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About Eastern Africa Journal of Contemporary Research (EAJCR)

Enhancing Student Councils Effectiveness at Public Secondary Schools in Bungoma North Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract

Involvement of students in the management of secondary schools in Kenya as key stakeholders through their student councils is widely adopted as recommended by the Ministry of Education. But even with the existence of student councils, most secondary schools in Kenya continue to experience student unrests and demonstrations. This study sought to identify the challenges inhibiting the successful execution of the mandate of student councils at public secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub-County and recommend appropriate strategies to enhance their effectiveness in the performance of designated roles for the better operations of the secondary schools. An exploratory qualitative survey research design was adopted for the study which targeted 10 public secondary schools that were randomly selected from among a total of 40 public secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub-County with respondents constituting Deputy Principals (who are the designated in-charge of student councils affairs in secondary schools), student council members, and ordinary students. Data was collected using open ended questionnaires, interview schedules and focus group discussions and analysed through content analysis with the arising findings organized under common themes. The study identified the lack of adequate support to the student councils as well as leadership and managerial skill gaps among the student council members as the key inhibitors of the successful execution of their mandate. Consequently, the implementation of the following ten strategies were suggested as appropriate remedy to enhance the effectiveness of student councils within the public secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub-County: appropriate induction and continuous capacity building for student council members; holding regular student council meetings; supporting the student councils members in their roles and activities; delegating reasonable authority to student council members; allocating workstations and support infrastructure to student council members; avoiding work overload and inadequate representation; safeguarding confidentiality; ensuring impartial discharge of duties; academic and social support for student council leaders; and finally according student council leaders the respect they deserve.

Keywords: Student Leadership, School Governance, Student Councils, Public Secondary Schools

1. Introduction

The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Kenya abolished the prefect system and introduced the student council system in 2009 in secondary schools as one of the strategies of averting the persistent problem of student unrest in schools particularly witnessed after the post-election violence of 2008 when there were several violent strikes in Kenyan secondary schools. The Kenya Secondary Schools Heads Association (KSSHA, MOE & UNICEF, 2010) also pointed out that if well implemented,

the student council system would significantly enhance students' participation in interactive school leadership.

Consequently, the Student Councils' Policy as part of a national leadership programme was rolled out in 2009 in Kenya with the aim of enhancing student participation in schools' governance (MOE & UNICEF; 2008; MOE, 2013). Many secondary schools across the country have adopted this system that allows students to exercise their democratic right while they are still young. Further, the student councils' system policy was rolled out in Kenyan secondary schools with the intention of making schools management more participatory by enhancing student participation in interactive school leadership. The policy was also introduced as a strategy to curb the rampant student unrest in Kenyan secondary schools through enhancing the student participation in interactive school governance.

However, most student councils' leaders have not been effective in their roles due to a myriad of challenges they encounter in the course of discharging their duties key among them being inadequate support from the schools' management, insufficient or lack of council members' induction after elections as well as intimidation by teachers and lack of motivation (Mukiti, 2014).

According to a collaborative report by Kenya Secondary Schools Student Council (KSSSC, 2013), the success of the student councils depends on a number of factors key among them being individual and collective commitment of each team member in performing their roles; the need for all the student councils' members to work together and support one another regardless of the position one holds in the hierarchical structure. A student council should fully represent the student body in the affairs of the school by taking the views and opinions of the students and issues affecting them to the school management for action. Furthermore, an effective student council ought to promote personal, social and intellectual development and a sense of responsibility amongst student councils' leaders and the student body. The report also recommends that it is the responsibility of the secondary school Principal in consultation with his/her deputy and the heads of departments of the respective council sections as pointed out in the council structure to ensure that the student councils' members perform their roles in line with the school rules and regulations, policies and procedures

The KSSSC (2013) report further recommends that immediately after the inauguration of the students' council leadership, the principal and his/her deputy in conjunction with the heads of various departments shall organize an induction session for the newly elected leaders covering duties and responsibilities; review of the students' council constitution; communication channels and media of communication; maintenance of records; time management; and team work and delegation of duties. Furthermore, the school administration shall provide and maintain a students' council resource center to be equipped with relevant materials for students' council to operate effectively and

efficiently. These are basic measures put in place to ensure that the students' council leaders deliver their services as required.

In the same vein, Miriti and Wangui (2014) recommend that effectively managing communication between students and the school administration, being disciplined and orderly, embracing democratic principles in leadership, being morally upright and promoting student welfare as some of the effective measures that need to be embraced by student leaders so as to enhance the working of student councils in schools.

The effectiveness of a student council in a school is measured in terms of its ability to enhance student participation in interactive school governance as its core mandate. An effective students' council has the ability to promote school discipline by encouraging the rest of the students to co-operate with the school's management, teachers and parents and obey the school rules and regulations for the development of their school. Consequently, a student council can only be considered effective if it manages to create order and harmony in the school as this is what eventually promotes good relations between the teachers and the students in the school leading to improved academic standards of the school.

Despite the existence of student councils in nearly all secondary schools in Kenya, student unrests and demonstrations still persist. Bungoma County is one of the counties in Kenya that are hard hit by the cases of student unrests especially in secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub County due to issues to do with students' welfare, demand for school buses among others, yet there are student councils in these schools. In the circumstances, this study sought to address the following two research questions:

i) What challenges inhibit the successful execution of the mandate of student councils among public secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub-County?

ii) Which strategies need to be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of student councils in the performance of their designated roles for the better operations of the secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub-County?

2. Methodology

This was an exploratory qualitative study adopting a survey research design. A total of 10 Deputy Principals (who are the designated in-charge of student councils affairs in secondary schools), 102 student council members, and 600 ordinary students from 10 public secondary schools that were randomly selected from among a total of 40 public secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub-County, constituted the target study units/respondents for the study.

In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain as much information as possible on the operational status of student councils and suggestions to improve their effectiveness in the selected secondary schools. Data was collected using open ended questionnaires for the students, interview schedules for the deputy principals, and

focus group discussion guides for the selected student councils' members. Data analysis was conducted through content analysis which involved reading through, editing and organizing the data from the interview schedules, focus group discussions and open-ended questionnaire items into common themes that emerged.

3. Results and Discussions

The findings from the research instruments were reviewed and summarized under common themes highlighting the respondents' observations and suggestions on the prevalent aspects they think inhibit the effective performance of student councils among public secondary schools in Bungoma North Sub-County and the strategies they think would enhance the effectiveness of the student councils.

3.1 Theme One: Appropriate Induction and Continuous Capacity Building for Student Council Members

It was evident from the respondents' comments that newly elected student council members were not being formally oriented into their new roles yet it is critical that after being elected to various student leadership positions, student council members should be adequately inducted in their roles as stated in the KSSSC (2013) manual so that at least they are made aware of what is expected of them. Better still, they should attend seminars, workshops and other student leadership forums so as to gain the leadership skills and the confidence they need to lead other students. Their roles should be clearly spelt out to them in a meeting with the Principal, Deputy Principal and Guidance and Counseling teachers clearly stating what is expected of them. However, it is unfortunate to note that majority of the student council members selected for this study had not been inducted in their roles. For instance, one of the student leaders said:

> *"We were simply told to start working immediately after the elections. The Deputy Principal who is our patron does not care about us; he is not there for us and does not even join us in our meetings. I can assure you some of us here are not sure of our roles because we were never inducted apart from a 30-minutes meeting we had with him immediately after we were elected. He promised to take us for a benchmarking tour to a neighboring school which he never mentioned the name and ever since he has never talked about it again."*

Therefore, most student council members feel that induction in their roles would really help them know what is expected of them. Being taken to other schools to meet with other student leaders and exchange ideas on student management would also be quite helpful.

In the same vein, another student leader from a different school had the following to say concerning preparation for their roles:

> *"We cannot know our roles when they have not been described to us; we should be given documented roles, which should later be elaborated during a meeting with the Deputy Principal. The roles should also be clarified to avoid confusion and duplication. I suppose these roles are documented somewhere, like in a*