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Teaching problems and school failure in Mogovolas district's primary schools, Mozambique

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Abstract: In Mozambique, quality assessment within the National Education System (NES) considers students' access, retention, completion rates, and graduates' competencies. In response to difficulties observed among primary school teachers and trainers at Teacher Training Institutes in Mogovolas district, in Nampula Province, this study examined the relationship between teaching-related problems (pre-service training, subject-matter knowledge) and School Failure in Mogovolas district primary schools. The thesis is that there is a direct relationship between teaching problems and school failure, which makes it essential to identify underlying causes to enable targeted intervention and correction thereby preventing negative impacts on students' acquisition of competencies within the NES. The sample comprised 46 participants including students, teachers, trainers and school managers. A qualitative approach was adopted using semi-structured interviews, competency assessment tests, and content analysis. The findings indicate that students experienced significant difficulties in competency assessments, particularly in Natural Sciences and Mathematics. Teachers, in turn, demonstrated limited content knowledge and relied on ineffective teaching methods. The study concludes that inadequate pre-service training, inappropriate assessment practices, and misaligned pedagogical strategies are key determinants of School Failure in Primary Schools in Mogovolas District. These findings corroborate the socio-institutional perspective (Sil, 2004; Branco, 2012; Bernardes, 2017; Chicote; Deixa, 2020) which attributes the responsibility for the School Failure to the internal mechanisms and practices of the educational institution.

Keywords: teaching problems; pre-service training; teaching methods; Mogovolas.

1 Introduction

In Mozambique, quality assessment within the National Education System (NES) considers students' access, retention, completion rates, and graduates' competencies. Above all, it is in the competences shown by graduates that quality can be assessed. A study by the Ministry of Education and Human Development (Mozambique, 2020) the entity responsible for the education sector, concluded that the quality of education in the country is low; this is reflected in the graduates' profiles showing knowledge and competencies below the expected levels and the needs of the labour market.



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Similar results were found in a study carried out in 2016, in Nampula province, by the *Todos Pelas Crianças em Moçambique* program that concluded that more than 50% of students pass a grade without having acquired basic competencies in reading, counting, calculus and 4 in every 10, grade 8 children can successfully complete a grade 2 test (TPC Mozambique, 2017).

The non-development of expected competencies by the end of a cycle is evidence of school failure. In this regard, literature indicates that educational quality is intrinsically linked to the capacity of an education system to promote pedagogic differentiation and curricular justice, as defended by authors who question standardization of teaching in the face of diversity in students. Pinto, Delgado, Martins (2015) explain that given the complexity of the concept of SF, different results are possible for the students, namely fail, retention, dropout or discrepancy between the contents delivered by the school and students' aspirations.

Although previous studies have explored the issue of SF, the origins and causes of this phenomenon divide researcher opinions. At the heat of the debate, in the 70s, a new concept originated about SF that goes beyond the relationship school/environment and repositions the problem in the mechanisms that operate inside the school, questioning, especially, its functioning, practices as well as the need for pedagogical differentiation. In this plot, apart from the students, the teacher and the school structure become crucial in students' learning.

This article explores the relationship between teaching problems and school failure in primary schools of the district of Mogovolas. For that purpose, the study sought to: identify the main teaching problems in primary schools of Mogovolas district; describe the perceptions of main actors in the teaching and learning process relating to school failure; identify the subjects that portrait School Failure in primary schools of the district of Mogovolas; demonstrate the relationship between teaching problems and School Failure.

Based on the new conception of School Failure where questions are addressed to the mechanisms involved in the functioning of a school and places the teacher as the main link between the implementation of curricula and an agent that puts into practice curricular strategies and proposals, the study asks what could be the relationship between teaching problems (pre-service training, assessment practices,

subject-matter knowledge) and school failure in primary schools of Mogovolas district in Nampula.

The field study was carried out in Mogovolas and the sample involved 46 participants (students, teachers, teacher trainers and school managers), selected in primary schools and at the Teacher Training School. The approach followed is qualitative and semi structured interviews, competency assessment tests (designed under the Primary Teaching Curricular Plan and validated on their response to the study's objectives) and content analysis were used with the aim of exploring the origins of SF, considering its relationship with quality of education and the development of expected basic competencies.

The structure of the article presents, apart from the introduction and final considerations, a theoretical discussion on SF, teaching problems – the basis for the interpretation of the SF phenomenon - the methodology used and the methodological options. Data analysis and discussion is presented under four (four) main categories. In the final considerations we present the main results of the research, with emphasis on the various teaching problems identified and their relationship with School Failure in primary schools of Mogovolas district.

2 School Failure: concepts, theories and causes

Education aims at the construction of knowledge, acquisition of techniques, the development of the student's personality and the internalization of norms and values that will enable social insertion. For various reasons, not all children successfully experience learning. In the cases where students don't succeed at learning, there is an urge for questions and studies to identify the reasons associated to the failure (Fernandes; Silva,2005).

From the Latin *insucessu* (m) that translates as failure, the absence of success in the performance of school tasks and the completion within expected time, School Failure is presented with negative connotation and associated with vocabulary such as delay, repetition, failure (Mucopela, 2026; Araujo, 2020)

The view of School Failure as a quantification of an observable fact in school, in the Mozambican context, has faced criticism taking into account that many school leavers from primary school (grades 1 to 7, between 6 to 13 years of age) and secondary school (grades 8 to 12, between 14 to 18 years of age)

show difficulties in reading and writing, as well as in elementary mathematical operations (Chicote; Deixa, 2020, p. 278-279)

Fernades and Silva (2005) consider SF a proof of the failure of the school institution, for its inability to train minds that possess cultural knowledge of what is real. Therefore,

[...] School Failure represents the inability of the educational system to guarantee true equality of opportunity [...] the inability of the system to make quality education compatible to education for all, capable of assuring to everyone an active role in society (Eurydice, 1995, p. 49 *apud* Chicote; Deixa, 2020, p. 278)

A foundational idea to comprehend school failure and its relationship with the different structures that come together is presented by Mucopela (2016), by situating SF within the context of various factors of political as well as cultural, institutional, socio-pedagogical and psych pedagogical natures. Therefore, SF is associated with program inadequacy, lack of infrastructure, parents who are inattentive or disinterested in the education of their children as well as to inadequate goals, as students come to school with cultural knowledge of what is real and therefore students' failure also reflects the inability of the school to train their minds.

In the face of various conceptions and perceptions of SF that merge, namely social, political and pedagogical structures, as well as students and teachers, the study adopted the concept by (Branco,2012) which assesses SF on student absenteeism, completion of school permanence time, knowledge and abilities necessary to satisfactorily study and perform other tasks in their social and professional life. This is what Cortesão and Torres (1990) refer to, by explaining that SF doesn't manifest itself only in grade failure and dropouts, but also when after a studying cycle students cannot mobilize the knowledge acquired throughout such period, indicating that no learning took place or that it did not take place adequately.

Despite this, there is an awareness that the lack or presence of those abilities in students, per se, are not enough to characterize SF, nor is an unsatisfactory result the only indicator of this phenomenon. There are cases in the Mozambican context, where SF happens even when a student passes. Hence, capturing the complexity of factors associated with School Failure and their relationship with different structures is essential for the design of intervention strategies at various levels of the educational system.

In the search for an understanding of the SF phenomenon, Mendonça (2006) presents two perspectives, notably: the visible and the invisible. The first,

[...] has to do with a school failure produced in quantitative terms through unsatisfactory results, grade repeats and dropouts. [the second] the invisible is expressed in qualitative terms, as individual frustrations, inadequate training and alienation towards the preparation for democratic participation (2006, p.117)

The invisible perspective of SF corroborates Benavante *et al.* (1994) understanding of the causes of school failure, as they understand it to be more of an endogenous than exogenous nature from the school institution, that is, students who drop out have problems with the school and have been abandoned by it, in many cases. This reinforces the premise that SF doesn't manifest itself in unsatisfactory results and dropouts only, but also in the inability of mobilizing and applying the knowledge acquired in school to concrete life situations.

The theoretical framework on the causes of SF indicates the existence of various factors that confirm the phenomenon. Some of an individual nature, in other words, of the student, others from the sociocultural context of the student, and furthermore, others which combine all the variables. Such diversity indicates not only the complexity of the phenomenon, but also the changes that take place in society.

Pereira (2012), Mucopela (2016) and Fernando (2020) resort to at least three theories to explain the phenomenon of SF: the theory of individual talents, the theory of sociocultural deficit and the social-institutional theory. From these three theories the possible causes of school failure are discussed in the next paragraphs.

Formulated in the 60s, the theory of sociocultural deficit results from advancements in Genetic Psychology, in Educational Psychology and in Psychosociology that stimulated the search for answers to SF in other contexts, that is, beyond students' individual causes. SF, according to its advocates, is a social problem, socially selective, as its occurrence varies depending on students' social background – the sociocultural handicap (Pereira, 2010). To Forgiarini and Silva (2007, p.5), during the period of psychologization of learning difficulties and the birth of the cultural explanation for SF, there was a dissemination of the idea that the “cultural environment of which poor children are part is deficit of stimuli, values, habits, abilities and norms, which would make learning difficult”.

The causes of socio-familial order refer to the students' family and social, cultural and economic backgrounds, to which the responsibility for school difficulties is directed, as for example the lack of culture of the environment, lack of vocabulary and lack of stimuli in their living areas. The (lack of) school success of students is justified by their social belonging, by the cultural baggage that they hold when entering school (Benavente, 1990 *apud* Fernadno, 2020, p. 19)

For this purpose, in the explanation of the causes of SF there is a reference to deficits, summed up in the handicap or sociocultural deprivation concept, postulating that a child coming from an environment marked by poverty and disadvantage will not have developed the cultural basis necessary for school success. Hence, SF would be linked to the social background of the students and to their cultural baggage when starting school (Pereira, 2010)

Therefore, children from underprivileged families, in cultural, social and economic terms, would present a more limited view of the future and consequently would be more affected by SF as they carry with them “linguistic codes and practical know-how and aesthetic posture codes that are not privileged by the school and by the teachers” (Dias, 2017, p. 61). Thus, the causes of SF would, according to this theory, be associated with

[...] the student and the family environment from where they come, in the extent that students(children) are no longer the only ones being blamed, and responsibility is extended to parents who not having the means to provide them with the means favourable to a quality education place the child in a situation of inequality towards other colleagues with a privileged socioeconomic status (Dias, 2017, p. 64-65)

Controversial, to the extent that it reinforces social stratification and exacerbates social exclusion, this theory highlights the “reproducer” role of the school in converting social inequalities to school inequalities. The school is a passing place where the good remain good and the bad remain bad, not performing in this way its transformative and modelling role.

With regards to social- institutional theory, the 70th decade marks a turning point in the analysis of the factors of SF. The educational context and the school become responsible for SF (Branco, 2012). The change in focus results, in great part, from the occurrence of SF in countries where the standard of life is high, deconstructing the preconception that low class students are the only ones destined to experience school failure (Dias, 2017).

Freire and Bernardes (2017, p. 312) affirm that SF is a “social phenomenon that is constructed inside the school [...] originated from the non-objectification of pedagogic task, which aims at promoting the appropriation of theoretical knowledge as a preponderant feature of a well-organized teaching”. Forgiarini and Silva (2007), however, understand that the social - institutional approach seeks to blame the school and those who work in it, while disregarding the social and political context in which the school operates.

Branco (2012) believes that the responsibility for SF falls on the school when it standardizes school practices, curricula and pedagogies assuming uniformity of behaviours and individualities of the students. A similar understanding is shared by Quadros *et al.* (2015) in asserting that, such a situation where in the classroom there are numerous singularities of students, a single answer cannot be expected.

Martins (2017) gives responsibility for action inside the school to the teacher and to aspects that affect them that condition SF, such as “bad teacher training, high absenteeism levels and teachers not respecting students’ development pace [...]” (2017, p. 13). In a broader analysis of SF, Sil (2004) asserts that to adequately explain SF is only possible if factors such as distribution of students per stream, teacher absenteeism and uniform curricular structure are considered.

Nevertheless, although SF can be explained through the interconnection of various factors that involve different social actors and a whole organizational structure of the educational system, the fact that the teacher is the sole articulator of the curricular proposal in the school context justified the theoretical choice of the present study, that is, the selection of the social-constitutional theory as the most appropriate to interpret the teaching problems observed in primary schools of the district of Mogovolas. Despite that, other causes of SF with a focus on technical and methodological aspects in teacher training were considered. An analysis based on teaching problems as causes of SF suggests that while the quality of learning by students depends on multiple factors, teachers contribute substantially to improving learning results if they consider that they play a fundamental role in the Teaching and Learning Process and, especially, in fighting SF. “Thus, the success and the effectiveness of measures and strategies implemented in fighting SF, should, majorly, consider the way in which the teachers engage in the teaching task and the attitudes they hold [...]” (Dias, 2027, p. 67).

In heterogeneous social contexts that characterize schools and classes, Pereira (2010) highlights the importance of the teacher. The teacher positively influences students, especially when they hold attitudes that reinforce students' self-acceptance, empathy towards weaknesses and strengths and encourage the positive aspects of their behaviour. In fact, the teacher variable is, in different ways, the most evident in comparison to the others (the method) in the achievement of good school results.

It is therefore understood that the teaching act comes with responsibilities, dedication and duties as well as a set of competencies that are essential in the performance of the task. Based on this, a range of teaching problems that affect school success and that can cause SF were identified, among which the following are considered: inadequate pre-service training, difficulties with assessment practices, use of inappropriate methodologies and weak subject-matter content mastery. These translate into actions that are connected to the practice of teaching. Therefore, the study is included in current debates on SF, adopting a social-institutional perspective that enables the understanding of teaching problems as the genesis in the explanation of SF.

3 Methodology

The study adopted a case study design of exploratory and descriptive nature, with a predominantly qualitative approach. The qualitative dimension of the study explored the meanings assigned to SF, from descriptive data collected through semi structured interviews, enabling the understanding of the relationship between teaching problems and school failure. It was from this approach that a description of participants' perceptions on School failure was presented. To quantify the responses obtained from the field research, descriptive tools of the quantitative approach were utilised (frequency and median analysis) especially in the treatment of the results from competency assessment tests administered to teachers and students, following a mixed method strategy. The use of the two approaches with more weight on the qualitative, enabled a detailed analysis of the SF variables; thus, the adoption of mixed methods made the study of complex problems viable, as well as the production of potentially more relevant study results (Galvão *et al.*, 2018).

In the study, the interviews conducted enabled the direct collection of information and representations from teachers and school managers, on the manifestations and causes of SF, as well as their opinions on the relationship between teaching problems and school failure. To this purpose, two interview guides were designed involving five (5) categories: validation of the interview, interviewee profile, conceptions of SF, teaching problems and relationship between teaching problems and SF, with a variation on design of questions. Data were collected in three (3) schools and one (01) training institute – Teachers of the Future School (ADPP – EPF) all in Mogovolas district. It is worth noting that some primary school teachers in this district were trained at ADPP- EPF in Nametil.

In these schools, four (4) directors of studies and ten (10) teachers who teach in primary school were participants in the study. To assess whether the competencies and abilities expected from primary education were achieved, the study also involved primary school graduates attending grade 7 at Nanhupo - Rio Primary School and Nametil 7 *de Abril* Primary School, in a total of 30 students from both sexes, being 15 of each.

From EPF the participants included the director of studies, two (2) teacher trainers who have taught in the “grade 10 + 1 year” course, a training program that qualifies trainees to teach in initial education level. In total, forty-six (46) participants were involved in the study among them teachers, school managers, teacher trainers and students, actors considered relevant in the teaching and learning process.

After data collection, the produced information went through content analysis to extract the content of the interview and the variables associated with SF (Baedin, 1977). The first stage was pre-analysis (organization of the material) followed by the exploration of the material (coding, classifying and categorizing of key concepts). The subsequent stage involved the qualitative analysis of evidence of the manifestations of teaching problems to explore the causes of SF from the adopted theory's lens.

For the selection of participants, a non-probabilistic sampling was followed, responding to the criteria of accessibility, thematic relevance, geographic and administrative dispersion, relevant aspects in capturing the causes of SF. In the design of the study the heterogeneity of participants was highly explored.

This study was conducted in close observation of ethical research principles involving human beings, where all participants were appropriately informed of the

objectives of the study, anonymity issues, confidentiality and the use of data exclusively for academic purposes. Free consent was orally obtained and recorded accordingly. The identity of the participants and institutions was preserved using acronyms and codes. It is noteworthy that given the size of the sample and the local nature of the study, the results obtained cannot be generalised to the Whole NES, therefore the conclusions should be interpreted within the specific context of the study.

4 Analysis and discussion of results

With no consensus among different authors and theories, SF has become a problem not only to schools in poor countries, like Mozambique, but also in developed countries, as it became evident in the first decades of the 20th century. Since then, the forms and manifestations of SF have been studied, be it from the familial context as well as institutional, where emphasis is placed on the competencies of those who teach, especially in the context of increasingly heterogeneous schools and classes.

With the purpose of exploring the possible causes of SF, below is an analysis of some categories. To identify the subjects portraying SF in primary schools of Mogovolas district, the competencies of students enrolled in grade 7 in 2023 were assessed. In total, thirty (30) students were tested, of these nineteen (19) girls and eleven (11) boys, on which a test was administered based on the framework of competencies and performance evidence for the 2nd cycle of primary education. The test covered four (4) subjects: Portuguese Language, Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences, with a score of five (5) points each, totalling twenty (20) points. Table 1.

Table 1 – Results obtained by tested subject

Subject	Results		
	Correct (>2.5)	Incorrect	Average
Portuguese Language	7	23	1.36
Mathematics	2	28	0.35
Natural Sciences	0	30	0.25
Social Sciences	1	29	0.58
Overall	2	28	2.55

Source: Authors, 2024

In Portuguese Language, the ability to extract implicit information from a text was tested where six (6) students, that is, 20% showed this ability. However, when the ability to extract explicit information from the same text was tested, more than half (53,3%) presented correct answers. With regards to the ability to write texts with legible handwriting, logical sequence, spelling correctness and punctuation rules through a writing task of a simple opinion text in up to five (5) lines, on the topic “child marriage”, seven (7) students responded correctly. In this subject, from the thirty (30) students tested, only seven (7), that is, 23,3% scored 2,5 points or higher, see table 1. Therefore, the difficulties students have in interpreting texts, expressing ideas and personal thoughts obeying grammatical rules, using correct spelling and punctuation rules become evident.

In the subject of Mathematics, the students’ ability to solve real day-to-day problems applying basic mathematical operations with natural numbers was assessed. From the thirty (30) students, two (2) obtained positive results, that is, a score equal to or greater than 2.5 points, the equivalent of 6,6%. It was notorious the difficulty students face to solve the problem through a numerical expression grouping values into classes. Silva [2012--] says that it is common in the calculus of numerical expressions for mistakes to be made, ones which are related to three (3) aspects: the order of operations, the rule of signs and the methods of solving. Therefore, the difficulties in formulating mathematical expressions based on concrete problems, related or not to the student's daily life, was one of the problems observed among the students submitted to the competency assessment test. The results obtained in Mathematics revealed an average of only 0.35 among the students. This technical difficulty reinforces the thesis by Bernardes (2017), when he states that SF is often a result of the non-objectification of the pedagogical activity, where the failure in the mastery of content by the teacher compromises the acquisition of knowledge by the students.

One of the objectives of the Natural Sciences subject is to equip students with skills and scientific literacy necessary to understand, explain and interpret what they observe (Mozambique, 2020). In the case of the students tested, when asked about the water cycle, none of the thirty (30) students was able to answer correctly. Similar results were obtained in the question about the difference between the digestive and respiratory systems.

With a significant improvement over the previous questions, 40% of the students were able to identify two diseases that affect the respiratory system. Although not conclusive, the results obtained suggest that some skills were not properly developed in this subject, and may, for example, result from an ill transmission of content by the teacher or non-teaching - school absenteeism - one among other teaching problems.

In Social Sciences, students are expected to develop "[...] the skills necessary to understand the historical process, to situate events in space and time [...]" (Mozambique, 2020, p.19). And to measure the development of these skills, the students were asked to name the country that colonized Mozambique and only two (2) answered correctly. Regarding the date and place of the proclamation of National Independence, two (2) students answered correctly.

Finally, students were asked to indicate the dates of national holidays and eight (8) students indicated almost all national holidays. The results obtained in this discipline expose the deficiencies in knowledge about the history of Mozambique, especially in relation to the achievement of national independence. This deficit not only jeopardizes the development of the expected skills, but also interferes with the "[...] social, cultural, critical, scientific development, making today's subjects, the children, future men and women prepared to face socio-cultural environments, ready to take ownership of their ambitions and responsibilities as adults" (Onório; Treviso, 2017, p. 276).

In general, in the Social Sciences subject, of the 30 students, only two (2) obtained a score equal to or greater than ten (10) points. The average score was 2.55 points, an unsatisfactory result under the Classification Scale of the General Assessment Guidelines for Primary Education, Literacy and Youth and Adult Education and for General Secondary Education, approved by Ministerial Diploma No. 7/2019. This result indicates that the students did not meet the requirements of the Teaching Program.

Therefore, from the problems and difficulties presented, School Failure under the theoretical option followed in this research, is a reality among the participant students tested and occurs in all subjects. A comparison of the subjects under study shows that Natural Sciences had the worst performance (0.25 points average) and Portuguese Language had the best result (1.36 points average), as Table 1 shows.

Although not conclusive, the results obtained in the competence assessment tests expose the learning problems in primary education and reinforce the understanding that primary school pupils move from one grade to another without acquiring the skills expected at each grade and learning cycle, which jeopardizes intellectual development and the development of skills in subsequent grades and cycles — traces of School Failure.

Considering the diversity of understandings about SF, the conceptions of ten (10) teachers who teach primary education are described below: two (2) teacher trainers, three (3) deputy directors and a director of studies at a teacher training institution, chart 1.

Chart 1– Definition of SF by interviewees

List	Response Subcategories	Respondents
01	Poor academic performance	DAE1*, P2**, P 3, P 6, P 7, P 8, P 9
02	Poor learning	DAE 2, DAP***, P 1, FP1****, FP 2
03	Lack of monitoring by parents and/or guardians; Insufficient funds; Poor commitment to work	DAE 3
04	Inability of the School	P 4, P 5, P 10

Source: Authors, 2024

Legend: * School deputy directors ** Teacher*** Director of Studies **** Teacher trainer.

To teachers and Deputy Directors, SF reflects poor learning and poor pedagogical performance, corroborating Severino (2019), who describes School Failure as poor school results, failure, fails, dropouts and lack of motivation. On the other hand, SF also indicates the inability of the school to fulfil its mission of educating, training and socializing, in other words, the "failure of the entire school community and the inability of the system to motivate students, keep them in school and promote their success" (Marmelo, 2011, p.1). Therefore, School Failure exposes the failures of a whole educational system in achieving its objectives and principles, hence, fails, poor results and school *dropouts* are evidence of these incapacities.

It is difficult and complex to pinpoint sole causes of SF, as they involve a diversity of actors and factors, some of which are context specific. To identify possible causes of SF, the interviewees were asked why students did not learn or had difficulties learning. Chart 2 presents the answers to this question.

Chart 2 – Causes of School Failure according to the interviewees

List	Respondents	Response subcategory
01	DAE 1, P 1, P2 P4, P5, P7, FP1	Demotivation and absenteeism of teachers and students
02	DAE 2, DAP	Social factors (family economic background), withdrawals, constant changes of residence of guardians
03	DAE 3, P 3, P 9	Poor monitoring of parents and guardians and teaching problems (poor teacher training, poor subject matter knowledge), lack of school supplies, prohibition of punishments
04	P 6, P 10	Poor collaboration among stakeholders in the teaching and learning process (students, parents and guardians)
05	P 8	Lack of communication between the community and the school, poor monitoring by parents, teacher attendance and use of cell phones during classes by teachers.
06	FP 2	Lack of basic skills by psych pedagogues and psychologists in schools, but it is incorrect to present a single cause

Source: Authors, 2024

In search of possible explanations about the causes of EI, the following were considered: students, teachers, family and the educational system. In chart 2, nine (9) times the teachers were considered to be part of the causes of SF, due to lack of motivation, limitations, negligence and absenteeism. Regarding students, seven (7) times they appear as responsible for IE, due to lack of interest, absenteeism and dropouts. And, finally, parents were considered part of this problem, mainly due to the lack of monitoring of students (dependents).

The educational system, in turn, is part of this "equation" with the semi-automatic passing policy, in force since 2004, by neglecting quality over quantity, in addition to the lack of teaching and studying material for teachers and students, also seen as part of the causes of School Failure. Fernandes *et al.* (2015) present the aetiology of SF and centre the discussion on the teacher, when they examine their scientific, pedagogical, didactic competences, values and affective attitudes inside the classroom. To Sil, Lopes (2002), SF presents factors related to the school, its organization and functioning, and to the practices of teachers. Teachers are the articulators of any strategy to prevent the occurrence of SF, through their practices and attitudes, so they must be able to enforce the norms established for the school context and classroom, to promote school success.

To identify the main teaching problems in primary schools in Mogovolas district, two key subcategories were considered: scientific and methodological skills,

synthesized in four subcategories of analysis, namely: mastery of content, pre-service training, use of appropriate methodologies and problems with assessment practices.

To assess the level of subject-matter content mastery, a test was administered to students graduating from grade 6 and to seven (7) teachers. Of the seven, three declined to take the test. The objective was to measure the level of mastery of content taught by teachers in primary education. Table 2 presents the results obtained in the test.

Table 2 – Results from the test administered to teachers

Subject	Results		
	Correct Answers (>2.5)	Incorrect Answers	Average
Portuguese Language	7	0	3.85
Mathematics	3	4	2.57
Natural Sciences	4	3	2.92
Social Sciences	5	2	3.35
Overall	7	0	12.71

Source: Authors, 2024

Overall, the average score obtained by the four (4) teachers was 12.71 points, that is, five times higher than the average (2.55 points) of students in the same test (Table 1). With regards to subjects, it is noted that the teachers had the best performance in Portuguese Language, with an average of 3.85 points, and the worst performance in the subject of Mathematics with 2.57 points. Teachers showed greater difficulties in performing basic mathematical operations to solve concrete real-life problems; explain different natural phenomena and recognize national holidays, therefore, almost in the same proportions of difficulties presented by the students.

Although the average in the Classification Scale is positive, the result was satisfactory, which indicates knowledge that is not solid and that's applied with difficulty. To support this analysis, teachers were asked if they had ever been in situations where they should teach content of which they did not have full mastery, and they all acknowledged that they had, with Mathematics being the subject with the most recurrent difficulties. In addition, the teacher who teaches grade 6 (P10) confessed that, although she teaches Natural Sciences, she does not have mastery of this subject.

In the field, the Deputy directors said they had seen teachers with poor mastery of content and believe that the Pedagogical Days and Training Seminars, held during school breaks, can help to correct and reverse this scenario. This picture is in alignment with the results presented by Uamusse (2022), which indicate that 80% of teachers do not master the content taught in grade 4 and the subjects of Mathematics and Portuguese are the most problematic.

In the pre-service training item, teachers were asked if they considered their pre-service training sufficient to perform teaching functions and, in response, twelve (12) of sixteen (16) said it was insufficient. Teachers especially mention the duration of the training course, as being very short. Connected or not to this, Deputy directors point to methodological difficulties and mastery of content as the main problems of newly graduated teachers. Manoel (2019) associates the problems of content mastery with the short duration of teacher training programs. And, to fill this gap, he suggests holding pedagogical days — one appropriate room to address these problems.

Regarding the use of (in)appropriate methodologies, teachers were questioned about what determines the choice of a teaching method; Eight (8) of the ten (10) interviewees pointed out the nature of the content as a determinant and one (1) considered the age group as a fundamental aspect. It is evident that teachers have methodological limitations, as they disregard other important aspects that determine the choice of a teaching method, such as adequacy to the teaching objectives (the method must allow students to build the expected learning), the age and cognitive characteristics of the students, the physical conditions, the time available to deal with the content, as well as the cultural context where the school is inserted.

For Macamo (2015), if

[...] teachers' teaching methods, their didactic resources, their communication techniques are inadequate to the characteristics of the class and of each student, their success will be at risk. [...] Valuing different cultures, trying to understand them and using them as essential tools for the teaching-learning process are fundamental points for the quotient between objectives and results to be positive (2015, p. 6-7).

Therefore, when the methodological options do not suit the aspirations of the students, their learning can be at risk. On the other hand, the use of technological resources, models, illustrations, practical activities, pedagogical workshops and other

active strategies increases the chances of learning occurring in the ways considered acceptable.

To assess the teachers' knowledge about aspects of assessment, the ten (10) teachers were asked about the focus of the assessment, among learning objectives, expected competencies and contents taught. Seven (7) teachers said that the assessment should be limited only to what was taught. One teacher holds that the competencies provided for in the curricular plan are the basis for the design of test plans. Another highlighted that students should be tested on what they are believed to have learned, while (P4) pointed out learning objectives as a relevant aspect of the evaluation.

In the school context, the knowledge constructed manifests itself in differentiated competencies and demands differentiated cognitive processes. For assessment to aim at more than simply memorized content, it is necessary for the teacher to have mastery of the types of thought and their categories, obeying the structuring of the taxonomy in the cognitive domain (Pinto, 2001).

The Deputy Directors were asked about the problems they identified in test plans. They mentioned the definition of objectives, the use of inappropriate terms and verbs, and the design of questions. Therefore, there are several aspects that teachers must consider during test design so that they achieve their objectives, that is, as a means of providing diagnostic information to make necessary changes and redefine learning.

Teachers were also asked about which strategy, among score improvement retake tests and catch-up classes, they have adopted in the face of numerically negative assessment results. Of the ten (10) interviewees, four (4) mentioned that they teach catch-up classes followed by a score improvement test; while two (2) said that they resort to catch-up classes; Three (3) teachers use score improvement retake tests with different questions.

A similar question was asked to the Deputy Directors, about what they would recommend in similar cases; two (2) mentioned the score improvement tests, but using different assessment modes, and one (1) said that they would recommend catch-up classes and, later, a test. Senn, Bastos (2008) explain that the catch-up on contents should occur whenever the student presents difficulties, and this is not an easy practice to achieve the student's success. They also highlight that the catch-up is on content

and not on scores and should not be translated into a simple repetition of classes, it should employ creativity and diversification of methodologies that activate the student's interest and consequent reconstruction of learning.

It appears that the problems with assessment practices are linked to the difficulties in determining what to test, when to test, why to test and how to test. The use of a single assessment tool, the design of test questions based on what was taught disregarding the competencies provided for in the curricular plans and teaching programs, illustrate problems with assessment practices in the act of teaching, which may determine the kind of results achieved by the students.

5 Final considerations

Capturing the complexity and diversity of factors that make up School Failure involves analysing different structures and actors: students, school infrastructure, teachers, family, curricular models. In Mogovolas, the phenomenon of School Failure analysed from field data, is characterized as the failure to achieve the objectives, results and competencies expected at the end of each learning cycle (poor learning) and not only by the rates of failures/retention or school dropouts.

Although many students pass from one cycle to another, for example, from the 2nd cycle of primary education to the 1st cycle of secondary education, most of them do not develop the skills and abilities expected in all subjects. In Mogovolas, the causes of SF bring together actions/responsibilities of different actors, especially teachers, students, parents, but also educational policies in force in the country.

Among the subjects assessed the worst performance was observed in the subject of Natural Sciences, where the average score was 0.25 points, and the best in Portuguese Language, where the average performance was of 1.3 points, still very low. Fieldwork exposed deficient pre-service training (program duration) of teachers that does not offer a solid and sufficient scientific, pedagogical and didactic knowledge base for the performance of the teaching task, as well as the use of ineffective teaching strategies in the face of the heterogeneity of classes, specificities of students and the difficulties of each school context.

It was also observed that there was a deficit among teachers in the mastery of the content taught, especially in the subjects of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, which jeopardizes the mediation of contents and creates lack of interest in studying

from students. Aspects related to weak methodological knowledge that ignores the specificities of each student and promotes the use of methodologies that do not stimulate reflection and critical thinking stand out. Regarding this aspect, problems were also noted with assessment practices in the design of questions that do not explore the competencies expected in the teaching programs. In conclusion, teaching problems (poor mastery of contents, deficient pre-service training and methodological aspects) explain School Failure in primary schools in the District of Mogovolas.

Therefore, in view of the complexity and diversity of the causes of SF, as well as the limitations of this research, especially the small sample size and its non-probabilistic nature which limits the generalization of the results, the research question is considered as having been adequately explored and the objectives achieved. Despite this, the debate on the relationship between teaching problems and school failure is not finished, thus new perspectives and assessments are proposed considering different contexts, resources and tools that may or may not corroborate the conclusions presented. In fact, new reflections are essential to outline new understandings and horizons about School Failure, especially in the Mozambican context – one of the causes of school dropout.

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