

Reasons behind Long Commute Distances on Students' Attendance and Academic Performance in Mwanza City, Tanzania

Ngutunyi David, Jacqueline Temba, Simon Sitta Matondo

Department of Regional Development Planning, Institute of Rural Development Planning, Lake Z one Centre, P. O. Box 11957, Mwanza, Tanzania.

*Corresponding author

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Abstract

The academic performance of the students is crucial and stands as an indicator of the school's development. Most public schools, especially mushrooming ward secondary schools, are influenced by long commuting distances. The study aimed to explore the influence of long Commute Distances on Students' attendance and academic performance in Mwanza City. The study applied a convergent parallel research design and questionnaire and interview guide. The data collected through questionnaires were analyzed by using SPSS Version 23 and interview data were thematically analyzed. The findings revealed that long commuting distances negatively affect students' academic performance, limiting their study time and exposing them to potential challenges. The study recommends that the government and other education stakeholders should implement policies and programs that address barriers to education, such as providing scholarships, transportation assistance, and resources for students in marginalized areas.

Keywords— Distance, Education, Community, Commuting, Performance

I. INTRODUCTION

Long commute distances significantly influence students' attendance and academic performance across the globe. Longer commuting times are associated with various negative outcomes, including decreased academic performance, increased stress, and poorer health. Studies have shown that students who commute longer distances tend to have lower academic performance. For instance, a study conducted at Gulf Medical University found that students with extended commute times experienced decreased academic performance due to less time available for studying and increased physical and mental stress (Ahmed et al., 2021). Similarly, long commutes are often associated with increased absenteeism, as students facing lengthy travel times may struggle to arrive on time or miss classes altogether, directly affecting their learning outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Commuting for extended periods is also linked to various health issues, including stress and fatigue. Ahmed et al. (2021) highlighted that students with longer commutes reported significant physical difficulties and higher stress levels, which can further detract from their academic focus and performance. In the context of China, studies have found that the psychological well-being of students deteriorates with increased commuting time, indirectly affecting their academic performance (Zhou et al., 2022). The impact of commuting varies significantly based on geographic and socio-economic contexts. For instance, students in urban fringe areas may adapt better to longer commutes compared to those in city centers or rural areas, where the effects on academic performance are more pronounced (Zhou et al., 2022).

Studies conducted in various countries confirm that long commute durations negatively affect primary and

secondary school students' academic performance (UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2022). However, the relationship between commuting and academic performance differs across demographic groups and geographic contexts. For example, the low density of public service facilities in rural and suburban areas, coupled with greater distances between homes and schools, often makes it harder for students in these regions to attend school regularly and achieve academic success (Li et al., 2022). Similarly, urban fringe areas often have better infrastructure, allowing students to tolerate longer commutes more effectively, while rural areas face greater challenges due to poor transportation systems (National Bureau of Statistics Tanzania, 2022). Using national survey data from China, Zhou et al. (2022) demonstrated that commute times are significantly negatively associated with children's academic achievements, with variations across urban, rural, and suburban areas. For instance, children in urban fringe areas have the longest average one-way commuting time (18.6 minutes), but they tend to better tolerate long commutes compared to their rural counterparts. In addition, travel mode plays an important role in mitigating the effects of long commutes. Walking to school is positively associated with psychological well-being in urban centres, while bicycles and public transport positively affect rural students' scores (Zhou et al., 2022). Furthermore, students in the lower quantiles of academic performance are most affected by long commutes, as shown by quantile regression analysis.

Research indicates that long commute distances negatively influence students' attendance, leading to irregular school participation, fatigue, and reduced engagement in learning activities (World Bank, 2022). Prolonged travel times often result in late arrivals, absenteeism, and reduced study time, all of which contribute to poor academic outcomes (Burzacchi et al., 2024). Additionally, students commuting long distances are more likely to face safety concerns, increased transportation costs, and health-related challenges, which further exacerbate their academic struggles (UNICEF, 2023). Students who live far from school are more likely to abscond school sessions, especially on difficult travel days. This missed instruction hinders learning and achievement. Students with long commutes, particularly those involving unpredictable public transportation, tend to have higher rates of absenteeism. This is because issues like traffic, delays, and breakdowns make it difficult for these students to make it to school on some days. Every school day results

in lost learning opportunities that accumulate over time and hinder academic performance (Klein et al., 2022). To address these challenges, urban planners and policymakers must focus on fostering a balance between schools and residential areas, improving public transit services, and investing in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure for vulnerable student groups. Such initiatives can enhance students' psychological well-being and academic performance, particularly in regions facing significant commuting challenges (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Long commuting distances have been shown to negatively affect student attendance. Mchelu (2015) conducted a study in Songea Municipal Council, Tanzania, which revealed that students who faced long commutes were more likely to experience tardiness and truancy. The study highlighted that factors such as lateness and tiredness significantly contributed to students missing classes, ultimately leading to lower attendance rates. This finding aligns with broader research indicating that long travel times can deter students from attending school regularly, as the physical and psychological toll of commuting can be substantial.

The psychological impact of long commutes cannot be overlooked. Studies have shown that long travel times can lead to increased stress and decreased well-being among students, which in turn affects their academic performance. For instance, research conducted in China indicated that long commutes can impact student health due to less sleep, physical fatigue, and the risk of accidents (Ding & Feng, 2022). Long commutes can negatively impact students' health and well-being in various ways, including a lack of sleep, physical fatigue, and a higher risk of accidents during the commute. Poorer health and well-being then influence students' ability to focus, concentrate, and learn, subsequently impacting their attendance, test scores, and grades. Poorer health can then influence attendance and academic performance. Access to quality education is a fundamental right and a key driver of social and economic development. However, various factors impact students' ability to fully benefit from educational opportunities, particularly in urban areas where long commute distances are a growing concern. Long commuting distances to school have been identified as a significant barrier to students' attendance and academic performance, especially in low- and middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2022). Longer commuting times

negatively impacted children's psychological well-being, which was reflected in their academic achievements. This suggests that the emotional and mental strain of commuting may hinder students' ability to perform academically, a concern that is particularly relevant in the context of Mwanza City, where infrastructure and transportation options may be limited. Given the adverse effects of long commuting distances on attendance and academic performance, policymakers must consider interventions that could alleviate these challenges. Mchelu (2015) recommended the introduction of boarding systems in community secondary schools to accommodate students who travel long distances. Additionally, improving road infrastructure and transportation options could significantly enhance students' access to education and their overall academic outcomes.

In Mwanza City, students who must travel long distances may face additional challenges, such as unsafe roads, unreliable public transportation, and adverse weather conditions, all of which can discourage regular school attendance. Chinyoka and Naidu (2014) highlighted that absenteeism due to commuting difficulties can lead to classroom disengagement, further exacerbating the problem of poor attendance. The issue of long commute distances is compounded by inadequate public transportation and urban infrastructure. Many students, particularly those from low-income families, must walk long distances or rely on unreliable transport systems to reach school. These challenges are likely to have a significant influence on their school attendance and academic performance, which are critical indicators of educational success and future opportunities (National Bureau of Statistics Tanzania, 2022). Despite these challenges, limited research has been conducted to explore the relationship between commute distances and academic outcomes in Mwanza City which may disproportionately affect students in accessing educational institutions.

III. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study employed mixed research approaches together with a convergent parallel research design. The design gathered both qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously, analyzing them separately, and then combining the results at the end to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The study was conducted in Mwanza City Tanzania.

Purposive, stratified and simple random sampling techniques were employed. The stratified sampling technique divided respondents into male and female groups, while purposive sampling was used to select key informants like the district education officers and head teachers. Simple random sampling was used to select respondents to provide an equal chance for each person to be selected.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Influence of Long Commuting Distances on Students'

The study findings explore the influence of long commuting distances on students, whereby the performance of the students is crucial as an indicator of the school's development to educational achievements. Most public schools, especially mushrooming ward secondary schools, are influenced by long commuting distances. Some of the schools form settlements as hostels or provide special renting rooms and houses for secondary students to be near the schools. The researcher wanted to find out the influence of long commuting distances on students' attendance and academic performance. The findings are well presented in Figure 1.

The study findings in Figure 1 indicate that 43.5 per cent of the respondent teachers disagree with the statement that the commuting distance of the students to school can support achievement in academics. Additionally, 15.2 per cent of the respondent teachers were neutral, 26.1 per cent of the respondent teachers strongly agreed with the statement, and 15.2 per cent of the respondent teachers agreed with the statement.

The study concurs with Güven et al. (2022), indicating that students who live far from school are more likely to abscond from school sessions, especially on difficult travel days. This missed instruction hinders learning and achievement. Students with long commutes, particularly those involving unpredictable public transportation, tend to have higher rates of absenteeism. This is because issues like traffic, delays, and breakdowns make it difficult for these students to make it to school on some days. Every school day missed results in lost learning opportunities that accumulate over time and hinder academic performance. Having less study time outside of school hours restricts students' chances for learning and skill development, which impacts their grades and test scores.

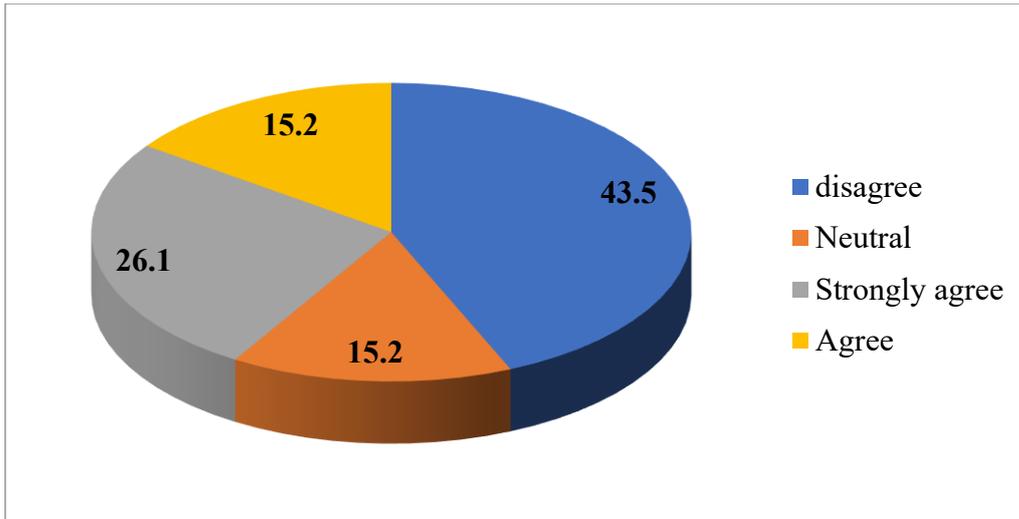


Fig.1: Long Distance from School (n=92)

In the interview with the educational officers, one of the interviewees made the following remarks:

“Long distance to the students from their settlement can affect the performance of the students in their schools, especially the girls’ students who face some obstacles like sexual harassment along the way to or from schools. This should not be taken for granted in the schools; there should be a policy to support and a decision to establish hostels for our students, especially girls” (Interviewee B January 2025).

This also implies that, in general, long commuting distances can affect the performance of the students. Some students use public transport, leading to their arrival late at school sometimes after the beginning of class sessions. Other students walk on foot from far residences to school, which can disturb other school programs, influencing students' academic performance.

Students’ Opinions on the Influence of Long Commuting Distances

In this section, the respondents' answers regarding the influence of Long Commuting Distances were provided by the students, as they are the ones experiencing long distances from their places of residence. The results are indicated in the figure 2 below.

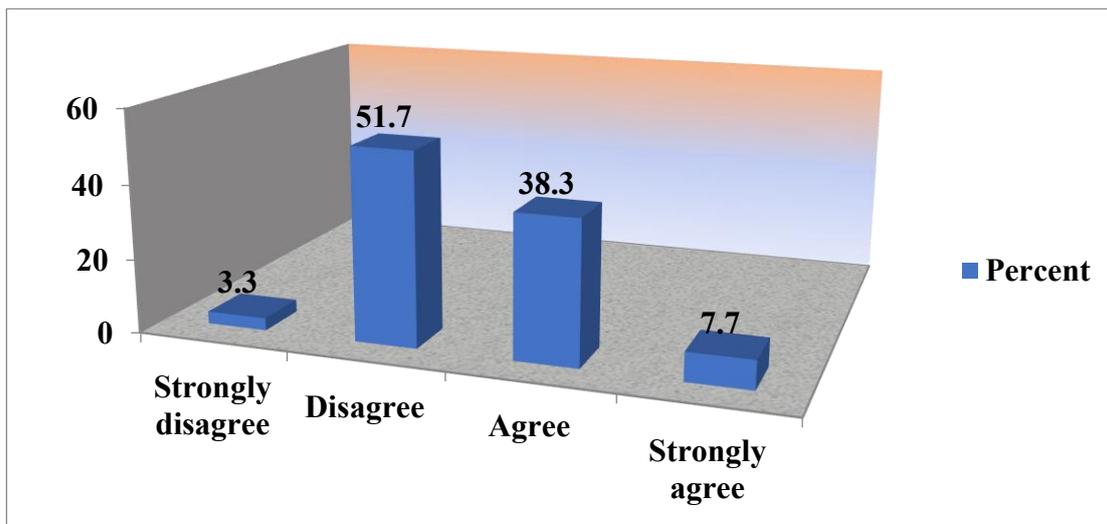


Fig.2: Long Distance from School (n=60)

The study findings reveal that 51.7 per cent of the respondent students disagree with the statement that the influence of commuting long distances can support students' attendance and academic performance. Additionally, 6.7 per cent of the respondent students strongly agree, 38.3 per cent of the respondent students disagree with the statement, and 3.3 per cent of the respondent students strongly disagree (Figure 2).

This study concurs with Ruiz-Hermosa et al. (2019), suggesting that students with long commutes to school arrive tired and less alert, impacting their ability to focus and engage in class. This fatigue builds up over time and hinders performance. Students with long commutes, especially those involving public transportation, often arrive at school tired, distracted, and less alert due to the physical and mental strain of the commute. As a result, these students may have more difficulty concentrating in class, participating in lessons, and absorbing new material. Over time, this accumulated fatigue can negatively impact academic performance.

Furthermore, studies have shown that students who commuted long distances reported difficulties in completing classwork and were more prone to dropping out of school due to the challenges associated with their travel. This is consistent with findings from other studies that suggest a direct correlation between commuting duration and academic achievement, where longer commutes are associated with lower academic performance. As a result, these students may have more difficulty concentrating in class, participating in lessons, and absorbing new material. Over time, this accumulated fatigue can negatively impact academic performance (Mchelu, 2015). Additionally interview with one of the heads of the school commented that:

"Mostly the students who are coming late are living far from school; they are supposed to wake up early and make preparations for school either by foot or public transport. Most of them sometimes miss the first session of the classes, especially during the rainy season. Also, due to that situation, sometimes these students sleep in the class after feeling tired with the long walking distance or due to scrambling for public transport to school" (Interviewee C, January 2025).

The study result implies that both teachers and students are facing challenges due to the long distance from their schools, which can contribute to affecting the academic

performance of the students and general education development. While teachers are observing the working regulations in the working centres, students are still facing the long-distance problem and are supposed to live near schools, hostels, or boarding, and possibly through the allocation of student transport from various places. Moreover, since then, the theory has been widely studied and applied to various contexts, including education. The resource dilution theory shows that, due to the effectiveness of policies on school management, teachers ensure all students attend school on time to avoid latecomers which can lower student achievement in academic results as class sizes increase.

V. CONCLUSION

The study findings revealed that students with long commutes have limited leisure time after school, affecting their ability to study, do homework, and review lessons. The study also found that long commuting distances negatively affect students' academic performance, limiting their study time and exposing them to potential challenges. The influence of long commuting distances on students' attendance and academic performance emerged as a noteworthy concern. Teachers and students acknowledged the negative impact of lengthy commutes, aligning with existing research indicating limited study time and potential challenges for students. The study emphasized the need for policies and interventions to mitigate these challenges, including potential strategies to build hostels near schools or implement measures to manage transport problems, ultimately improving student attendance and academic performance.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings presented, it is evident that long commuting distances significantly impact students' attendance and academic performance. The study underscores the urgent need for proactive measures to address these challenges. To enhance student outcomes, it is recommended that schools consider establishing hostels or providing accommodation closer to educational institutions, especially for students facing extended travel times. Moreover, implementing student transport services can help mitigate the adverse effects of long commutes on academic achievement. By reducing travel-related fatigue and ensuring timely arrival, such interventions can enhance students' focus, engagement, and overall performance. Collaborative efforts involving government policies, educators,

policymakers and communities are essential to creating supportive environments that foster student success amidst the challenges posed by lengthy commuting distances.

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