Original Research Article

Examining School Quality Assurance Criteria for Enhancing Learning Achievements in public primary schools in Arusha Region, Tanzania

ABSTRACT

This study examined School Quality Assurance (SQA) criteria for enhancing learning achievements in Public Primary Schools (PPSs) in the Arusha region, Tanzania, adopting a concurrent research design under a mixed methodology approach. Researchers used semi-structured interviews and closed and open-ended questionnaires for data collection from 226 respondents. Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic approach, and quantitative data via descriptive and ordinal regression statistics. The study revealed that unawareness, poor understanding, inadequate utilization, infeasibility, and inflexibility of the SQA criteria harmed learning achievements. The lack of familiarity stemmed from insufficient training and limited accessibility of SQA handbooks among School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs) and teachers, resulting in the ineffective implementation of SQA criteria during school assessments. The infeasible and inflexible nature of the criteria failed to address the unique challenges faced by each school. The study found a significant positive relationship between awareness, effective utilization, feasibility, flexibility and sharing of SQA criteria, along with the SQAOs' judgments and learning achievements, as their probability values were less than .05. The study recommended in-service training programs on SQA criteria to equip SQAOs, headteachers, and teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge for effectively implementing SQA criteria in the school assessments to enhance learning achievements.

Keywords: School quality assurance criteria, public primary schools, learning achievements

1. INTRODUCTION

School Quality Assurance (SQA), often used interchangeably with terms like school inspection and supervision, has been a longstanding priority for improving and maintaining educational standards worldwide through monitoring, evaluating, advising and supporting teaching and learning activities [1-2]. The SQA has evolved and adapted across different countries and regions over time; for example, France first implemented SQA during Napoleon's regime in the late 18th century [3]. Germany initiated it as early as 1801 [4]. In England, SQA started in 1839 under the guidance of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector and later transitioned to the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED) [3]. Sweden established SQA in 1860 and reintroduced it in 2003 [5-6]. The SQA activities continued to develop in size and scope in other European countries and were eventually implemented in their colonies.

In Africa, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, SQA gained prominence after achieving independence and establishing formal education systems. Kenya and Uganda have a history of SQA dating back to the 1920s during British colonial rule. Nigeria established the Federal Inspectorate of Education in 1973, and Papua New Guinea introduced it in the 1800s ([7-9]. Each country has its own set of criteria for SQA practices. While SQA criteria may vary, some common elements include infrastructure quality, management effectiveness, quality teaching, learners' achievements, and participation in co-curricular activities [10].

In Tanzania, the SQA has evolved from its historical background rooted in school inspection, spanning different colonial periods. The development of the SQA underwent five distinct periods, namely German colonial rule from 1903 to 1919, British colonial rule from 1919 to 1925 and 1925 to 1961, the post-independence era starting in 1961 to 1978 and 2016 to present, with a focus on supporting teachers' responsibilities [11]. Initially, school inspectors, now referred to as SQAOs, played a crucial role in overseeing schools, exerting control over teachers, monitoring teachers' attendance, commitment and performance, and ensuring the curriculum aligned with the objectives of the colonial administration [12, 13,16].

After gaining independence in 1961, Tanzania implemented several Plans, Laws, and Acts to continue supporting school improvements. It legally established the School Inspectorate Department under the Education Act No. 25 of 1978 [13]. This legal framework mandated SQAOs to visit all schools. While there were changes over time, the responsibilities of SQAOs in this post-independence era slightly resembled those of the colonial periods, encompassing tasks such as overseeing curriculum delivery, controlling teachers, ensuring compliance with education policies, laws, and regulations, recommending necessary improvement, and providing reports to school managers and relevant authorities for action, and ensuring children's attainment of educational goals [13,16]. Among the core goals of Primary Education (PE) in Tanzania is to enable pupils to achieve basic skills in Reading, Writing, and simple Arithmetic (3Rs) (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [14].

Like in other nations, the SQAOs in Tanzania followed the SQA criteria during school assessments rooted in the colonial legacy, including academic achievement, teaching quality, teacher commitment, punctuality, and school premises to judge the effectiveness of schools. However, these criteria were often impractical and overlooked the local context. Again, SQAOs and teachers had limited knowledge about these criteria and their operational mechanisms. Also, SQAOs' deficient supervision skills resulted in a commanding rather than coaching approach, affecting the effective implementation of SQA criteria [15,16]. This impracticality and unfamiliarity hindered accurate assessments, impacting teaching and learning achievements.

In 2016, Tanzania embarked on a reform aimed at addressing the limitations of traditional school inspection and ensuring that education aligned with the needs and realities of the country. This reform established the SQA department, which introduced modifications to the SQA criteria. The revised criteria now encompassed learners' achievements, quality teaching, curriculum, the school leadership environment and community engagement [17,18]. These changes aimed to achieve transparent evaluation covering multiple dimensions of educational quality and driving improvements in the education system. To implement the revised criteria effectively, the department emphasized collegiality and involved headteachers and Ward Educational Officers (WEOs) [17]. Collegiality in this study refers to a cooperative and collaborative working relationship among teachers and SQAOs.

Tanzania has undergone other significant policy changes and reforms in its quest to improve the quality of education, with a particular focus on PE. These reforms were motivated by the goal of achieving Education for All targets and the Millennium Development Goals, the Big Results Now initiatives, which emphasised compulsory PE and ensuring high-quality learning achievements for all pupils [19].

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the government's initiatives, the achievement of quality learning in some PPSs in Tanzania remains unsatisfactory. Pupils continue to experience low learning achievements, as evidenced by their consistently low performance in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) [20]. Previous studies indicate that some pupils complete PE without

attaining the fundamental learning skills in the 3Rs. NECTA's assessment shows a drop in arithmetic achievement from 82.3% (2015) to 77% (2017), and the pass rate declined from 12.6% (2015) to 11.0% (2017) [14]. UNICEF (2018), cited in [21], found that 28% of standard seven leavers lacked 3Rs. According to Uwezo [22], approximately 30% of individuals lacked 3Rs in 2017. The illiteracy rates were alarmingly high, ranging from 53% in 2012 to 73% in 2013 [23]. According to reports on the 3Rs, the Arusha region had 344, 334, 165, and 194 pupils with insufficient proficiency in the 3Rs in 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2018, respectively.

Earlier studies by Charles and Sebastian [24, 25] on the influence of SQA on academic performance provided limited insights into the reasons behind low learning achievements in some PPSs. These studies primarily focused on urban areas and overlooked poor-performing schools in rural areas. They also lacked comprehensive information on the criteria employed by SQAOs in the school assessment. Considering the scarcity of details on the SQA criteria, coupled with persistently poor learning achievements and low performance in the PSLE in PPSs, there is a need to examine SQA criteria for enhancing learning achievements in PPSs in Arusha region, Tanzania. This study, therefore, sought to answer this research question: how do SQA criteria enhance learning achievements in PPSs in Arusha region, Tanzania?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Quality and Quality Assurance

Understanding SQA requires a clear grasp of the concept of quality itself. Elassy [26] has pinpointed five categories that define quality, which is pertinent to quality assurance, including quality as value for money, fitness for purpose, transformation, excellence, and perfection. Value for money aims to maximize the benefit from investments by ensuring accountability, effectiveness, and achieving desired outputs; fitness for purpose means meeting the intended goals and objectives effectively and efficiently; transformation empowers individuals with new knowledge and skills to adapt to their environment; excellence focuses on high-quality outputs; and exceptionalism emphasizes perfection and adherence to set standards.

Diverse perspectives from scholars shape our understanding of SQA, providing different interpretations of its meaning. Kisanga [27] defines SQA as the set of actions, policies, procedures, and practices designed to maintain and improve teaching activities, which ensures high-quality learning achievements. Komba [28] highlights that SQA encompasses effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability in education performance. Richards [29] describes SQA as observing school operations, evaluating resources and facilities, making judgments about their value and providing feedback to ensure the attainment of high-level standards in education. Based on these perspectives, this study defines SQA as the ongoing and comprehensive efforts to evaluate school inputs (teachers, pupils, facilities, and curriculum), monitor transformation processes (teaching and learning activities), and assess outputs (learning achievements).

2.2 School Quality Assurance Criteria

For effective SQA practices, it is crucial to have criteria for judgment that are clear and known to both SQAOs and teachers. In the reviewed literature, authors such as Kosia and Okendo [30] define criteria as guidelines utilized by SQAOs to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of school services, resources, facilities and achievements. Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea [31] describe the term criteria as benchmarks, Santiago, McGregor, Nusche, Ravela, and Toledo [32] refer to them as aspects or standards and MoEST [17] as

domains. These criteria play a critical role in enhancing the consistency and transparency of the SQA process. They serve as a clear guide for SQAOs, enabling them to understand what aspects to consider and the specific advice to provide when evaluating schools [17]. In Tanzania, these criteria are detailed in the SQA handbook. This study employed these definitions to facilitate understanding.

The 2017 SQA handbook in Tanzania outlines six criteria or domains for SQAOs to follow during school assessments. These criteria encompass various aspects, including learners' achievement, the quality of teaching, the alignment of the curriculum with learners' needs, the effectiveness of school management, the impact of the school environment and community engagement [17, 18].

The achievement of learners: under the criterion, SQAOs in primary schools assess the academic progress of pupils by collecting evidence on their proficiency in the 3Rs, along with accomplishments of class work, assignments, quizzes by pupils, the interaction of pupils during the lesson and overall alignment with the school's educational goals and objectives.

The quality of teaching: within this criterion, SQAOs evaluate the competence of teachers in delivering the curriculum and facilitating the acquisition of the 3Rs. This evaluation encompasses aspects such as the utilization of learner-centred approaches, adherence to the scheme of work, the effectiveness of lesson plans, and the availability and effectiveness of teaching aids and materials. The evaluation process includes offering suggestions to enhance teaching methods, techniques, and materials, aiming to improve the overall quality of education within the school.

Curriculum: within this criterion, SQAOs assess the accessibility and effectiveness of the curriculum in meeting the diverse needs and abilities of pupils. Also, they observe the inclusivity and relevance of extracurricular activities offered by the school. These evaluations aid in identifying areas for potential improvements in the curriculum to better cater to the needs of pupils.

Leadership and management: under this aspect, SQAOs evaluate the ability of school leadership and management by assessing their collaborative efforts in utilizing available resources for school improvement. This evaluation encompasses their accountability, creativity, and effectiveness in achieving desired learning.

The school environment: in this aspect, the SQAOs observe the extent to which physical surroundings, including classrooms, libraries, sports facilities and playgrounds, support teaching and learning. They also assess transportation services, cleanliness, maintenance, accessibility, hygiene practices, safety measures, technology resources and the overall comfort of the environment for learning and teaching.

Community engagement: in this benchmark, SQAOs assess the level of active involvement and communication between the school and the community. They evaluate the effectiveness of shared responsibilities and partnerships in creating a supportive learning environment. They gauge the frequency of meetings between teachers, parents, and community members to improve teaching and learning activities.

Despite the intended goals of SQA criteria to ensure transparency and consistency in the SQA process, some studies have highlighted challenges related to availability, understanding, awareness, utilization, flexibility and feasibility. For example, [33] in Ethiopia revealed that many SQAOs conducted SQA practices without official guidelines, leading to varying interpretations and inconsistent school evaluations. According to Haule's [15]

research in Tanzania, a lack of sufficient training and limited accessibility to the SQA handbook resulted in a lack of awareness and understanding of SQA criteria among SQAOs and teachers. Chidobi and Eze Thecla [34] in Nigeria echoed the findings of [15]. Mathews [35], in Irish post-primary schools, discovered that SQA criteria were perceived as inflexible and failed to consider the unique context of schools. Similarly, {36] study revealed that the SQAOs in Irish post-primary schools prioritized checklist items instead of assessing the broader aspects of the school environment, such as culture, climate, and overall effectiveness. This narrow focus led to a lack of holistic evaluation, causing dissatisfaction among school teachers.

2.3 Clinical Supervision Model

The study utilizes the clinical supervision model (CSM) as a theoretical framework, as modified by Bencherab and Al Maskari [37] and Glanz [38]. The CSM guides SQAOs in supporting quality teaching aligned with the SQA criteria. The model encourages open communication, mutual respect, and the exchange of ideas between SQAOs and teachers within authentic teaching settings. It promotes a sense of collegiality and a shared commitment to improving teaching and learning. By observing and interacting with teachers, SQAOs using this model can help align instructional practices with the SQA criteria. Applying CSM principles enables SQAOs to effectively utilize and promote teachers' appreciation of SQA criteria, enhancing learning achievements in PPSs.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

The framework, built on insights from literature reviews, incorporated different variables to streamline data collection, analysis, and presentation. It operates on the premise that SQA criteria enhance learning achievements through mediator variables. When SQAOs understand and utilize SQA criteria, alongside fair judgments, it promotes commitment to teaching and learning, builds trust, and fosters positive attitudes toward SQA among teachers. Feasible and flexible SQA criteria further enhance teachers' appreciation and improve learning achievements in PPSs (Figure 1).

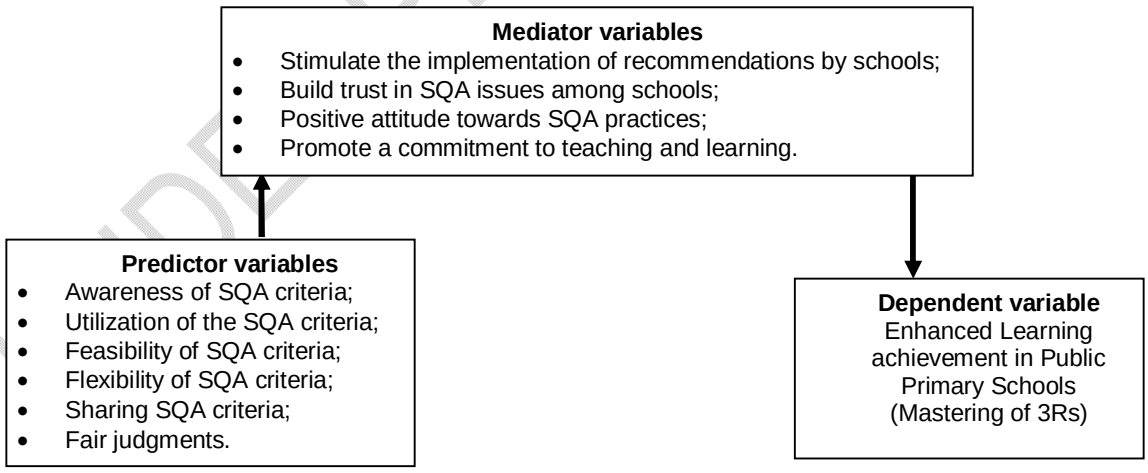

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Source: Researcher's insight (2020)

Figure 1 illustrates how independent and mediator variables interact to improve learning achievements. This study sought to answer one research question: How do SQA criteria enhance learning achievements in PPSs in Arusha region?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The study employed a concurrent research design within a mixed methods approach to examine the contribution of SQA criteria to learning achievements. The design allowed for the simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data through interviews and questionnaires. By giving equal consideration to the two types of data, the study achieved cross-validated findings, leading to valuable insights and a comprehensive understanding of the research topic [39].

3.2 Population and Sampling

Researchers used purposive sampling to select Karatu and Longido districts with 155 PPSs, randomly choosing 15 schools (10%) based on the academic performance criterion. The study encompassed a population of 1,605 individuals, which consisted of 206 classroom teachers, 1,353 pupils, 12 headteachers, 12 academic teachers, 12 DSQAOs, 2 District Chief School Quality Assurance Officers (DCSQAOs), and 2 District Educational Officers (DEOs). The study used a sample size of 226 participants, which comprised 135 pupils (10%), 45 classroom teachers (22%) for questionnaires, and 15 headteachers, 15 academic teachers, 12 DSQAOs, 2 DCSQAOs, and 2 DEOs for interviews. The sample size was determined using a combination of purposive, simple random, and stratified sampling techniques based on recommendations from various researchers. For instance, Arikunto [40] suggests a sample size of 10%-25% for populations exceeding 100 people, and Nworgu [41] advises a sample size of 10%-80% for generalizing findings. In qualitative research, recommended sample sizes range from 10 to 60 participants. For example, Daher [42] proposes 60 participants, Chitac [43] suggests 49, and Hagaman and Wutich [44] suggest 20-40 participants. Interviews involved purposefully selected individuals.

Table 1: Summary of sample size and sampling techniques

Category	Population	Percentage (%)	Sample size	Sampling technique	Instruments
Schools	155	10	-	Purposive & Simple random	-
HT	15	-	15	Purposive	Interviews
AT	15	-	15	Purposive	Interviews
DCSQAOs	02	-	02	Purposive	Interviews
DEOs	02	-	02	Purposive	Interviews
DSQAOs	12	-	12	Purposive	Interviews & questionnaires
CT	206	22	45	Stratified & Simple random	Questionnaires
Pupils	1353	10	135	Stratified & Simple random	Questionnaires
Total	**1605**		**226**		

Source: Researchers' sample identification, 2020
Key: Headteachers (HT), Academic teachers (AT), Classroom Teachers (CT)

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

This study employed semi-structured interviews and a mix of closed and open-ended questionnaires for data collection. While interviews and open-ended questionnaires captured qualitative data, closed-ended questionnaires collected quantitative data. Researchers interviewed headteachers, academic teachers, DSQAOs, DCSQAOs and DEOs and administered questionnaires to classroom teachers, pupils, and DSQAOs.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic approach. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and ordinal regression using SPSS version 28.0.1. The thematic analysis identified key themes and patterns in the qualitative data. Descriptive statistics described the data in terms of frequencies and percentages. Ordinal regression determined the relationship between and among research variables.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Researchers also carried out a pilot study to validate the interview and questionnaire instruments, resulting in a satisfactory reliability level indicated by a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .763. A minimum correlation coefficient of .60, as recommended by [45], was deemed sufficient for data analysis and reporting. The findings led to modifications of the research instruments for the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated earlier, the research question guiding this study was: how do SQA criteria enhance learning achievements in PPSs? The themes identified from this question include awareness, handbook, utilization, feasibility, flexibility, and sharing of SQA criteria, along with the SQAOs' judgments.

4.1 Awareness of the SQA Criteria and Handbook

During the interviews, some participants mentioned multiple criteria that guided SQAOs to assess overall school effectiveness. The SQAOs observed learners' achievement in the 3Rs competencies. They evaluated the quality of teaching by reviewing instructional methods, lesson planning, and assessment practices. Then they assessed curriculum quality by examining how well it aligned with the specific needs of the pupils. They evaluated school leadership and management, considering collaborative resource utilization and accountability. The SQAOs also observed the school environment, including classrooms, libraries, sports facilities and playgrounds, to ensure the well-being, health, and safety of pupils, teachers, and other staff. They further evaluated how schools involved parents in their children's learning and progress through communication, collaboration with teachers, parental involvement in school activities, and support of their children for homework and learning at home. Officers used quality indicators such as excellent, very good, good, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory in their judgements [17]. Their goal is to promote learning achievements in a supportive environment.

Interview findings showed that most headteachers, DSQAOs, DCSQAOs, and DEOs were familiar with SQA handbooks and criteria, while many academic teachers lacked awareness due to limited accessibility to SQA handbooks. Inaccessibility and unawareness hindered their understanding, acceptability and implementation of SQA activities. Consequently, teachers may not value or accept advice from SQAOs, potentially affecting teaching and learning achievements in PPSs. Similarly, the questionnaire results revealed that 64.4% of

classroom teachers, 74.1% of pupils, and 25.0% of DSQAOs disagreed with being familiar with SQA criteria. Haule's [15] research echoed these findings, highlighting the lack of SQA handbooks and the insufficient familiarity of individual teachers with SQA criteria.

Respondents stated that awareness and understanding of SQA criteria enabled teachers to appreciate SQAOs' advice, take responsible action on them, and enhance their teaching skills, leading to improved learning achievements. Jones and Tymms [46] supported these findings, noting that teachers who are knowledgeable about SQA criteria strive to meet expectations for improvement. Limited awareness of SQA criteria by teachers can hinder improvement efforts, potentially lowering school performance. The guidance offered by SQAOs proved invaluable in fostering effective teaching techniques for quality learning.

4.2 Utilization of SQA Criteria and their Importance

During the interviews, respondents expressed varying perspectives on the use of SQA criteria by SQAOs for evaluating the quality of various school aspects, such as school operations, resources, and facilities. While some headteachers, DSQAOs, DCSQAOs, and DEOs acknowledged the utilization of SQA criteria by SQAOs, some DSQAOs admitted their lack of familiarity with them, leading to ineffective application during school assessments. Moreover, many academic teachers expressed unfamiliarity with the utilization of SQA criteria by SQAOs, indicating a potential lack of awareness among teachers regarding the specific criteria employed.

The questionnaire results revealed that among the DSQAOs, 50.0% agreed that SQAOs employed SQA criteria during school assessments. However, 33.3% of classroom teachers and 45.9% of pupils disagreed, while 48.9% and 27.4% respectively were unsure about their use. These responses indicate a lack of understanding of SQA criteria among teachers and pupils, potentially affecting learning. The findings emphasize the need for retraining SQAOs to effectively utilize and communicate the SQA criteria, ultimately increasing awareness among all teachers and pupils. Chidobi and Eze Thecla [34] also recommended a similar approach in their research on SQA handbook utilization in Nigerian secondary schools.

Moreover, respondents highlighted the importance of using SQA criteria during the school assessment and stated that it improved consistency and transparency. They stressed that uniformity in SQA findings ensured fair evaluations for all schools. Transparency fostered trust, reduced bias, and enhanced positive attitudes toward SQA practices. Questionnaire findings indicated that a significant majority of classroom teachers (91.1%), pupils (66.7%) and DSQAOs (83.3%) agreed that utilization of SQA criteria enhanced transparency in the SQA activities. This consensus underscores the widespread recognition of SQA criteria as valuable tools for enriching teaching activities and fostering learning achievements when effectively employed. MoEST [17] also recognizes the contribution of SQA criteria in bringing clarity, uniformity, and overall enhancements to school assessments.

4.3 Feasibility of SQA Criteria to the School Context

In this study, the feasibility of SQA criteria within a school setting refers to their achievability, practicability, and capability of being successfully implemented. While most headteachers, DSQAOs, DCSQAOs, and DEOs found SQA criteria practicable in the school context, indicating they are workable and applicable to various aspects of school life, some academic teachers and a few headteachers expressed concerns that the criteria were not practical, as they did not adequately consider the unique characteristics of individual schools. Respondents who appreciated SQA criteria said:

> *The SQA criteria are achievable in the school context because they encompass various aspects of school life. From my perspective, if all officers adhere to the established criteria during assessments, pupils can achieve high performance irrespective of their environment and location* (the headteacher, Ithanga).

The quote implies that individuals who endorsed the SQA criteria were pleased with their extensive inclusion of various aspects of school life during the assessment process, which included pupils' achievements, teaching activities, school administration and leadership, curriculum quality, and environment. Ithanga believed that if SQAOs thoroughly followed the established criteria during assessments, it would have facilitated high levels of achievement in learning, irrespective of the circumstances or location of the school. These findings indicate that the SQA criteria have the potential to be effectively implemented and integrated into the overall operations of a school.

Respondents who disagreed with the SQA criteria raised concerns about their practicality and achievability in light of significant disparities among schools, including factors such as teacher-pupil ratios, teaching workload, and infrastructure. These concerns emphasized that the criteria failed to address these disparities and the potential consequences they could have on the quality of teaching and learning. One academic teacher said:

> *The SQA criteria treated all schools equally, but the reality is that schools vary in their environment, pupil and teacher numbers, and teaching facilities. For instance, rural PPSs often struggle with a shortage of qualified teachers compared to urban schools, which negatively affects overall performance. Therefore, categorizing these schools as underperforming without acknowledging their unique challenges would be unfair* (Muheri).

The quotation suggests that the SQA criteria were not universally achievable for all schools, as they failed to consider the specific contexts in which schools operated. Using a uniform set of guidelines to judge schools as poor or good performers could be unfair, as it did not account for the specific circumstances that influenced teaching and learning in each school. Treating all schools equally without considering their unique circumstances could discourage teachers who felt undervalued for their dedicated efforts to enhance learning achievements.

Again, respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the SQA criteria, specifically criticizing their inflexibility and limited scope of assessment, as highlighted by one academic teacher:

> *While criteria offer a standardized framework for evaluating schools, their rigidity may impede addressing specific challenges unique to each school. This lack of adaptability can undermine the effectiveness of recommendations for improving teaching and learning* (Mughenyi).

The comment highlights the limitations of standardized criteria in ensuring fairness across diverse schools. Also, through questionnaires, while DSQAOs (50.0%) said SQA criteria were feasible, most classroom teachers (57.8%) and pupils (79.3%) disagreed. The findings support Haule's [15] research, indicating that the SQA criteria were seen as unfair when schools were penalized for factors beyond their control, such as lacking infrastructure like inadequate classrooms, chairs, tables and teachers' offices. This study suggests the importance of flexible and adaptable SQA criteria that cater to the specific needs of each school rather than a universal application. Similarly, [17] emphasizes adaptability for accurate assessment.

4.4 Sharing SQA Criteria with Teachers

The findings showed that most DSQAOs and some headteachers acknowledged sharing SQA criteria with teachers through various means, such as handbooks, meetings, seminars, and short courses. However, many academic teachers were sceptical about the efficacy of these methods, as further elaborated below.

Regarding SQA handbooks, researchers found one copy of the SQA handbook in the headteachers' office in each of the 15 selected schools, but individual teachers did not have access to it. While some headteachers informed their teachers about the SQA criteria and their operation, they did not provide the manuals to individual teachers due to their inadequacy. During interviews, respondents mentioned additional reasons for the lack of access to SQA handbooks for individual teachers.

> *The SQAOs distribute SQA handbooks to headteachers for accessing SQA criteria. However, some headteachers consider these handbooks confidential and keep them in their offices, resulting in hesitation to share them with teachers openly. Nevertheless, teachers require SQA handbooks to read and comprehend SQA guidelines and other procedures* (an academic teacher, Ifaghaa).

The interviews uncovered a lack of clear communication of SQA criteria to all teachers. According to Ifaghaa, SQAOs did not adequately share SQA handbooks with all teachers. Besides, the headteachers received the SQA handbook from SQAOs but neglected to share them with their teachers, as they associated such guidelines with the marking scheme. The teachers believed obtaining the SQA handbooks would positively contribute to learning improvement. Haule [15] found in his study that SQAOs did not confidently communicate SQA criteria directly to teachers, instead handing SQA handbooks to headteachers who kept them in their offices.

Regarding meetings, the study found that teachers received information about SQA criteria during teachers-WEOs meetings. However, some academic teachers expressed concerns about the adequacy of communication through this method. They argued that some headteachers and WEOs read the SQA guidelines to teachers without providing thorough explanations. Poor clarification could result in a lack of familiarity with SQA criteria among teachers.

Regarding seminars and workshops, the study found that not all teachers were able to attend the few sessions conducted by SQAOs to familiarize them with SQA criteria. Although a few teachers mentioned attending a workshop that did not specifically cover SQA criteria, most stated that they had not participated in any induction seminar because their schools did not provide sponsorship. This limited attendance may result in teachers being unaware of the SQA criteria.

According to the questionnaire responses, about DSQAOs (66.7%) and pupils (81.5%) agreed that SQAOs shared SQA criteria with teachers. However, classroom teachers (80.0%) disagreed with this statement. Consequently, this study recommended that SQAOs sufficiently inform teachers about SQA criteria to enhance their understanding, improve teaching skills, and ultimately enhance learning achievements.

4.5 The SQAOs' Judgments

The findings revealed mixed views, with headteachers, DSQAOs, DCSQAOs, and DEOS expressing appreciation for the judgments, while most academic teachers showed

dissatisfaction. Those who appreciated emphasized that SQAOs' judgments were grounded in SQA criteria, making them objective, fair, and valuable for enhancing school improvement. They maintained that SQAOs prioritized supporting teachers and held schools accountable for necessary improvements rather than solely grading schools.

Participants who expressed dissatisfaction with the judgments of SQAOs voiced concerns about rating bias and insufficient time allocated for classroom observation. Regarding bias rating, they expressed concerns that some SQAOs relied on the presence of a scheme of work and lesson plans to assess schools, resulting in biased ratings and limited support for effective teaching methods. One academic teacher expressed her view on this matter, stating:

> *I am dissatisfied with some SQAOs' judgments as they prioritize the assessment of the scheme of work and lesson plans over evaluating how well teachers effectively teach to improve learning. This approach may overlook underlying issues that impact the quality of learning in PPSs (*Sese).

The quotation highlights that SQAOs prioritized teaching tools such as lesson plans and schemes of work, assuming their quality alone ensured good teaching. However, the study emphasized that effective teaching goes beyond these documents. Again, it stressed the importance of assessing teachers' ability to effectively implement these tools rather than solely concentrating on evaluating their quality.

The study also uncovered concerns among headteachers and academic teachers, citing insufficient time spent on classroom observations. This limited time spent could result in a narrow scope of assessment, potentially leading to incomplete appraisals of teaching effectiveness and learning achievements. Regarding this matter, one headteacher expressed dissatisfaction:

> *Some SQAOs may have only spent 15 minutes observing classroom activities instead of the required 30 minutes recommended by MoEST, which left me feeling disappointed and cheated. This limited time frame could lead to a narrow focus and an inadequate assessment* (Dede)*.*

Dede's concern about insufficient classroom observation time by some SQAOs highlighted inadequate evaluation of classroom teaching and learning activities. Adhering to guidelines of spending at least 30 minutes in observations could ensure fair judgments. Results from questionnaires showed that all 100% DSQAOs held that SQAOs provided unbiased judgments. However, classroom teachers (53.3%) and pupils (94.8%) disagreed with this view. This significant divergence in perceptions among respondents highlights the need for SQAOs to prioritize devoting more time to assessing teaching and learning activities.

The study used ordinal regression analysis to examine the relationship between respondents' views on SQA criteria and learning achievements. Coefficient values (β) and *P*-values indicate a strong positive correlation between the utilization (β=4.499, *P*=0.000), sharing (β=4.159, *P*=0.000), and understanding (β=3.922, *P*=0.000) of SQA criteria with learning achievements. Generally, findings indicate that strong acquaintance with SQA criteria among teachers and SQAOs can improve learning achievements (Table 2).

Table 2: Ordinal Regression Analysis on the Perceptions of Criteria and Learning Achievements (N=192)

Responses	Coefficient (β)	Std error	*P*-value
Understanding of SQA criteria	3.922	.586	.000***
Effective utilization of SQA criteria	4.499	.600	.000***
Transparency in the SQA process	.819	.325	.012*
Feasibility of SQA criteria	.567	.232	.015*
Sharing the SQA criteria with teachers	4.159	.7512	.000***
Fair judgments by SQAOs	.633	.176	.000***

Source: Field data, 2020

Note: most significant (***$P < .001$); very significant (**$P < .01$) and significant *$P < .05$

The study's findings, which highlight the positive correlation between awareness, understanding, utilization, feasibility, flexibility, sharing, and transparency of SQA criteria and fair judgments and learning achievements, correlate with the principles of the CSM. The CSM highlights the significance of open communication, collaboration, mutual respect, collegiality, and shared commitment between SQAOs and teachers in authentic teaching settings for enhancing learning achievements. Both the study's results and the CSM underscore the significance of creating a supportive and collaborative environment where SQAOs and teachers work together, value SQA criteria, effectively use them in school assessments, and integrate them into instructional practices while ensuring their alignment with the specific needs of pupils, This alignment ultimately can contribute to improved learning achievements.

5. CONCLUSION

The understanding, awareness, utilization, feasibility, flexibility and transparency of SQA criteria played a crucial role in enhancing learning achievements. This could be attributed to the potential for accurate judgments by SQAOs, effective implementation of advice, and increased value and acceptance of SQA criteria among teachers. A lack of awareness and familiarity with SQA criteria and biased judgements might have led to teachers undervaluing or disregarding them, potentially impacting teaching and learning achievements in PPSs.

6. RECOMMENDATION

The government and the SQA department develop customized training programs focused on SQA criteria to equip SQAOs, headteachers, and teachers with the essential skills and knowledge required for effectively implementing SQA criteria in assessments and teaching practices, thereby enhancing learning achievements.

CONSENT

The authors have obtained and preserved written consent from respondents according to international or university standards.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The authors have obtained and maintained written ethical approval following international or university standards.

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