Research Paper **Education**

Hindrances to Student Participation in Decision Making in Secondary Schools in Kenya: The Case of Central Rift Region of Rift Valley Province in Kenya

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ABSTRACT *The purpose of this study was to investigate the hindrances that were encountered by students and school administrators in involving students in decision making processes in secondary schools in Kenya. The study was prompted by the recent changes in secondary school administration in Kenya whereby the Ministry of Education allowed the formation of student councils in the schools to facilitate the participation of students in administration. The research was conducted in the Central Rift Region of Kenya focusing on boarding secondary schools. Cross sectional survey research design was adopted. Out of the 87 boarding school in the region, 15 were randomly selected to form the sample. Similarly, 150 students (10 from each school) were also selected to respond to the questionnaire. Purposive sampling was done to select 6 head teachers who were interviewed and 30 teachers who responded to the questionnaire. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire administered to students and teachers. Descriptive statistics was used to summarize the findings. It was found out that students encountered challenges in their endeavors to get involved in decision making in schools. The challenges identified in the study included reluctance by adults to allow students to participate in decision making, students views not being taken seriously, intimidation by school authority and delay by school administration in effecting the suggestions of students. A further challenge was the lack of forum by students to express views; meaning that students were excluded from key decision making bodies. It is therefore recommended that a sensitization campaign be undertaken by the Ministry of Education for the purpose of changing attitudes and perceptions concerning student participation in the minds of all stakeholders.*

KEYWORDS: Hindrances, participation, students, decision making

Introduction

According to Christie (1998) the participation of students in decision making is replete with tension and controversy. She argues that for the purpose of democracy students constitutes a large number of stakeholders, but their inclusion in the decision making process is problematic. This is because of the contending viewpoints on how differing interest groups perceive and articulate the participation of students in decision making process. Most opponents of student inclusion in decision making base their assertions on the view point that students must passively receive instructions and behave in accordance with instructions from parents and teachers. This view will mean that policies must be designed by adults yet students are part of the decision making body.

Magadla (2006) presents a second viewpoint that hinders student participation. This viewpoint suggests that students can participate to a certain degree. This viewpoint argues that there are a matter on which student inclusion is undesirable example cited is disciplinary matters of professional issues. This is also supported by Squelch (1999) who argues that being a stakeholder does not mean you participate in every decision. Some decisions are best left in the hands of parents and professionals. Sithole (1998) agrees and argues that although students have a stake in the governance of schools; their participation is limited because they are regarded by law as minors, which means that there are duties that they cannot perform owing to their status.

The foregoing arguments are therefore aimed at limiting student inclusion in decision making to peripheral issues if not dismissing it altogether as of no consequence. Proponents of the above theories are supported by a number of researches done on student involvement in governance. Magadla (2007) raises a number of problems experienced with student involvement in decision making. The first one is that students have insufficient knowledge to make contributions concerning certain matters especially finances. The second one is that trust concerning discussions at meetings is not desired, especially when it comes to sensitive matters. The third one is that students seldom make any comments and ask questions. The fourth one is that they are inhibited by adults. The fifth one is that they are not interested in daily governance of the school. Lastly the students are dismissed students as too

young and not responsible enough to be on equal terms with adults.

Huddleston (2007) further found out that in the Czech Republic one of the chief factors that militates against the increasing participation of students is old school teachers and parents who are reluctant to give students a voice. In general, also, private and semi-private schools are less likely to encourage student participation. Factors which militate against more effective involvement were said to be: teachers' fear of losing control; reluctance of teachers and students to give up their free time; poor information – students are not always aware of activities in which they can participate; lack of professional development – e.g., training manuals and seminars. Davies (2005) also gives a number of issues and constraints in participation, namely: the need for whole school structures or activities, rather than confining participation to elite or to a segment of the school; the scope and extent of participation activities; time and opportunity costs; existing attitudes and orientations by teachers; the motives for introducing participation (i.e. whether it is seen primarily as a way to control pupils rather than empower them).The above views by Davies(2005) seem to blame institutional hurdles to student participation in decision making.

Huddleston (2007) further found out that contradictions in school life – e.g., between teachers' and parents' views, between democratic ideals and externally set demands of testing and examinations. The students he interviewed felt there was very little opportunity for them to influence curriculum content or learning methods. A number said that trying to do so was often a bad experience, that no one listens to what they say and that the reaction of the teacher is negative. So they start to be passive and don't think that they could influence anything at all. The research indicates that both teachers and students see curriculum and learning methods as an individual issue for the teacher and the class, rather than as a general issue of student involvement.

Despite the hindrances to student participation highlighted in the foregoing literature, this study maintained that students were one of the most indispensable components of democratic school governance. This viewpoint was emphasized by Njozela (1998) who claims that parents and principals should not underestimate the contributions of students, especially if they are given the opportunity to develop their skills and

their level of maturity. It was therefore incumbent on this study to investigate the contribution of student inclusion in decision making to democratic practice in Kenya especially because no study had been done to relate democracy and student participation in decision making in Kenya.

Statement of the Problem

Following frequent cases of student unrest in Kenya over the last few years, the Ministry of Education has responded to calls for greater inclusion in decision making in secondary schools. This response has been in the form of creation of Student Councils, touted by educationists as the panacea to the oft disruptive and destructive unrests in the sector. Though there have been attempts by the school administrators to implement this policy, it was however not done without implementation problems that manifested in form of complaints by both administrators and students. Due to the fact that this was a relatively novel and unexplored issue in education where not much research has been carried out, the study was thus established in order for these hindrances to successful inclusion of students in decision making to be empirically explored and documented. In this way, policy formulators and other stakeholders in the secondary school sector would have a basis for making policy that would respond appropriately to these challenges. In light of this therefore, this study aims at investigating the hindrances to student participation in decision making in secondary schools in Kenya.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Central Rift Region of Rift Valley province in Kenya. The target population of the study was all students, teachers and head teachers in boarding secondary schools in the Central Rift Region. The sampling unit was the school rather than the individual participant. Using formula for calculation of sample size proposed for descriptive studies in Mertens (2005), fifteen schools were randomly sampled from a population of 87 secondary schools. From each school 10 students were sampled using the random sampling technique bringing the sample size to 150 students. Two teachers per school were also conveniently sampled from each school to participate in the study. Both groups of participants were required to respond to the questionnaire. In addition six experienced head teachers were purposively sampled to be interviewed by the researcher. Experience in administration was the basis of their selection into the sample.

The study adopted a cross- sectional survey design. Best & Khan (2006) define the survey as a method that gathers data from a relatively large number of cases at a particular time. It is a method used in non experimental research such as this in which questionnaires or interviews are used to gather information and the goal is to understand the characteristics of a population (Johnson et al 2008). This was fitting to the study as it intended to collect views from the population on student participation in decision making in schools. The study was basically descriptive (describing conditions as they are at a particular time) hence the survey was the appropriate design. The design was also cross-sectional as it involved the collection of data at one point in time from a random sample representing some given population at a time (Jurs, 2005). In the case of this study the sample was composed of teachers and students.

Reliability

To ensure reliability, piloting of the instrument was done in three schools in Baringo County, a county outside the study area.60 questionnaires were distributed among the students and six teachers. In total, 54 questionnaires were returned. The reliability coefficient was calculated using Cronbach coefficient alpha. A reliability coefficient of 0.77 was obtained and was deemed reliable. In addition, experts in the field of education administration were engaged to verify the content validity of the instrument. In view of their suggestions, rectifications were made on the instrument.

Results and Discussion

The major objective of the study was to find out the hindrances to student participation in decision making in secondary schools. The first step towards achievement of this objective was to posit a dichotomous question in which the respondents were to submit a yes or no response to the question: are there challenges encountered in involving students in decision making? The findings are presented in the Table 1 below:

Table 1 Responses on whether or not students have en- countered challenges in getting their views included in decision making (figures in %)

Respondent	YES		NO		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Student	202	91.8	18	8.2	100
Teacher	26	86	4	14	100

The findings on Table 1 indicate that 91.8 % of the students and 86% of the teachers agreed that students encountered challenges in participation in decision making. This shows that student participation in decision making is fraught with obstacles; a view confirmed by Christie (1998) who maintains that participation of learners in school governance is replete with tension and controversy. Even Gearon (2003:205), in his book for teachers of citizenship asks: "can an essentially undemocratic institution, with little potential for genuine power sharing, offer a context for young people to experience democracy in action?" This implies that student participation in decision making is not easy mainly because the school itself is based on authoritarian system of leadership. The study therefore sought to find out the challenges faced by students and administrators in including students in decision making. Table 2 presents the responses of the participants.

Table 2: Challenges in including students in decision making (figures in %)

Challenges	Respondents	SA/A	D/SD	ms	Total
Students have insufficient knowledge to deal with certain issues such as finance	Students	44.2	56.8		100
	Teachers	76	24	8.8	100
Students are not interested in the daily running of the School	Students	15	85	8.7	100
	Teachers	4	96	9.8	100
Adults are reluctant to allow students to participate in decision making	Students	100	-	-	100
	Teachers	75.7	24.3	5.8	100
Students views are not taken seriously	Students	76.6	13.4	2.5	100
	Teachers	57	43	1.1	100
Students are intimidated by school authority	Students	87	13	0.4	100
	Teachers	66.6	33.4	2.8	100
Student participation seen as rebellion	Students	84.2	15.8	1.9	100
	Teachers	73	27	2.4	100
Unreasonable demands from students	Students	57.3	42.6	1.3	100
	Teachers	87	13	4.5	100
Delay in effecting suggestions by teachers	Students	70.9	29.2	6.6	100
	Teachers	76	24	6.5	100
Lack of forum to express views	Students	82.2	17.8	3.3	100
	Teachers	73.4	26.6	-	100

The results in Table 2 above depict a high degree of agreement to most challenges revealed by the respondents. Teachers and students shared almost the same sentiments regarding the challenges. Accordingly, it transpired from the open ended questionnaire items that involving students in decision making especially in areas requiring technical expertise such as finance was inhibited by the perceived lack of knowledge by the students that would enable them to participate fully in such discussions. Head teachers agreed with this view:

Students are not allowed to make decisions on finances or school fees for two reasons: one: that this is the mandate of the school within the regulation laid down by the Ministry of Education. Two: economy of the country also dictates on the school fees and budgetary allocation which students may not be aware of.'

This view was mainly propagated by teachers with 76 % of them presenting such a view. However 56.8 % of students opposed this viewpoint believing that students possessed relevant skills in dealing with financial issues. Hence it was felt that students should only participate in decisions which concerned them directly. This confirms Harber and Trafford (1999) when they argue that the traditional exclusion of young people from consultative process and bracketing out of their views is founded upon an outdated view. Such a view fails to acknowledge the students' capacity to reflect on issues affecting their lives and education.

A majority of students (100%) and teachers (75.7 %) raised the issue of reluctance of adults to allow students participate in decision making. Some were of the opinion that students in the school were intimidated by teachers when they raised concerns that depicted the school administrators in bad light. A student responded that students who were vocal in speaking up for the others were victimized and labeled

deviant. Some of these students would be suspended from school. This treatment raised fear in the students such that their freedom of expression was constrained. This finding is further emphasized by 87% of the students and 66.6% teachers who reveal that students are intimidated by teachers when they give contrary views on administrative matters. In support of this, Fielding & Rudduck (2002) observes that one of the challenges to student participation in decision making is the attitude of teachers and administrators to students being allowed a say in what happens to them at school, particularly if what they are discussing is how and what they are taught. For many educators, student voice can be threatening, particularly if it is given equal weight with teacher voice. Because what students have to say about teaching and learning may be threatening to teachers, the temptation might be to silence student voice or to limit it to areas of relative safety, such as school uniform, litter policy or setting achievement targets. The issue of feeling threatened on the part of teachers was also reported by the head teachers in the interview schedule. One head teacher reported:

'One of the greatest challenges facing us in involving students in decision making is the reaction of teachers. Teachers are annoyed due to fear that students are gaining too much power. They feel they are losing ground. They defend themselves during open fora when accused of something. They victimize the students then the students withdraw from reporting incidences'.

Giroux (1993) therefore reminds adults that they should not deny secondary school students the opportunity to express their views to participate as result of fear that they will lose control of them. Related to this challenge was the concern by 82.2 % students and 73.4 % of teachers that they lacked fora to express their views openly. Wyse (2001) supports this finding by pointing out that the opportunities for children in schools to express their views freely in matters affecting them are extremely limited. This concern has been highlighted in earlier discussions in this chapter where it was established that the means of communication that were open to students in the schools were those that failed to inculcate democratic culture in the students of dialogue and discussion. In other words, the communication channels emphasized the autocratic culture that secondary schools were founded upon.

These responses suggest that students lacked necessary support from the adults. Wyse (2001) adds those children's rights to participation is perpetuated by views that form interrelated strands. First, students are not capable of making reasoned and informed decisions, secondly, students lack wisdom born of experience and are prone to making mistakes. This means that student participation in decision making is not encouraged by adults in the school community and in point of fact, democracy and free expression was hindered due to fear and intimidation by the adults on the students. In support of this, Brown (2002) wonders whether students genuinely gain the skills of democratic participation in an environment in which, traditionally, their opinion is not valued, and they are unable to make decisions or effect change on issues of importance to their daily experience. Tihapi (2006) asserts that we cannot speak for other people because we lack the means to understand their interest. Secondary school learners should therefore be offered the opportunity to explain what their experiences are by being allowed to participate in decision making processes. This reveals the desire for secondary school students to be part of the problem solutions bedeviling the secondary school sector. Atkins (2004) agrees that power struggles between the powerful (teachers) and the powerless (students) is one of the greatest hindrances to student participation in decision making. Participation is the process is basically related with power. The political power game brings conflict between the powerful and powerless. Participation is a conflictual and sometimes it is a violent process whereby the less powerful must struggle for increased control over their lives. Participation involves political struggle whereby the powerful fight to retain their privileges.

Data presented by all participants regarding the challenges reveals a common complaint that due to their immaturity, students sometimes made unreasonable demands leading to the administration failing to take their suggestions seriously. A reasonable percentage of students (57.3%) and teachers (87%) pointed out this challenge. One head teacher reported:

Students make demands that cannot be met due to financial constraints facing the school. An example recently there was a case where students made a request for internet services to be provided by in the school despite the fact that the computers vital for the installation of internet service are not enough. Such unrealistic and wild demands by the students may wipe out whatever sympathy they might have had from teachers.

They students are branded immature and any input into the decision making process in the school may be rejected. Another head teacher pointed out that:

"Students are alarmists. They magnify issues. Next time you don't take them seriously."

However, students were of the view that they had the right to be heard despite their age. Trafford (2010) agrees that children's difficulties with participation could in part be attributed to the theories of head teachers that students are children and different from adults who should be in control. This confirms the popular adult view that students are immature due to their youth but as they grow older, they get more responsibility. In a study to find out the levels of student participation in school governance in public schools in Nepal, Hairi (2007) also found out that students were excluded from critical decision making activities because of the adult fear that the students' demands would be unrealistic. Instead student participation was confined to school activities like annual festival, collecting resources of school construction and maintenance of the play ground. In a similar study in South Africa, Mabovula (2009) found that learners are not competent enough to deal with sensitive issues of school management as they are still immature and need to be trained and work-shopped. Moreover, respondents felt that learners did not participate meaningfully in democratic processes within the school, as they did not have what it takes to participate meaningfully, lacked proper understanding and tended to give vent to their personal problems.

At the same time, Shihilu (2001) found out that the public school administrators did not have knowledge of the process of their participation in the school governance. This attributed to the misconception that participation is itself hard job. The lack of understanding and knowledge is the main barrier of the student participation in decision making. Many head teachers, teachers and parents do not have the information on involving students in decision making. The lack of knowledge can be partly blamed on the Ministry of Education which many head teachers blamed for their ignorance. Said one:

'We have not received any official communication from the Ministry on this matter. What we act upon is media reports. However the District Education Office recently conducted seminars on student councils. The government needs to do more.'

Therefore, the lack of knowledge is a barrier of student participation. In terms of this study therefore, such views only serve to confirm that power relations between adults and children are the main hindrances to student participation in decision making.

A further complaint by teachers was the fear that students would abuse their powers if given opportunity to participate in administrative tasks such as interviewing or appraising teachers' performance. Examples were given of inappropriate interviews or of pupils marking their teachers' lessons out of 10. There is no doubt that, in some schools, student's views were being used cynically as a means to control teachers: as a result teachers feel undervalued by management and undermined by that misuse of student participation in decision making. This has been confirmed by studies done in the UK where teacher unions are starting to agitate about what they describe as an over-emphasis or even misuse of student participation in decision making as a management tool for controlling teachers (Anderson, 2000). Some of the evidence produced suggested that children are being involved in the appointment of teachers (which is good practice, though not universally popular) – but in wrong ways: in one case, a candidate was asked by pupils to sing a song (Atkins, 2004). This depicts an irresponsible lack of training given to those students on the panel, so that they had no idea what their role was or where the limits lay.

A further complaint by majority of respondents (71% students and 76 % teachers) was the delay that school administration took to implement some of their suggestions. This delay discouraged student participation in effective decision making and encouraged an apathetic attitude towards participation yet according to Shweisfurth et al (2002)

educators play a very important role in laying the foundation for democratic citizenship, and that foundation acts as a catalyst for democratic citizenship in adulthood. Tihapi (2006) states that teachers generally take it for granted that secondary school students will learn democracy unaided. Such an attitude contributes to the apathy already felt in the students that whatever they suggest is not taken seriously. The result of such apathy is the continuity of the status of non participation in decision making due to the feeling that whatever students said did not matter. This spells doom to efforts of inculcating democratic culture among the students.

Further examination of data obtained from the interview sessions revealed the following challenges to democracy in schools:

i.   Tradition and conservative mindset of school administrators. That habits have been formed and the belief that things have been this way for years and should not change. Some want to run the school the way they run their homes.
ii.   Feeling that students are too young.
iii.   Don't care attitude of students who don't see the need for participation. They feel that they are in school for a season and hence it is not in their best interest.
iv.   Reaction of teachers who feel that their space is being undermined. Teachers are now very jittery and on the receiving end.
v.   Parents, students taking advantage of this democratic space to make unwarranted and unreasonable suggestions
vi.   Overreaction by the school administration may make students reluctant to voice their opinion. Some administrators become overzealous in their quest to implement suggestions by students e.g. sacking of staff and teachers whom the students had complained about. This may be more than what the students wanted.

Accordingly, the study concludes that secondary school students have not yet experienced democracy at school. The findings of the study reveal an indecisive and autocratic mindset among educators regarding the issue of student participation in decision making. Furthermore, they betray a narrow conception of student participation in school governance and still display an element of mistrust towards the students concerning their roles in governance. As a result of these forces, the democratic potential of learner participation is undermined.

Conclusion and Recommendations
The study concludes that school administrators encountered challenges in allowing students to participate in decision making. Student participation in decision making was hampered by a variety of issues namely; fear of intimidation by school administrators, delays in effecting student suggestion and a perceived lack of avenues through which students can effectively participate. Administrators and teachers alike also pointed out that it was common for students to give impractical and unviable suggestions that caused many among them to believe student participation as a futile venture. It is therefore recommended that school administrators to strive to create a conducive environment that encourages participation. It behooves school administrators to respond to student suggestions by either adopting them as school policy or informing students of the reasons for the rejection of their proposals. In order for the students to offer constructive criticism of school policy, it is necessary for administrators to accord vocal students to be protected from victimization and to assure students that their active role in championing for student rights will not be punished. Assurances of this nature should be accompanied by proper guidance of the students of what participation entails. Students should be made to understand that participation does not mean a lazes faire approach and abuse of privilege.

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