship between the learning environment of a student in terms of their achievement, satisfaction, comfort, health and enjoyment (Higgins, et al. 2005; Che Nidzam Che, et al., 2010). In addition, the learning environment may also affect students' behavior and their social interaction (Sanoff, 2000). A learning environment, which is equipped with quality physical aspects, can increase teaching and learning comfort levels. Research has further shown that libraries are considered a hub of research and information and their role can never be denied by educating the masses (Mwansa, 2012). Libraries provide leadership and expertise by using information and its affiliation technology, which plays a role in the teaching and learning process. and libraries are interdependent on each other Education without libraries and libraries without education are paralyzed.

3.3.1 Science Laboratories as Learning Environment in Schools

Research has proved that laboratory activities have long had a distinctive and central role in the science curriculum and science educators have suggested that many benefits accrue from engaging students in science laboratory activities (Hofstein and Lunetta, 1982; 2004; Tobin, 1990 & Hodson, 1999). Similarly, the National Science Education Standards (NSES, 1996) and the 2061 project (AAAS, 1990) reaffirm the conviction that inquiry in general and inquiry in the context of practical work in science education are central to the achievement of scientific literacy.

3.3.2 Physical Learning Environment in Secondary Schools

The learning environment is the space allocated for learning and teaching and it is an important aspect that needs to be addressed to ensure effectiveness and improve learning outcomes. A quality learning environment may promote intellectual activities, interaction, and generation of ideas, friendship, and cooperation and encourage learning, growth and personal development of students. In the learning environment, various aspects interact and affect the students. Many studies conducted show the learning environment can affect learning outcomes and student development (Serris & Miller, 2011; Evans, 2006). The study also revealed that there is a relationship between the learning environment with students in terms of their achievement, satisfaction, comfort, health and enjoyment (Higgins, et al., 2005); Che Nidzam Che, et al., 2010). Previous studies have found that the physical environment can influence students' psychology and social behavior and thus, significantly influences learning.

3.3.3 Staffing Levels of Teachers in Rural Secondary Schools

The single most critical challenge highlighted in various empirical studies is the low staffing levels of teachers in rural schools which is seen as posing considerable challenges

to school head teachers in organizing learning and teaching. Amato (2004) states that rural schools are often identified as 'underperforming schools' compared to urban schools. Lingam (2012) encourages the need to have adequate staffing in rural secondary schools. Supportively, Amato (2004) appreciates that teachers must be adequately motivated by the provision of incentives that will attract their stay in the rural secondary schools.

3.3.4 Qualification of Teachers in Rural Secondary Schools

White (2010) appreciates that academic qualifications, pre-service and in-service training, experience, content knowledge and skills in learning and teaching are some strong indicators of teacher quality. Available data from other developing contexts especially in sub-Saharan African countries suggest that large proportions of rural teachers lack adequate qualifications and content knowledge (Kudari, 2016). Amato (2004) established that staff qualification of some rural schools compared to urban schools in many countries indicated that fewer university graduates work in remote schools compared to urban schools. In contrast, more than half the staff, in all the urban schools, were university graduates.

3.3.5 Academic Performance in Rural Secondary Schools

Academic performance means the knowledge and skills that students have mastered in a subject or a course. It's basically a measure of how well students have performed in the various assessment items set for them based on some educational criteria determined by professional educators. Through students' performance in the assessment items such as essays, tests, viva, and examinations, students' performance is determined in ranking as to the educational standards that they have reached — pass, credit, merit, distinction, high distinction and so on. These educational standards may be recognized as satisfying the standards for admission for further studies in institutions domestically and internationally. Maina (2010) argues that in secondary schools, numerous factors contribute an important part in enhancing the academic performance of students which among them includes: school resources, **s**kills and abilities of the teachers, school ethos, and classroom environments among others. Kabeta et al. (2015) also state that the quality of school leadership matters and recommends that head teachers need to be instructional leaders if the quality of teaching and learning has to improve. An effective head teacher will ensure that there is a conducive environment for both teaching and learning.

4. Methodology

This study used a descriptive survey design where both qualitative and quantitative techniques were applied in the collection of data. The target population comprised Head Teachers, Deputy Head Teachers, Heads of Department Teachers and Pupils in the upgraded rural secondary schools of Mumbwa District. Five officers from the District Education Office were also included. The sample comprised five (05) Upgraded Rural

Secondary Schools and the selection was as follows: five (05) Head Teachers, five (05) Deputy Head Teachers, five (5) Head of Departments from each school, five (5) Teachers from each school, five (5) Pupils from each school and five (5) officials from the DEBS office. This was translated into the total sample population of ninety (90) respondents. In the study, purposive sampling was used to select Head Teachers, Deputy Head Teachers, Heads of Departments and officials from the Ministry of Education at the District level to participate in the study while the Teachers and Pupils were selected using a simple random sampling technique. A mixed questionnaire (closed and open-ended) and an interview guide were used as instruments for data collection. SSPS and Microsoft Excel were used to analyze the quantitative data and qualitative data were analyzed through coding and themes.

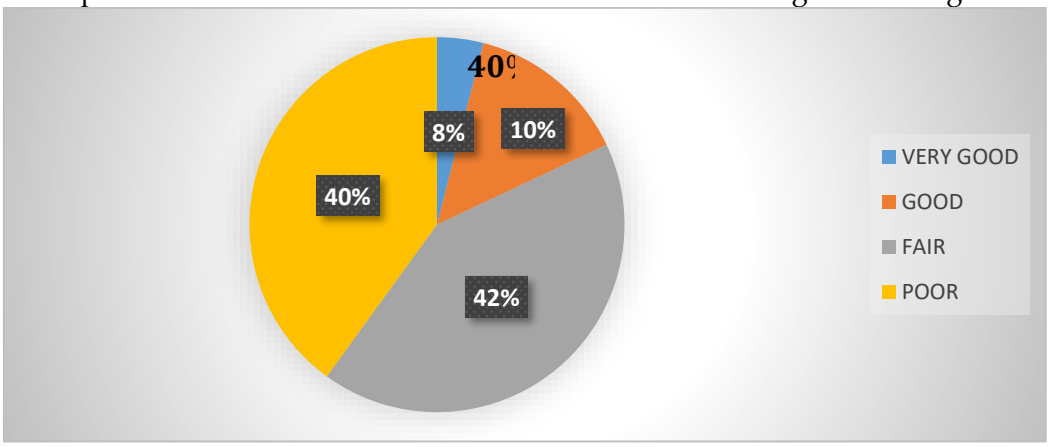
5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented in line with the objectives of the study as follows:

1) To determine the conduciveness of the learning and teaching environment in the upgraded rural secondary schools.
2) To establish the academic performance of pupils in the Upgraded Rural Secondary Schools.

5.1 Responses to determine whether the teaching and learning environment is conducive for secondary education provision in the Upgraded Rural Secondary Schools

Figure 2: Responses to Determine the Conduciveness of the Teaching & Learning Environment



The above figure illustrates that forty-two (42%) of the 90 respondents indicated that the learning environment was fair for learning while forty (40%) indicated that the learning environment was poor. On the other hand, only ten (10%) indicated that the learning environment was good. Lastly only eight (8 %) of the respondents indicated that the environment was very good for learning. The above illustration shows that the study established that the learning environments in the upgraded secondary schools were poor for learning.

Jones (2008) reveals that for learning to be effective in schools, the environment needs to be conducive to learning, allowing the pupils' space and time to interact within the learning and teaching process. Similarly, the study by Moulton (2010) appreciates that creating and maintaining stimulating learning environments can be achieved through effective classroom organization, interactive and whole school displays and a climate of innovation. Mount (2005) stated that learning is directly linked to stimulants available in schools.

5.2 Teaching and Learning Materials Availability in Upgraded Rural Secondary Schools

Pupils from school B complained that:

> **"***The textbooks here are not enough to cater for all of us so we share the few that we have and that makes it very difficult when doing class work."*

One pupil, from school A, said:

> "*The school has no laboratory apparatus, so we learn these things theoretically and only come to meet them physically when doing practical for final exams."*

One HOD, from school C, lamented that:

> "*I find it very challenging teaching chemistry, physics and biology without apparatus as you know these are practical subjects."*

Another HOD, from school E, said:

> "*I have failed to run the department effectively because there is nothing to manage. There are no textbooks, no apparatus, and no teaching aids like charts. Even chalk sometimes is not there. Apart from that we are only two in the department."*

One head teacher, from school D, explained that:

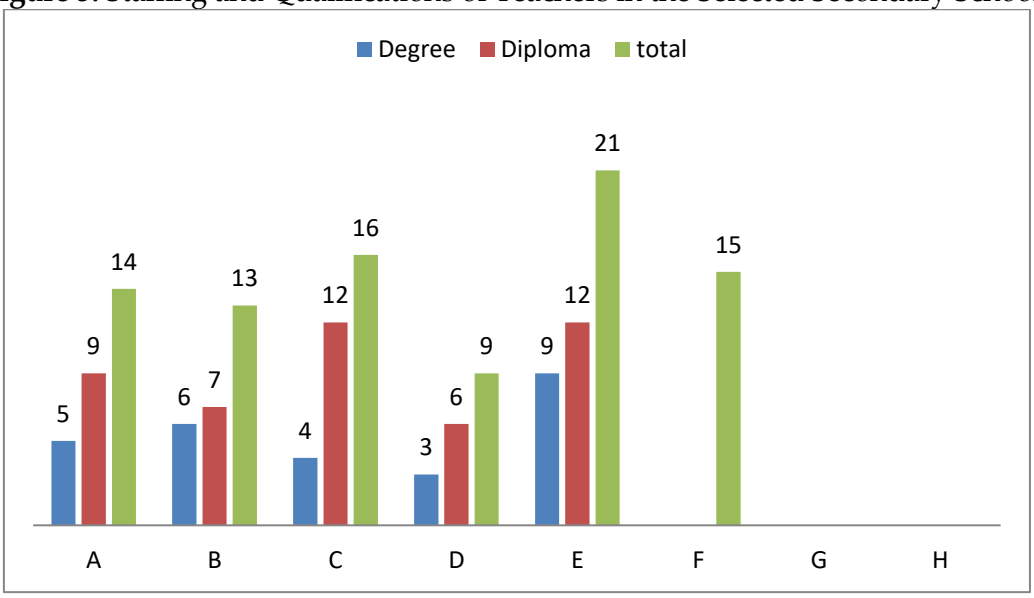
> "*Due to non-availability of teaching and learning materials we spend a lot of money in photocopying materials like textbooks whenever we come across useful materials."*

5.3 Staffing and qualification Levels of Teachers in Upgraded Rural Secondary Schools

Figure 3 below shows the staffing levels of the teachers in the study schools. School A has a total of 14 teachers of which 5 are degree holders and 9 diploma holders. School B has a total of 13 teachers of which 6 are degree holders and 7 diploma holders. School C has a total of 16 teachers of which 4 are degree holders and 12 are diploma holders. School D has a total of 9 teachers of which 3 are Degree holders and 6 Diploma holders and lastly,

school E has a total of 21 teachers of which 9 are degree holders and 12 Diploma holders. The figure shows that in all the 5 study schools, there were more diploma holders than degree holders and that the staffing level is not adequate to meet the teacher-pupil ratio.

Figure 3: Staffing and Qualifications of Teachers in the Selected Secondary Schools



A qualified teacher is commonly defined as a teacher who has, at least, the minimum academic qualifications required for teaching subjects at the relevant level in a given country (Ayara, 2003). This definition does not include the notion of trained teachers, which refers to teachers who have received at least the minimum organized pedagogical training (pre-service and in-service) required for teaching at the relevant level. A qualified teacher is, therefore, a teacher who is equipped with all necessary teaching qualifications, training, and experience required to pass knowledge to pupils.

5.4 Academic Performance in Upgraded Rural Secondary Schools

Table 1: Performance of the Upgraded Rural Schools for Grade Nine (9) 2018 Final Examinations

Name of School	No. Entered			No. Sat			No. Absent			No. Passed			Fail			Pass %		
	B	G	Total	B	G	Total	B	G	Total	B	G	Total	B	G	Total	B	G	Total
A	30	26	56	22	15	37	8	11	19	10	8	18	12	7	19	45	53	49
B	21	22	43	18	12	30	3	9	12	10	8	18	8	4	12	55	66	60
C	99	76	175	70	45	115	29	31	60	24	13	37	5	2	7	31	29	30
D	51	40	91	42	28	70	9	12	21	10	6	16	1	2	3	24	21	22.5
E	12	8	20	6	6	12	6	2	8	4	4	11	1	2	3	67	67	67

Source: ECZ 2018 Exam Analysis.

Table 1 shows the performance of the upgraded schools for the 2018 grade nine (9) final examinations. School A had a pass rate of 49% for the 2018 final examinations while school B has 60% for the 2018 final examinations. The table also shows that school C had

30% for 2018 final examinations while school D had 22.5% for 2018 mock examinations and lastly school E had 67% for 2018 final examinations. Therefore, the table shows that the performance of pupils in grade nine was not good during final examinations in the selected schools.

Table 2: Performance of the Upgraded Rural School for Grade Nine (9) 2019

Name of School	Entered	Absent	Sat	Cert	Statement	Fail	%
A	67	11	56	6	29	21	**10.7**
B	60	10	50	11	38	1	**22**
C	134	13	121	48	73	8	**39.7**
D	54	12	42	10	27	5	**23.8**
F	72	21	51	12	36	3	**23.5**
G	53	16	37	3	27	7	**8.10**

Source: ECZ 2019 Exam Analysis.

Table 2 shows the performance of the upgraded schools for final examinations in 2019. School A had a pass rate of 10.7 for 2019 and School B had 22% while C had 39.7 for 2019 final examinations respectively. School D had 23.8% while school E had 8.1% for the 2019 final examinations. The findings above show that the performances in the study schools were poor during the 2019 final examinations.

Table 3: Grade 12 2018 Final Examinations Analysis

School	Number Entered	Number Sat	Number Absent	Number Pass	Division One	Division Two	Gce	Fail	Pass%
A	20	19	1	6	1	2	16	4	30
B	44	41	3	12	4	8	20	9	27.2
C	128	120	8	89	21	51	30	1	69.5
D	56	50	6	14	2	12	30	6	25
E	72	68	4	24	8	16	40	8	33.3

Source: ECZ 2018 Grade 12 Exam Analysis.

Table 3 shows the performance of the upgraded schools for grade twelve final examinations in 2018. School A had a pass rate of 30%, School B had 27.2 2% for 2018 and C had 69.5% respectively. School D had 25% while school E had 33.3% for the 2018 final examinations. The findings above show that the performance in the study schools was poor during the 2018 final examinations.

Table 4: Grade 12 2019 Final Examinations Analysis

School	Number Entered	Number Sat	Number Absent	Number Pass	Divi One	Divi Two	Gce	Fail	Pass%
A	30	28	2	11	3	8	13	2	39.2
B	56	54	2	20	4	16	31	3	37
C	150	144	6	62	30	22	80	2	43
D	64	63	1	26	10	16	30	7	41.2
E	88	81	7	46	19	27	30	5	56.7

Source: ECZ (2019) Grade 12 Exam Analysis.

Table 4 above shows the performance of the upgraded schools for grade twelve final examinations of 2019. School A had a pass rate of 39.2%, School B had 37.2% and C had a 43% pass rate respectively. School D had 41.2% and E had 41.2% for the 2018 final examinations. The findings above show that the performances in the study schools were poor during the 2019 final examinations.

The study established that the academic performance of learners in upgraded secondary schools was low, a fact that was attributed to poor learning facilities and inadequate learning materials among others. This relates to the findings of the study conducted by Malambo (2012) on factors affecting the academic performance of pupils in grant and non-grant aided schools revealed that the unsatisfactory performance of pupils was due to the inadequate teaching and learning resources among others. Additionally, the study by Mbozi (2008) reviews that quality education in selected schools in Kazungula and Livingstone districts in Zambia indicated that inadequate textbooks were found as a factor affecting the performance of the learners. This implies that inadequate teaching and learning materials affect the learning process. According to Sammon's (1995) model of an effective school, well-stocked teaching and learning materials for both teachers and pupils to use during class time is cardinal for purposive learning. However, this is contrary to the findings of this study which revealed inadequate learning and teaching materials. The availability of quality textbooks in secondary schools is strongly related to achievement.

8. Conclusion

The study established that the upgraded secondary schools were not conducive to learning because they lacked a number of things that qualify them to be secondary schools. The study further established that these schools lack infrastructures such as inadequate classrooms, appropriate science laboratories, poorly furnished libraries and no computer laboratories. The schools were also short of learning materials and furniture coupled with poor dilapidated buildings and other school necessities as most of them use primary school infrastructure. Further, the study revealed that the performance of learners in the upgraded secondary schools was not good evidenced by the string of poor results during the final examinations for 2018 and 2019. The pass percentage was generally below 50%. The poor performance was attributed to a lack of library facilities, inadequate time for teacher-pupil consultation after class hours and not having enough reference books for learners. Additionally, the study revealed poor academic performance as a result of the poor family socio-economic status of most of the rural children. Furthermore, the study revealed that most teachers are not adequately qualified to teach senior secondary grades as most of them were just moved from primary and junior secondary classes.

9. Recommendations

1) The Ministry of General Education should build more infrastructure such as modern libraries and science laboratories in the upgraded rural secondary schools in order to make the teaching and learning environment conducive and this will help to improve the academic performance in upgraded rural secondary schools.
2) Increasing funding to schools so that adequate teaching and learning materials can be purchased.
3) The Ministry of General Education to deploy more teachers in upgraded rural secondary schools because the study finding has shown that one of the contributing factors to poor academic performance in these schools is due to low staffing levels.
4) The Ministry of General Education should send more qualified teachers (graduate teachers) to the upgraded rural secondary schools to teach senior classes. The findings of the study have shown that grade Ten (10) to Twelve (12) learners are taught by diploma holder teachers who are usually qualified to teach junior classes. and this is the contribution to poor academic performance.
5) The Ministry of General Education should also ensure that the deploy adequately qualified head teachers in these upgraded schools in order to have effective leadership.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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