

# **Understanding Realities, Inequalities and Implications Associated With Policy and Practice in Form One Selection in Secondary Schools in Kenya**

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## **Abstract**

This article reports on the findings from a research study on form one selection in secondary schools in Kenya. The aim of the study was to identify issues and challenges associated with form one selection using quantitative and qualitative research design. Data was collected through a survey from 81 principals in Nyamira County, Kenya. Data analysis indicates various issues and challenges that militate against the provision of education based on equality. The issues and challenges identified undermined the provision of equality in education provision in Kenya. The current form one selection policy and practice favoured national and county schools and disadvantaged district schools. The issues and challenges include among others that national and county schools selected top performing students based on KCPE (Kenya certificate of primary education) examination results, leaving bottom performing ones to district schools. District secondary schools also face severe competition from other schools within the district, thus chasing not only fewer numbers of students but also low achieving ones. The results also indicate that district schools were under pressure from their community to admit students with very low marks. Also selected students failed to turn up forcing district secondary schools to admit students with even the lowest marks in order to survive in the free secondary education era. In conclusion, the current form one selection policy discriminated against district secondary schools resulting in admitting students with very low or rather poor KCPE marks.

**Keywords:** policy and practice, Form one selection, Nyamira County, Secondary schools, Kenya

## **Introduction**

Education provisions in various countries of the world are differentiated into elite and/or prestigious schools systems and less elite ones. Elite schools systems are the minority comprising 1 – 4 per cent of the total education provisions depending on the country. In the literature reviewed elite schools systems are also referred to selective education system and selection is based on very competitive entrance examinations, for instance in Kenya, the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination top marks, in Singapore, primary school leaving examination (PSLE) and in England, 11- plus entrance examination (Amburo, 2011; Henry, 2011a; Coldron et al., 2010; Yakaboski and Nolan, 2011), just to name a few. Elite or selective education systems are considered privileged institutions for most able or intellectual pupils or students (Galindo- Ruenda and Vignoles, 2005; NewBurn, 1939; Allen and West, 2010). Chan (2008) adds that they are institutions for ‘the best and brightest children who are likely to secure positions of pre-eminence in society in the future’. Further review of literature reveals that the selective education systems have played significant roles in the creation and sustenance of elite classes in countries such as the United States, England and Wales, and Singapore, among others and are still popular in those spheres (Gaztambode- Fernández, 2009; Yates, 1971; Dobbie and Fryer, 2011; Sim, 2012). Because of their popularity many people scramble for the limited spaces available in such institutions (Deresiewicz, 2008). Deresiewicz (2008) also reports that in many contexts so many resources are devoted to such institutions. However, concerns have been raised regarding elite education systems; for instance, they have been associated with social segregation, inequality and divisions in the societies (Deresiewicz, 2008). In an article entitled the ‘disadvantages of elite education’ Deresiewicz (2008) observes that elite school students consider themselves the best and brightest and everyone else something else; less good, less bright. Some of them think that they are more than others because their examination scores are higher (Deresiewicz, 2008). Elite arrogance in relation to elite education provision has been in Singapore (Nee (2004). This article reports on the views of secondary school principals on form one selection policy in secondary schools in Kenya.

## **Understanding Kenya’s Public Secondary Education System**

Currently Kenya operates three levels of public secondary schools existing in a hierarchical manner, namely National, County and District schools. Soon there would be four hierarchical levels, namely National, Extra- County, County and District schools, when the current national schools expansion /upgrading programme is completed. There are contrasting differences between them in terms of teachers, facilities and other resources (Glennerster et al. 2011).

### **National secondary schools**

The national public secondary schools consist of some of the longest- established public secondary schools in the country and select form ones across the country. Five of the eighteen earlier ones were established during the colonial rule (Yakaboski and Nolan, 2011). The number of national secondary school has recently grown from 18 to 78 (Ndonga, 2013). The government plan is to have at least two national schools in each of the 47 Counties (Muindi, 2012b; Siringi, 2011a; Siringi, 2011b). Also the government plans to increase the number of classrooms in the existing national schools to cater for the growing number of top performing students (Muindi, 2012a). However, some parents feel that the recently upgraded national secondary schools are not as good as the eighteen earlier ones in terms of facilities and teachers (Muindi, 2012b). Overall national schools are considered elite and prestigious public secondary schools in the country (Glennerster et al. (2011). Compared to other public secondary schools in other categories, national schools have better teachers, better facilities, offer a broad range of subjects and provide higher quality peer group (Glennerster et al.

2011). For instance, in 2007, 80 per cent of the teachers in national schools had a degree compared to 68 per cent in other public schools (Glennerster, et al. 2011). Glennerster et al. (2011) also report that teachers in national schools were twice as likely to hold an advanced degree compared to teachers in other public schools. In terms of Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) performance, national schools perform far better than other public secondary schools, for instance, in 2008 on average students scored 9.6 (out of 12), 90 per cent of students scored at least a C+ and also there was no gender gap (Glennerster et al. 2011).

### **Extra- County secondary schools**

This is a new breed of public secondary schools that would exist between national and county schools. The growth of national public schools from eighteen earlier ones to the final figure of 105 involved a three phase government programme of elevating or upgrading the best performing public schools to national public schools status (Muindi, 2012a; In2 East Africa, 2013). Currently there are 78 national public schools in the country as indicated in the preceding sub-section; the 27 earmarked for elevation to bring up the total to 105 would be called extra-county schools according to Professor George Godia, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of education (Ndonga, 2013). According to Muindi (2012a) the additional 27 schools marks the third and the last phase of upgrading schools to national schools status. But why are they called extra-county secondary and not national schools as the rest of the other national schools? That raises questions regarding their status, quality of teachers and other resources, among others. One key feature of the extra-county schools is that their selection of students would be based on 40:40:20 ratios. That means 40 per cent of students to be taken nationally, another 40 per cent from the county and 20 per cent from the district hosting the school (In 2 East Africa, 2013; Muindi, 2012a). Therefore the 27 extra-county public secondary schools do not quite fit in the national schools category whose students selection is 100 per cent county-wide.

### **County secondary schools**

These are former provincial schools (Muindi, 2012a) and recruit from one students from within the province /county hosting the individual primary schools (Yakboski and Nolan, 2011). In 2008, on average, their performance in KCSE score was 6.2 (out of 12) and only 43 per cent of students scored at least a C+ and gender gap was small but statistically significant (Glennerster et al. (2011). There are almost 1000 public county schools in Kenya.

### **District secondary schools**

These are at the bottom of the pecking order or tier and draw students from the district hosting respective primary schools. A majority of their students consist of those who could not gain admission into national or provincial/county schools (Glennerster et al. 2011). In terms of KCSE performance the scores are appalling. For instance, in 2008, the average was 4 points (out of 12) and only 11 per cent scored at least a C+. There was also a significant gender gap in the performance such that the proportion of boys achieving at least a C+ was almost twice the proportion of girls. There are approximately 3000 public district schools in the country (Glennerster et al., 2011).

### **Understanding Form One Selection Process In Kenya**

The current candidate level for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) is over eight hundred thousand as a result of the free primary education policy (Wahome, 2013; Aloo and Odek, 2012). The current transition rate from primary to secondary schools stands at 77 per cent (In2 East African, 2013). Further review of literature, reveals, for instance, that approximately 150,000 candidates out of 811,930 who sat the KCPE 2012 were likely to miss

form one slots because of lack of adequate spaces in public secondary schools (Ndogo, 2013). It is estimated that there are about 7,500 secondary schools in Kenya against a required number of 22, 785 (In 2 East Africa, 2013) and that suggests that the country is in dire need of more than 15,285 additional secondary schools in order to absorb all the 2012 KCPE candidates. The need for secondary school places would continue to persist as the number of KCPE candidates continue to grow annually. That seems to be a huge challenge facing the country's secondary education provision at the moment.

KCPE examinations are taken after eight years of primary education and significantly determine the type of school a candidate joins, whether national, extra-county, and county or district public secondary school (Amburo, 2011; Soft Kenya, 2013). KCPE plays a significant role in terms of transition to secondary schools. For instance, KCPE regulates access to secondary schools because if students fail the test, they are likely to either dropout or repeat the final year of primary school (Yakaboski and Nolan, 2011). At the initial stages in their eighth and final year in primary education, students register for KCPE examination. During registration each student makes seven choices of the secondary schools he or she would like to join. This includes two national schools, two county and three district schools (Yakaboski and Nolan, 2011). Upon the release of the KCPE examination results, three selection rounds follow in sequence, the national public secondary schools first, then county public secondary schools and finally district public secondary schools, depending on the candidates' performance and school choices (Yakaboski and Nolan, 2011; Soft Kenya, 2013). The selection process among other things reduces the chances of high performing students joining lower level public secondary schools e.g. district schools. However, Yakaboski and Nolan (2011) identify prestige and cost as the main challenge to secondary access and participation. Selection of candidates into national secondary schools is based on candidature and affirmative action to ensure every district's candidate is selected (Soft Kenya, 2013). According to Soft Kenya (2013):

*The national public secondary quota is used to select candidates per gender and merit list per district. Cut-off-to each national school is automatically determined based on the last candidate to be selected to a given national school from a given district in a county.*

The national public secondary quota is also referred to as a district quota (In2 East Africa, 2013). The formula used for calculating district quota equal to: the number of candidates in a district divided by the total number of candidates registered nationally and then multiplies it by the number of places available in national schools (Aduda and Muindi, 2011). It is also important to point out that selection of candidates into national schools is based on given ratios for instance in 2010, the criteria used was, 'for every three pupils admitted to national secondary school from public primary schools, there was one from private schools'; then in 2011 the ratio was 65:35 and 2012 was 73: 27, public to private respectively (Aduda and Muindi, 2011). Defending the formula (ratio) permanent secretary in the Ministry of Education said (Aduda and Muindi, 2011) 'The idea is to create equity and fairness when selecting the pupils to national schools as expounded in our Constitution'. SOFTKENYA (2013) provides a six point general selection procedure. However, form one selection policy and especially in relationship to national schools is a very contentious issue (Wainaina, 2012; Amutabi, 2013; Shundu, 2011; Ronoh, 2013).

### **Understanding Elite Secondary School Systems Discourse**

A number of countries in the world, such as China, Malaysia, Romania, Singapore, and Turkey allocate students to secondary schools based almost entirely on admission entrance examination (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011). Gifted students in Australia, Korea, Japan,

Mexico City, the canton of Zurich and the United Kingdom compete for limited spaces in selective secondary schools (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011). The selective or elite secondary education systems are known by various names in various countries, national schools in Kenya (Yakaboski and Nolan, 2011) public exam schools in the United States (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011) and Grammar school in England, in the United Kingdom (Galindo-Ruenda and Vignoles, 2005) just to mention a few. They remain important features in a number of countries (Galindo- Ruenda and Vignoles, 2005; Sim, 2012). The benefits of selective secondary include high-achieving peers, more advanced and rigorous coursework and high expectation, factors assumed to contribute to improved students achievement (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011). This is supported by Galindo-Ruenda and Vignoles (2005) whose study result indicates that ‘the most able pupils in the selective stream did do somewhat better than those of similar ability in mixed ability school systems’. However, Dobbie and Fryer (2011) warn that selective systems e.g. public exam schools may not be suitable for lower ability or marginal students:

*Social interaction in exam schools could be negative, especially for students who are lower in the ability distribution with a comparative advantage in non- academic activities. Lower relative ability may also make students less competitive in college admission even if their absolute level of achievement is unchanged.*

Galindo- Ruenda and Vignoles (2005) share similar views when they report that grammar system was advantageous to the most able pupils in the system than lower ability pupils. In fact they found that lower ability pupils performed worse in the selective school system. This suggests that in a selective school system the students’ ability counts. This may further suggest that selective system is not for everyone but for the chosen few. Many people in various societies have benefited intellectually and socially from elite schools (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). Elite schools have been associated with not only the formation and/or production of upper social class in various societies but also with the perpetuation and transmission of the traditions (Gaztambide- Fernández, 2009). Gaztambide- Fernández (2009) further observes that ‘the role of elite schools is to reproduce elite classes’. Tomlinson (2008) further argues that ‘elite groups further their own political and social agendas by persuading others that there is no other way of thinking or acting and inequalities become accepted as inevitable’. Similar view is also expressed by Hirsch (1977) as cited in Tomlinson (2008)

*‘... there is a personal conflict in access to high level education and top jobs which leads elites to search for new form of social exclusion to give them a form of social exclusion to give the a competitive advantage’.*

Max Weber (Weber, 1947) as cited in Tomlinson (2008) pointed out that dominant groups always need a theoretical legitimisation for their own privilege. Barr (2006) as cited in Sim (2012) reports that Singapore is a country managed by ‘a culture of elite governance’. The prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong describes elite as ‘a core group of people who occupy key position of power and influence, and set the direction for the whole society and country’ (Sim, 2012). A much broader definition is provided by Brannelly et al (2011):

*The term elite denotes the usually very small group of leaders occupying formal or informal positions of authority or power in public and private organisations or sector at national or sub-national levels. They generally take or influence major economic, political, social and administrative decisions in those spheres and often also use their power to influence decisions beyond such spheres.’*

Tomlinson (2008) therefore asserts further that ‘... winning the competition for elite qualification becomes crucial for high level jobs’. Perhaps in support of elite school system, in 1997 Gordon Brown then Chancellor of Exchequer said that ‘we cannot run a first rate economy on the basis of second-rate education system...’ (Tomlinson, 2008).

However, the downside of elite school system among other things is that it leads to social segregation (Coldron et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2012). Jenkins et al. (2008) adds that social segregation is engendered by greater selectivity by schools and warns that excessive segregation may also threaten social cohesion. Jenkins et al. (2008) further argue that greater inequality in academic achievement results in greater inequality in later-life outcomes (Jenkins et al. 2008).

Three countries have been selected purposively for illustration. They are England, the United States and Singapore. Their elite education system shares some characteristics with the national secondary schools in Kenya.

### **Grammar school systems in England**

Grammar schools in England and Wales have a long history dating back to 1937 when fourteen thousands of them existed, with a student population of over four hundred thousand (NewBurn, 1939). In the 1950s and 1960s 15%- 20% of students in England and Wales attended grammar schools (Tomlinson, 1991). Grammar schools were regarded as escape route for working class boys and girls. They were designed for intellectual, gifted and talented students and therefore provided a pathway for universities and the profession. They are only available to an exceptionally able minority (NewBurn, 1939). Grammar schools are regarded as ‘agent through which the socially under-privileged are enabled to compete successfully with their public school counterpart in securing university places and entering the profession’ (Yates, 1971).

Mathews (2009) views grammar schools as top performing schools that challenge the average students. Tomlinson (2008) views grammar schools as superior schools for high ability students, designed for talented and gifted students. Coldron et al. (2010) highlights key characteristics of the grammar schools system which include symbolic prestige, advantageous intake and relatively good examination results. There are only 164 grammar schools in England as a result of the 1970s reforms in England and Wales (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011; Coldron et al. 2010; Paton, 2009a).

In the United Kingdom, before the 1960s a tripartite system of education existed, consisting of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools (Galindo-Ruendo and Vignoles, 2005; Yates, 1971). Grammar schools were academically oriented secondary schools which catered for the top of the ability range and admission was based on ability test at age 11 and socio- economic factors (Galindo- Ruendo and Vignoles, 2005). Grammar school students in the most of the cases acquired ordinary ‘O’ level at age 16 and advanced ‘A’ level at age 18 and were most likely to go to higher education (Galindo-Ruendo and Vignoles, 2005). Secondary modern on the other hand provided what was considered to be a lower level academic education for those who would not get into grammar schools (Galindo-Ruendo and Vignoles, 2005). Students in secondary modern schools either left the education system at 16 with few or no qualifications or acquired a set of certificates of secondary education or GCSE at age 16. Technical school were designed to prepare pupils for entrance as a prentices in Engineering and building trades and in 1937 there were only thirty thousand of such pupils (NewBurn, 1939). NewBurn (1939) further reports that a few who successfully completed the apprenticeship programme joined senior technical schools and technical colleges but a majority of them entered the industry at sixteen and continued their education. However, in the Mid 1960s policies were introduced that encouraged local education authorities (LEA) to set up mixed ability comprehensive schools and consequently secondary

modern changed to comprehensive secondary schools. But comprehensive secondary schools could neither accommodate students up to the age of 18 nor attract most able students resulting in number of them joining neighbouring grammar schools (Galindo-Ruendo and Vignoles, 2005).

The current Grammar school system cater for 4 per cent of the secondary population and still remain highly controversial (Manning and Pischke, 2006) but still popular among parents. Further review of literature suggest that competition for places in grammar schools is more intense than ever before due to factors such as recession which may lead to redundancy while children are still in private education system and parents wanting their children to get to a good university and a good profession (Henry, 2011a).

In the pursue of grammar school education some parents tend to enter their children multiple entrance tests so as to increase their chances of getting into a grammar school. The practice of multiple entrance tests is attributable to lack of uniformity in grammar school admissions across the country (Henry, 2011a). Multiple entrance tests also suggest that parents are willing to relocate in order to have their children in a grammar school. Among the ethnic minorities, Indians and Chinese have far higher number of children in grammar schools compared to their proportion (Henry, 2011a). For instance, Queen Elizabeth boys' grammar school in Barnet, North London, one of the most over-subscribed, the country's top performing schools and which sends pupils to Oxford and Cambridge universities than any other state school, 16 per cent of children are white, 32 per cent are Indians and 9 per cent are Chinese. Only about 8.6 per cent of the population is Indians and 2 per cent are Chinese (Henry, 2011a). Further review reveal that about half of the children who pass grammar entrance examination are turned away due to lack of enough places available (Henry, 2011b; Paton, 2009b). New government admission rules have given grammar schools green light to expand but they are limited by resource constraint, for instance, one head teacher said '... without capital funding they do not have space to take more'. Unfortunately the government is not willing to support their expansion (Henry, 2011b).

Evidence suggests a significant increase in the number of parents preparing their children for the entrance examination (11- plus) and also children starting as earlier as year 3 or 4 year (Paton, 2012a). Paton (2012a) further reports that children at young age are put under too much pressure. Also pupils are required to score as much as 99.5 per cent (Paton 2012b; Paton, 2011). However, one head teacher observed that (Paton, 2012a): 'Increasing entry requirement were not reflective of more intelligent pupils or rising number of application, ... many children were simply being tutored to pass'. (Paton, 2012a). It has also been observed that those who are most tutored struggle significantly when they join grammar schools (Paton, 2012a):

*' ... at the end of the first when children are put into streams and sets those children who prepared least for the examination will end up in the higher sets and the ones who were spoon-fed for years end up in lower set'.*

Some long term effects linked to failing grammar entrance examination have been reported (Paton 2012b). For instance, 36 per cent of those who failed the 11 –plus said that they still 'lacked confidence to undertake further education and training courses', 13 per cent said that the experience 'put them off learning for life', while some 40 per cent of adults still carried 'negative feelings with them into fifties, sixties and beyond'(Paton, 2012b).

### **Public exam schools in the United States**

Public exam schools are prominent around the world for two main reasons: their excellent academic reputation and educating many of the world's most gifted students, as well

as the social and intellectual elite of the American society (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011; Gaztambode-Fernández, 2009). Along list of prominent exam school alumni attest to their prominence, for instance, United States representatives, Olympic medallist, Oscar nominee and Nobel Laureates, among others (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011). However, Dobbie and Fryer (2011) argue that it is possible that the aforementioned alumni were successful not necessary because they went through the public exam school system but because they were highly gifted and motivated teenagers who would have succeeded in any school. Studies have also shown that exam schools affect both high and low ability students similarly and in particular end of school test scores as evidenced from a study in Mexico City (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011). Public exam or elite schools are considered highly selective and privileged institutions (Gaztambode-Fernández, 2009). They are few in number but they have played a significant role in the history of the American upper class and continue to exert their influence on the social, intellectual, political and economic elite of the United States (Gaztambode- Fernández, 2009). Baltzell (1958) as cited in Gaztambode- Fernández, 2009) strongly associates them with formation of upper class of the United States. Gaztambode- Fernández (2009) asserts that the 'role of elite school is to reproduce an elite class'. Some key features of the elite boarding schools include expansive curriculum, wide-range of courses offered and small class sizes. Also students have particular qualities, attitudes, skills and both willingness and eagerness to learn (Gaztambode- Fernández, 2009). The schools also offer opportunities in the areas of athletics and extracurricular activities (Gaztambode-Fernández, 2009).

Gaztambode-Fernández, (2009) identifies four key features of the elite boarding schools curricular: the academic, the athletics, the artistic and the extracurricular. Together with public exam schools system, United States also operates comprehensive school systems for mixed ability students (Manning and Pischke, 2006). The benefits of the Public Exam schools to the marginalised students is based on three theories:- In Exam schools there are fewer 'bad apples' that exert negative influence on higher achieving students'; Exam schools have more rigor and they are likely to have more resources relative to traditional schools (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011).

### **Elite school systems in Singapore**

According to Barr (2006) as cited in Sim (2012), 'Singapore is a community managed by a culture of elite governance'. The top administrative and political leadership positions are filled mainly by top performers from the country's competitive education system (Sim, 2012). The pool of elite public servants is created and sustained by the elite schools systems, gifted education programme (Barr and Skrbiš, 2010; Chan, 2008). The small elite group have played a key role in terms of influencing and shaping policies related to nation- building projects (Barr and Skrbiš (2010). However, Brannelly et al. (2011) associates elite leadership with high level of inequality and a lack of accountability. Admission to gifted education programme is strictly based on merit (Chan, 2008) and the programme provides training to the top 1 per cent of students aged 9 to 16 (Nee, 2004). Getting into the gifted programme or elite school systems depends on getting into the right or good primary school (Ee, 2011). Ee (2011) calls them 'Big brand' primary schools. Ee (2011) adds that good primary schools are connected to good secondary schools, which translates as follows:

*Get your child into the right primary school and hopefully that will mean better performance at key exams, especially the dreaded primary school leaving examination (PLSE), this leads into the right junior college or polytechnics and that in turn to the right university, the top job, the right career and therefore eternal 'success' and happiness (Ee, 2011).*

Better schools are believed to have the best teachers and resources (Ee, 2011). Getting into a good primary is very competitive and requires parents to get on the priority list and hopefully past the competition. Some parents do certain things in order to get on the priority list which include volunteering with the school, which means giving 40 hours of work to the school, moving and buying a house proximate to a good or top schools and also politicking into the school boards (Ee, 2011; Gee, 2012). Besides, some parents, for instance, the Chinese families who are regarded as higher social economic group in Singapore, provide private tuition to their children as a supplementary learning aid (Barr and Skrbiš, 2010). As a result the Chinese have consistently over-performed minorities (Barr and Skrbiš, 2010). Evidence suggests that Singapore spends significant resources on the few talented individuals in order to both sustain the culture of elite governance and enable the country to maintain its economic position in the region. Lee Kuan Yew argues that (Manzy and Milne, 2002 as cited in Sim, 2012):

*For those who are more than ordinarily endowed physically and mentally and in whom we must expend our limited and slender resources in order that they provide that yeast, that ferment, that catalyst in our society which alone will ensure that Singapore shall maintain its pre-eminent place in South and South East Asia.*

Talented people are identified and/or selected through a process of meritocracy and then developed (Barr, 2006 as cited in Sim, 2012): 'Identify the 'talented' in schools, pump all your resources into nurturing them, exploring their minds to an ever-steeper hierarchy of challenges and then select the best'. However, there has been a call for a new elitism focusing on innovativeness and creative entrepreneurial (Wei et al., 2008). Nee (2004) calls it a move from professionalism to creative and entrepreneurial skills. Former prime minister, Lee Kwan Yew argues in favour of change in the focus of elite education and development saying that 'too many Singapore's able were professional when the country actually needed more business people' (Nee, 2004). He further observes that 'citizens with creative ideas and entrepreneurial abilities are more important' (Nee, 2004). Similarly, Wei et al. (2008) argue that: 'Value-creating actors that are driven largely by innovation and entrepreneurial exploitation of knowledge are therefore vital for Singapore's future economic successes. However, resentments have been expressed against elite education; for instance, Nee (2004) notes that:

*There is also a particular brand of Singapore elite arrogance creeping in. Some civil servants behave like they have a mandate from the emperor. We think we are little Lee Kuan Yews (without earning our spurs)."*

Chan (2008) also argues that gifted education programme creates the mentality of 'us and them'. Chan (2008) further argues that: 'it is wrong that the elite minority from wealthier households is more likely to receive value-added education at the expense of vast amounts of public funds in our education system'.

## **Study Area**

Nyamira is one of the 47 counties in Kenya. The number of counties is based on the number of districts created under the provinces and Districts Act of 1992. The county constitutes the second level governance after the national one. Therefore counties of Kenya are geographical units for devolved government based on the 2010 constitution of Kenya (Onderi and Makori, 2013). Nyamira County is located in Nyanza province and is made up of three districts, namely, Manga, Nyamira and Borabu (Kenya Open Data Project, 2011). According to the new constitution (2010) county government are to replace the provincial and local government administration system which has been existence since independence

(Omari, 2011; Onderi and Makori, 2013). Nyamira district, part of Nyamira County has been noted for its poor performance in mathematics (Yara and Wanjohi, 2011). Yara and Wanjohi (2011) observe that a student's performance in mathematics is underpinned by the type of school he or she attends, because some schools have qualified and experienced mathematics teachers and good learning environment than others, and this could be true for other subjects as well. However, literature on form one selection in the County is limited. There are 143 secondary schools in Nyamira County with a total student population of 49,800. Literature is also scanty on the number of national, county and district schools in the County.

## **Methodology**

The study reported in this article was conducted to increase knowledge and understanding about the complex nature of the challenges that confront school principals as they execute their roles and responsibilities. The focus is on form one selection policy. The data will contribute to building a knowledge base for understanding the nature of the challenges linked to form one selection in a hierarchically differentiated education system. The study involved eighty one secondary schools which were purposively sampled from which eighty one principals were obtained for the study. Initially one hundred schools were sampled and contacted but in the end only eighty one responded representing a response rate of 81%.

Data was collected from eighty one principals. Prior to data collection, the researchers sampled and contacted school heads and invited them through a letter to take part in the study. In the letter the researchers introduced themselves, described the purpose of the study, explained what the participants were expected to do, indicated that they had a choice to opt out of the study at any time without any negative consequences on their part, assured them confidentiality and therefore undertook to keep their personal details strictly confidential and use them only for the purpose of research. At the end of the letter, participants were requested to sign a declaration of informed consent form in which they confirmed their understanding of the content of the letter, the purpose and nature of study and their voluntary participation in the same, explaining what was expected of them. Questionnaires were delivered to one hundred principals but only eighty one completed questionnaires were returned. The study is a mixed method approach involving quantitative and qualitative design and employed a survey technique to collect data. Questionnaires were used as the main tool for collecting data. Questionnaire format consisted of closed, open-ended and rating scale items. This was necessary to diversify responses as well as reduces what Watson and Coombes (2009) in Onderi and Makori (2012) call 'question fatigue'. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic or background information including gender, years in headship, headship, school size, school setting whether rural or urban, whether mixed or single sex, denominational orientation, relationship with PTA and BOG and secondary school tier whether national, provincial or district. The open-ended section offered the respondents an opportunity to make a comment, expand or clarify some information on their responses and thus help the researchers gain some insight in their perspectives on challenges affecting their roles and responsibilities in educational institutions. The open-ended comments or responses yielded qualitative data which was analysed into emerging themes. The resulting quantitative data was analysed using the statistical package for social science (SPSS) for obtaining descriptive data.

## **Results**

### *Participants' characteristics*

The participants were mainly secondary school principals and were 81 in number. Seventy per cent (70%, n=81) of them were males while thirty per cent (30%, n=81) were

females. This perhaps suggests something about females' representation in the educational leadership or decisions making positions. Just fewer than two-fifths (37%, n=81) had been in principalship position for less than five years, a third between five and ten years and another a third over ten years. Combining those that had between five and ten years of headship experience and those that had over ten years gives sixty three per cent, thus suggesting that a significant number of principals had substantial leadership and/or management experience in secondary school. Just over forty per cent (42%, n=81) were in their first headship, just fewer than forty per cent (38%, n=81) in their second headship and just over ten per cent (12%, n=81) in their third headship. So combining those who were in their second headship, those in their third headship and those beyond third headship gives fifty eight per cent, suggesting further that over half of them had significant experience of working in more than one secondary school.

Just over forty per cent (42%, n=81) worked in small secondary schools, just over forty per cent (43%, n=81) in medium school, just over ten per cent (11%, n=81) in large school and just fewer than five per cent (4%, n=81) in mega secondary school. Just over eighty per cent (83%, n=81) worked in secondary schools which were located in rural settings. Just fewer than ninety per cent (89%, n=89) worked in public schools. Just fewer than seventy per cent (68%, n=81) worked in a faith or church related schools. Just over sixty per cent (64%, n=81) of the schools were district schools, just fewer than thirty per cent (27%, n=81) were provincial and just fewer than ten per cent (9%, n=81) were national schools.

### Form one selection

Five related questions were posed to the participants:

- Are you satisfied with the way form ones are selected?
- Does the school have a form one selection policy?
- Is the policy effective?
- Does the school have a set minimum entry point in relation to form one selection?
- Are there serious issues linked to form one selection?

Analyses of the responses to the above questions are illustrated on Table 1 below:

**Table 1: showing analysis of Form One selection policy**

Items	Yes(%, n=81)	No(%,n=81)
Are satisfied with the way form ones are selected?	82	18
Does the school have a form one selection policy?	61	39
Is the policy effective?	61	39
Does the school have a set minimum entry point in relation to form one selection?	73	27
Are there serious issues linked to form one selection?	57	43

The table 1 above shows that just over eighty per cent indicated that they were satisfied with Form One selection, just over sixty per cent indicated that the school has form one selection policy, just over sixty per cent described the policy as effective, just over seventy per cent indicated that the school has a set minimum entry point in relation to form one selection and just fewer than sixty per cent indicated that there were no serious issues linked to form one selection. However, just over forty per cent indicated that there were serious issues related to form one selection. Those who indicated that there were serious problems associated with form one selection process were asked to comment on the nature of the problems. Further analysis of their comments resulted in the following four themes illustrated in Table 2 below. Each theme is then briefly discussed; a few quotations have been selected for illustrations.

**Table 2: Four emerging themes demonstrating challenges facing form one selection policy**

Themes	%(n=33)
District schools face steep challenges from national and county schools	33.3
District schools face competition from schools in the neighbourhood	15.2
The community exerting pressure in the form one selection process	21.2
Form selection and issues of none reporting of some students	30.3
Total	100

*District schools faces steep competition from national and county (former provincial) schools.*

Evidences from the study findings demonstrate that district schools face steep competitions from national and county schools as a result they fail to obtain a sufficient number of qualified form one students (students with minimum entry requirements) because they select their students last, after national schools and county schools have had their share or turn. National schools and county schools select top performing students leaving bottom performing ones to the district schools. Consequently district schools end up with students who are considered low academic performers or what has been rightly described as academic leftovers or simply poor students. This is based on eleven comments; three statements below have been selected for the purpose of illustration:

- ‘Since the school is a district school most students enrolled are those who have been left out who did their Standard eight poorly. Also students whose guardians/parents are poor’;
- ‘The best students are selected to join national and provincial schools. District school are left to pick from leftovers of students who have performed poorly’;
- ‘Most KCPE graduates with good marks go or are admitted to county or national schools leaving us with low marks graduates i.e. 200 marks. District schools compete for low entry KCPE achievers’;

Competition from other schools in the neighbourhood also affects the quality of students joining district schools

Competition for form one students among schools in the same neighbourhood often results in some schools admitting the lowest academic achievers because of the need for numbers associated with fee day secondary education funding (capitation grant). Also some of the students admitted to district schools are those from poor backgrounds who lack necessary resources. This is based on five comments; for the purpose of illustration three of them have been selected:

- ‘Free secondary education has allowed 70 per cent transition to secondary, thus affecting the form one intake marks in the district schools. Mushrooming of schools has reduced the intake marks due to demand for numbers. Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) funding has raised competition for learners’;
- ‘The school entirely relies on the neighbouring community with a lot of competitions from the many schools within a small radius’;
- ‘Schools of class/level always get poor students- those who have failed in their Standard 8. Most students come from poor backgrounds. Most students lack basic needs for their smooth running’;

The community exerting pressure in the form one selection process

The study findings indicate that some parents and especially those local to the school have been noted to interfere with form one selection process by exerting unnecessary pressure on the schools to admit their children regardless of their standard eight examinations (KCPE)

performance. There are also issues of nepotism linked to form one selection. This is based on ten comments made by respondents; four statements have been selected for illustration:

- ‘Community members come round wanting their children to be admitted even with very low marks citing justification of being the daughter of the soil’;
  - ‘The community wants their children accepted irrespective of their (students) qualifications. Getting the right students not easy because of poor teaching- learning environment. Lack of many essential facilities’;
  - ‘Though both the minimum entry is there and form one selection policy is there the community demands entry of their children without strings attached’;
  - ‘Clanism within the community, poor performance from primary schools’;
- Form one selection and issues of none reporting of some students.

Evidence suggests that some students once they have been selected to district secondary schools fail to turn up. This has been attributed to factors such as community attitude, school not known because it is a new school and also some parents do not like mixed schools. Some schools situated in rural areas experience communication challenges and this discourages a number of students and parents from selecting such schools. Consequently schools end up opening doors even to those who have under-performed in the KCPE examination. This is based on seven comments made by respondents; four statements have been selected for illustration:

- ‘Students selected do not report to school. Mixed schools are not liked by parents’.
- ‘Attitude of community. School situation in rural setup with communication challenges’;
- ‘Very few selected Form one students report hence the school opens the door to all breaching the admission policy’;
- ‘The school has just started therefore not well known’;

## **Discussion**

This study set out to investigate form one selection policy and its implications. It is evident that while between 3/5 and 4/5 of the respondents were very positive about various aspects of the policy 2/5 were not (see Table 1). For instance, respondents were asked if the form one selection policy was effective, 3/5 of them indicated to the affirmative. They were also asked if there were any serious issues linked to form one selection, just fewer than 3/5 indicated to the affirmative that there were no serious issues linked to form one selection. However, just over 2/5 who indicated that there were serious problems associated with the current form one selection policy had an opportunity through the open-ended section of the questionnaire to make comments. Analysis of the comments revealed four serious challenges facing the policy (see Table 2). Firstly, district schools face serious competition from national and county secondary schools. In the form one selection process, national schools are given the first opportunity to select top performing students from the whole country. Then the county schools are given second opportunity to select top performing students from schools within the county. District schools come last and select from what can be described as ‘leftovers’. The current policy favours national and county schools. Perhaps the only way a district secondary school can admit a top performing student is when a student who has been selected to a national or county school cannot afford the fees charged by such schools. This is likely if the students come from a poor economic background.

Selection to national schools is similar to selection to elite schools in Singapore, grammar schools in England and public exam schools in the United States. Selection to such school is very competitive and consists mainly of entrance examinations (Chan, 2008; Glennerster et al., 2011). It is also important to mention that national schools in Kenya like

elite schools elsewhere are considered elite with better teaching and learning resources, better teachers, better financial support, high achieving peers, more advanced and rigorous course work and high expectations, compared to county and district schools (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2008). However, serious controversy surrounds the elite education provision. Critics argue against the existence of elite schools observing that huge amount of national resources are spent on a small portion of individuals some of whom at the end turn out to be arrogant. Critics also argue that elite school systems promote inequality and segregation in the society.

Secondly, district schools face competition from other schools within the same neighbourhood. Such an environment forces other schools to admit students with below average performance for the purpose of numbers. In the free secondary education regime, the higher the numbers of students, the higher the overall capitation grant. So in this case, student numbers drive district schools to admit under-performing students.

Thirdly, the study also identified a challenge associated with community exerting unnecessary pressure on district schools to admit their children regardless how they have performed in standard eight (KCPE) examinations. There are also issues of nepotism associated with form one selection. Such community practices frustrate the efforts of the schools in improving the quality and standard of education provision in district schools.

Fourthly, issues of none reporting of some selected students. The study revealed that students once admitted to some district schools fail to turn up for a number of reasons, for instance:

- Community negative attitude towards district schools;
- Some of the district schools are new and therefore not well known to parents and students;
- Some district schools are situated in remote/rural setting where communication poses a serious challenge.

Consequently a number of district schools end-up opening doors even to those who have under-performed in the KCPE examinations. The result is that such schools continue to perform poorly in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE). In that way the vicious cycle of poor examination performance is perpetuated.

## **Conclusion**

Education provisions in various countries around the world consist of a small portion (1- 4 per cent) of elite schools and a large portion of non-elite schools. Elite schools are considered institutions for bright and/or intelligent students. They are institutions for high achieving students. In Kenya, for instance, there are national schools, in England, the grammar schools, in Singapore, the elite schools through the gifted education programme, while in the United States, the public exam schools, just to mention a few. Selection into elite schools is very competitive and consists mainly of entrance examinations. In general terms elite schools have better resources, better teachers, better financial support, high achieving peers, more advanced and rigorous course work and high expectations, compared to other schools.

The study findings indicate that the current form one selection policy works against district schools in the county in several ways. Priorities given to national and county schools in the selection of form ones disadvantages district schools and promotes serious inequalities among schools in the provision of quality education to all children of the nation.

## **Recommendations**

The study makes two recommendations,:

Firstly, the government of Kenya need to invest more in district schools so as to improve teaching and learning resources so that those high performing students who fail to join national schools or county schools due to financial limitations (fees) are not disadvantaged by poor teaching and learning environment in most district schools.

Secondly, a country- wide study is necessary to determine the extent and impact of form one selection policy

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