Coping Mechanisms for the Challenges Encountered in the Involvement of Students' Council in the Running of Public Secondary Schools in Narok County of Kenya

Samuel Sakarri[1*], Peterson O. Oigara[2], Victoria Wanambiro[3]
[1-3]Mount Kenya University, Kenya

*Corresponding author
Samuel Sakarri

Abstract: Proponents of student participation in decision-making have justified their support for establishment of student councils on premise that decisions in a school affect the student in latent and manifest ways. Largely, they are recipients of final decisions hence the recommendations made by students may be very constructive and if approached in the right manner would work positively. The purpose of this study was to investigate coping mechanisms for the challenges encountered in the involvement of students' council in the running of public secondary schools in Narok County in Kenya. Descriptive research survey design was used to inform the study, which targetted students, teachers and head teachers of the secondary schools in the county. Structured and unstructured questionnaires were used to collect primary data. The collected data was coded with regard to the type and source then analyzed and interpreted quantitatively and qualitatively as per the objectives. The obtained data was interpreted, analysed and presented. The findings show that the identified challenges fall under three categories namely: School Culture, Teachers perception and Students perception. Solutions suggested to address these challenges include engaging the students' representatives in the making of rules, conduction of transparent elections for prefects where the votes are counted in the presence of the students and the leader elect announced among others. The researcher therefore recommends that teachers should learn the role of meaningful student council involvement. This calls for training in Student/teachers Partnerships amongst the school heads.

Keywords: Coping Mechanisms, Students Council, Public Secondary Schools.

INTRODUCTION

Students have limited say in some school decisions and often only relatively few students are involved in the form of committees and student organizations. They are rarely involved in core decisions such as pedagogy or school organizations. Important decisions are made for and about them, yet they are not given meaningful consideration or opportunity for participation during the evaluation or assessment process. Fletcher [1] observed that even in schools where students are asked to participate in the process; they are only given a token or passive volunteer assignments and tasks to complete and thus end up facing challenges unknown to school administration.

Calls for inclusions of students in the decision-making structure in schools have led to various attempts by the Ministry of Education to put in place structures for inclusion. The most prominent of this was the formation of the Kenya Secondary School Student Council (KSSSC) formed in 2009 with a view to making secondary school governance more participatory. In this new arrangement, students would be part of decision-making to ensure their interests are adopted in the administration of schools. However, despite this laudable move by the government, not much research has been conducted to find out coping mechanisms for the challenges encountered in the involvement of students' council in the running of public secondary schools. UNICEF [2] undertook a study on the adoption and nature of the SCs in Kenyan secondary schools. The study established that adoption figures had improved from one percent at the baseline in 2009 to 38.3 percent in 2011. The popular SCs were however welfare at 78 percent. The percentage of pure (SC only) and hybrid (SC and prefects) systems stood at 78.6 percent, with 40.3 percent of the SCs based on elected councilors and 38.3 percent based on the prefect system.

This state of affairs depicts secondary schools' reluctance to give SCs full mandate for management. Perhaps, the major cause of this disinclination is the lack of socialization or poor socialization of the SCs on management in many schools. Socializing the SCs in management is the only way the disinclination can be surmounted. To realize this goal, an evaluation study

that surveys the effects of socializing SC for management in their schools was necessary. The information obtained would be utilized to suggest guidelines to design a training manual that would equip the schools in Kenya with key competencies to constructively guide SCs in management in their schools. Scholars [3] and [4] advocate for more meaningful student involvement and believe that it has many benefits for both students and schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Challenges in involving students' council in the running of public secondary schools

Latham [5] suggests that one strategy is to view the rule-making process as a potential learning experience, not as an administrative chore. Latham adds that instead of distributing rules as an edict, the school can encourage teachers, student and families to work together in the rule-making process. Classroom Discipline Plan also suggests that the students can be encouraged to come up with rules that could be incorporated in the old school laws. This would give them a feeling of ownership since they will view them as their own creation and thus strive to obey them. Students are far more likely to internalize and respect rules that they helped create than rules that are handed to them [6]. Bruner-Jones [7] notes that such involvement must be genuine and should include all students and not limited to just a few students in student government. Such students may be least likely to challenge the rules in the first place.

According to Human Rights Watch [8], the purpose of children's education, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, should be the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and preparation for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, and tolerance. Students have several basic rights which they are entitled and which they should expect, but which unfortunately they often do not enjoy. However, the penetration of human rights movements into schools in Kenya has created awareness among children about their rights. Various acts of parliament are also in their defense [9].

Some of the basic rights include the right to a learning environment that is appropriately well ordered, peaceful, safe, non-threatening and conducive to learning. The right to having a caring, well-prepared teacher who instructs effectively and who limits students' inappropriate self-destructive behavior; and the right to choose how to behave, with full understanding of the consequences that automatically follow their choices.

Theoretical Framework

In order to fully investigate the coping mechanisms for the challenges encountered in the involvement of students' council in the running of public secondary schools, two theories, social change and functionalism were used. Social change is defined as a social process whereby the values, attitudes, or institutions of the society become modified because of the belief that a particular group is at risk for a problem with serious consequences unless a suggested behavior is adopted lessen or eliminate the problem. The functionalism theory focuses on the homeostatic nature of social systems: social systems work to maintain equilibrium, which is attained through the socialization of members of the society into the basic values and norms of that society. In order for social change to occur, a group of people must have certain characteristics. The study thus argued that, for SC to effectively manage indiscipline cases in secondary schools, they must be well socialized with adequate knowledge, skills and relevant attitudes for their role. The desired outcome for using SC is to attain a peaceable school where the number of strikes, suspensions and cases reported to teachers is reduced. The function of the SC organs in the school is to ensure that the equilibrium of a peaceable school is maintained. Socialization is expected to contribute to the success of this process.

RESULTS
Demographic information

The study found that there were some demorgraphic information that determined the way students and teachers would cope with challenges encountered in the involvement of students' council in the running of public secondary schools.

Table-1: Teachers' Gender

Teachers	Frequency	Percent
Male	18	54.5
Female	15	45.5
Total	**33**	**100.0**

Most (54.5%) of the teachers who participated in the study were male. This indicates that amongst the teachers in Narok County, there are more men than women who are involved in the running of schools hence in the instilling discipline amongst students. The study revealed that male teachers had better mechanisms in dealing with challenges compared to female teachers.

Table-2: Students' Gender

Students	Frequency	Percent
Male	49	53.8
Female	42	46.2
Total	**91**	**100.0**

The study revealed that most (53.8%) of the students in Narok County are male as indicated in the table above. Females are 46.2%, which implies that there are more boys than girls in the schools in the county; thus responding more to the challenges and solutions encountered while involving students' council in the running of the schools in Narok south district. The study revealed that boys were better placed to cope with challenges encountered in the involvement of students' council in the running of public secondary schools than girls did.

Class of the Student

The study revealed that students in higher forms were better placed to cope with challenges encountered in the involvement of students' council in the running of public secondary schools than those in forms 1 and 2.

Table-3: Students' Form

Form of the Student	Frequency	Percent
Form III	44	48.4
Form IV	47	51.6
Total	**91**	**100.0**

Most (51.6%) of the students were in form four. The rest (48.4%) were in form three. This indicates that in most of the schools in the County, form fours have more students than form threes. This was a good sample to involve in the study since the assumption was that they have spent adequate time in their respective schools to understand aspects of students' council involvement in management hence give more reliable information.

Work Experience

The study revealed that teachers who had more years of experience had better better coping mechanism for the challenges encountered in the involvement of students' council in the running of public secondary schools compared to those with few years of experience.
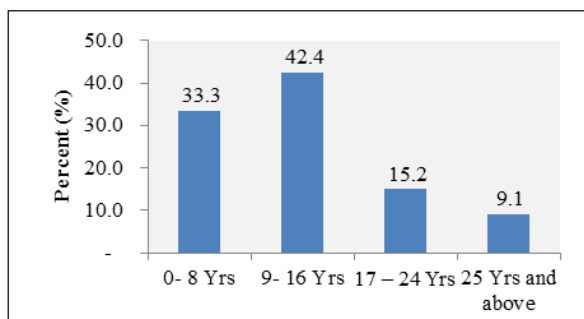

Fig-1: Teachers' Working Experience

Findings indicated that most of the teachers in the County have been in the service for over 9 years with 42.4% of them asserting that they had served for a period of 9-16 years. A few (9.1%) of them alleged that they had served for 25 years and above. This implies that most of them have adequate experience in the profession hence have an in depth understanding of the facets of students' council involvement in management of discipline thus enhancing the reliability of the information gathered.

Type of Institution

The study revealed that students and teachers in mixed schools were better placed to cope with challenges encountered in the involvement of students' council in the running of public secondary schools than those in pure Boys or pure Girls schools; may be because of interactions of genders and the confidence that comes with it.

Table-4: Type of Institution (Teachers)

Teachers' Institution Type	Frequency	Percent
Mixed	13	39.4
Boys	11	33.3
Girls	9	27.3
Total	**33**	**100.0**

The teachers who participated in the study were from different types of institutions in the area. Some (39.4%) of them were from mixed schools, others (33.3%) were from boys schools while 27.3% were from girls schools. This indicates that the County has various types of schools. This ensured that the findings would not be biased on certain types of schools handling of discipline and hence allows a generalization to enhance the reliability of the inferences drawn.

Table-5: Type of Institution (Students)

Students' Institution Type	Frequency	Percent
Mixed	29	31.9
Boys	27	29.7
Girls	35	38.5
Total	**91**	**100.0**

Findings on the type of institution where the students schooled further asserted that there are diverse categories of schools in Narok County with 38.5% of them mentioning that they were from girl schools. This indicates that the information collected was not biased on particular categories of institutions but instead there was a diverse study to ensure reliable achievements of the study objectives.

Challenges Encountered in the Involvement of the Students' Council and Suggested Solutions

Teachers and students both mentioned various challenges encountered in involvement of students' council in the running of the schools. The different challenges mentioned fall under three main categories namely: School Culture, Teachers perception and Students perception.

School Culture

The culture of a school includes the policies, rules, laws, and beliefs that inform the way people interact within that school. Some teachers mentioned that they would love to open up the decision-making process to the students but for the fact that a significant number of decisions are not theirs to give away or even to make themselves, the school policies turns out to be an obstacle in some areas e.g. the preparation of examinations timetable. Students on their side felt that they are often victims of rules developed without considering their interests. Bruner [10] noted that students who are involved in the construction of the school rules might be least likely to challenge the rules in the first place. Solutions suggested to address this challenge include engaging the students' representatives in the making of rules, conducting discussions with all students at classroom level before major decisions are made such as change in the diet before they are passed by the school. Students are far more likely to internalize and respect rules that they helped create than rules that are handed to them [11].

Teachers Perception

There were allegations by teachers that students simply resist decisions any time they are consulted due to the feeling that they are being pushed in it for no benefit. Others mentioned that they just resist to test to see if the teacher is serious about the decision. Additionally, some of the teachers alleged that students want to elect leaders who will support their indiscipline, hence their voting of leaders cannot hold per se given the purpose of the students' council. Olembo et al [12] on the purpose of the students' council noted that it was meant to promote students activity. To assist in the management of the school; to develop attitude of good citizenship; to promote welfare of the school and to provide forum for expression of students wishes; to develop students initiative and responsibility; to provide a laboratory for citizenship and to provide opportunity for the training of student leaders.

Students Perception

Students alleged that teachers simply do not want to hear them and actively work to suppress their voices. They mentioned that the teachers in appointing the students' representatives do not consider them. There were complaints from some students that they are not involved in electing the prefects while others complained that they vote in prefects' selection but their votes are not considered. It was alleged that teachers elect the leaders whom they like who in turn oppress the student rather than advocating for their issues in the school administration. Oyaro [13] asserted that students view prefects as puppets of the administration, traitors and sell-outs. He further added that they see them as part of the autocratic system that suppresses them and they despise and loathe them, noting that the attitude has prevailed because of various reasons, one of them being the way students' council is chosen. Suggestions given to address this include: conduction of transparent elections for prefects where the votes are counted in the presence of the students and the leader elect announced; reducing the powers of the prefects and giving the students a chance to rate their prefects at the end of every term. The Wangai Report [14] stated that some prefects wield too much power are harsh and even beat or molest fellow students.

Summary of the Study

This study used questionnaires containing both structured and unstructured questions to collect data. The questionnaires were distributed randomly to the selected secondary schools in the sub-county. The study generated both qualitative and quantitative data. The

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (Version 13.0) was used to analyze the data. For the quantitative data, analysis of the data was done through descriptive statistics by use of frequencies and percentages and averages. The qualitative data was first organized into themes corresponding to the study objectives. The data was then presented using charts, pie charts, bar graphs, percentages and tables.

Regarding the challenges experienced while involving the students council, the different challenges mentioned fall under three main categories namely: School Culture, Teachers perception and Students perception. Solutions suggested to address the challenges include engaging the students' representatives in the making of rules. Conduction of transparent elections for prefects where the votes are counted in the presence of the students and the leader elect announced; reducing the powers of the prefects and giving the students a chance to rate their prefects at the end of every term among others.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, meaningful student involvement is not easy or instantaneously rewarding. However, in a time when the success of individual students is being leveraged against funding for schools, it is essential to go beyond students planning school co-curricular activities and elections. There are real and substantial challenges. Despite the various types of meaningful student involvement outlined in this study, there is no finite model for engaging every student that can be adopted by all schools. What may be appropriate for one school might not succeed in another. Meaningful student involvement is part of a transformative cycle that should be continually re-examined, redeveloped and reconceived within each learning community as it evolves over time with new participants. The potential outcomes are too great to ignore the possibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings, the researcher recommends that:

Teachers should learn the role of meaningful student council involvement. This calls for training in Student/teachers Partnerships amongst the school heads. Workshops should be organized for students to share with their teachers on their cultures, heritages, and backgrounds. This can greatly help the teachers to have an in-depth understanding of the students hence a useful tool in the selection of student leaders. Schools heads should organize a "safe space" open discussion about perceptions that students, student leaders and teachers have towards each other. During these sessions, there should be check-ins that allows students and teachers to share their honest thoughts with one another. Schools should develop lesson plans to integrate meaningful student involvement into classes, allowing students to earn credit.

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