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The Quality of Student Leadership in Secondary Schools in Mbarara City North

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Schools.

The study assessed the quality of student leadership in secondary schools in Mbarara city north. A cross-sectional research design was adopted using mixed methods. The findings reveal conflict resolution, team work, and communication skills as approaches used by student leaders to manage discipline in Mbarara city secondary schools. The study concludes that student leaders are very influential in managing discipline. The study recommends constant engagement between management of schools and student leaders for effective discipline management among learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, in ancient times, student leadership entailed training of students in the management of prevailing social issues including discipline (Adams & Semaadderi, 2019). In the 19th Century, several cases of indiscipline reported in schools were counteracted with punishments and retributions from school administration (Scribner & Warnick, 2021). In 1950s among American high schools,

most of the reported cases of indiscipline were solved by teachers (Ksinan et al., 2019). In Malaysia, Asia, indiscipline problem in schools was ranked as a major problem among students of primary and secondary schools (Yahaya et al., 2019). As a result, there was a creation of student bodies in schools to curb down the escalating disciplinary vices, known as Students Leadership Teams (Naimie et al., 2018). Around the same time

in Brazilian schools, teachers faced conflicts and disagreements among students such as bullying, violence, and incivility which necessitated formation of student leaders known as prefects (Rizzotto & Franca, 2022). According to the report of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development of 2019, the Brazilian school policy of establishing student leadership was an igniting factor reducing indiscipline among high school students.

In Africa, the issue of students' discipline in secondary schools has been a pillar to success of education over the years, while indiscipline has been a common challenge persistently. In Nigeria, around 1843 when Methodist missionaries started formal schools, there were cases of indiscipline which were counteracted with community patrolling and engagement; and this caused a lot of mental, emotional and physical damages in society (Odebode, 2019). These acts of indiscipline were either been carried out individually by the students or as a group (Ojedapo, 2013). In Cameroon, around 1970s among the Christian mission Schools, missionaries established student leader groups which were to help the missionaries in monitoring the discipline of students (Ngwokabuenui, 2015). In Ethiopia, secular education started in 1974 and over the years findings reveal that disciplinary problems have been getting worse from time to time (Eshetu, 2014).

Several measures including establishment of prefectorial bodies have been looked at as solutions to the prevailing challenge in Ethiopian schools. The Zambian government in 1966 set up educational policies that were majorly meant to curb down the persistent cases of indiscipline among students (Kalimaposo et al., 2023). In South Africa, indiscipline in secondary schools has been described as an evil that has spread and negatively affected learners' behavior (Magabane, 2021). Among the various solutions to this indiscipline has been the use of students to manage their fellow students such as South African Students' forum established in 2016 and Ophrah Winfrey Leadership Academy (Mkandla, 2019). In Kenya, secondary schools established student leadership as early as in the 18th Century (Semali & Vumilia, 2016). Most

notable was in 1967 after independence with coalition of student leadership fora among various secondary schools (Omote et al., 2020).

In Uganda, educational institutions have stressed improved discipline amongst their students since the start of formal education in the late 18th Century. In 1930s, students' discipline was much linked to political affiliation and revolutions, and as a result, there were reported cases of violence, aggression and strikes (Kiggundu, 2019). In 1954, students advocated for fair treatment at school, and consequently mobilized themselves through charismatic leadership (Byaruhanga, 2006). Around the same time, there was an establishment of "abaana ba Buganda" movement which was a forum for students from Buganda Kingdom (Kiggundu, 2019). After independence, many students built up themselves into coalition groups for more strength in their respective institutions. A study by Makerere University reveals that more secondary schools elected student leaders to give a platform for freedom of speech and better management of discipline (Lukendo, 2015). In 1970, the Parliament of Uganda enumerated how educational institutions were to be governed, managed and controlled, including freedoms and rights of students. Later in 2008, the same act was amended to cater for student leadership in post primary educational institutions. In 1988, there was an establishment of UNSA [Uganda National Students' Association]; an umbrella mobilizing all students in the country, and it is existent until now. This association upholds student leadership in schools, and has interest in students' discipline among others (Ankwasiize, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

In a secondary school, students are expected to be disciplined so as to be groomed into better persons. This discipline entails obedience to school rules, obedience to authorities, responsive behaviors, and fulfillment of academic obligations among others. Students are expected to regularly and punctually attend school and lessons, and participate in all co-curricular activities among others. When students are disciplined, they achieve a lot from school and subsequently, the millennium goals of Education

are achieved. In order to realize this, stakeholders in the management of secondary schools ought to lay strategies of managing the discipline of their learners (Ofoyuru & Okema, 2021). Schools need to have clear rules that prescribe the standard of discipline expected of students (Ehiane, 2014). Among stakeholders in ensuring good discipline among students are their own leaders, namely; the prefects. These student leaders have to be prepared so as to be effective in fulfilling their duties of management of the discipline of their fellows (Atkinson, 2020).

The report from the Mbarara City Education officer of December, 2022 revealed that there were various cases of indiscipline among students of secondary schools such as absenteeism, late coming, disrespect to authority and rules, absconding from co-curricular activities, improper classroom behavior, lack of seriousness in doing classwork, disrespecting school uniform, disrespecting school property, and unhealthy peer relationships, among others. The report showed that 14.3% of students were irregular at attending school, 11.9% failed to manage class time, 33.6% did not like participating in co-curricular activities, 15.8% were disobedient to class authorities among others (Tumwebaze, 2022). In addition, a report from the Mbarara City Inspector of schools showed that many head teachers were complaining about increasing cases of indiscipline among students especially after the Covid-19 season (Tumwebaze, 2022). This was attributed to the long period of inactive school learning whereby many students learnt bad behavior majorly by circumstance.

From the above facts, there is a gap created by continued registered cases of indiscipline in secondary schools in Mbarara City North which is a threat to proper education in the city. Despite the several disciplinary policies and subsequent strategies to control the behavior of learners, there seems to be a gap not yet filled. Under this study, the researcher shall investigate the role of student leadership in as far as its quality has an effect on controlling the discipline of students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to establish the quality of student leadership in secondary schools in Mbarara City North.

Objective of the Study

To assess the quality of student leadership in secondary schools in Mbarara City North

Research Question

What is the quality of student leadership in secondary schools in Mbarara City North?

Theoretical Review

Theoretically, this study was based on the Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura which states that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modeling and is influenced by factors such as attention, motivation, attitudes, and emotions (Cherry, 2022). According to this theory, behavior and learning are determined by both environment and cognitive factors of an individual. This implies that the discipline of learners has a lot to do with both their surrounding environment and age by observation, imitation, and modeling (McKibben, 2017).

Conceptually, the study focused on student leadership quality. Etymologically, student leadership quality originates from three words, namely: student, leadership and quality. Their definitions are as follows. Scott (2014) defined “student” as someone who is studying at a school or college, while “leadership” as the action of leading a group of people or an organization. “Quality” on the other hand, as defined by Theofilou (2015) is the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind. It also refers to a distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something. From this, we deduct the definition of “student leadership quality” as the standard of the governance of the learners in high school. Student Leadership quality is the degree of excellence of students who take active leadership roles in their education and develop positive skills in the process of their service (Campbell, 2018). It is the measure from the assessment of the leadership of student

leaders insofar as they have the ability to shape and influence their followers' values, attributes and behaviors through a dynamic relationship (Diggele et al., 2020). Under student leadership quality, the researcher shall study the following sub-variables; teamwork and collaboration, motivational skills, conflict resolution skills, and ethical and moral integrity.

Contextually, the Ministry of Education and Sports gives room for establishment of student leadership in post primary schools (Education Act, 2008, Part VI, Section 30). By this mandate, students have a right to have student leaders to play some roles in school, some of which involve enhancing discipline of fellow students. There are over 8,000 secondary schools in Uganda, according to the report from the ministry of Education and Sports (MoES, 2022). In particular, there are 17 secondary schools in Mbarara City North with 7,523 students as at the close of the 2023 academic year (Tumwebaze, 2022). Given this large number of learners, the staff alone cannot manage to control, represent and attend to students' needs and welfare, and subsequently manage their discipline.

Methodology

The study used a cross-sectional survey research design with both qualitative and quantitative

approaches because it is easy to apply research instruments in a relatively short period of time. The study was carried out in Mbarara City North. This area comprises of three divisions, namely: Kakiika, Kamukuzi, and Biharwe; it borders Rubaya in the North, Isingiro District in the East, Mbarara City South in the South, and Rubaare in the West. This area of study is one of the two constituencies of Mbarara City, in the South-Western part of Uganda. This study area was chosen because many secondary schools in this area have disciplinary challenges among their students. Several reports from different stakeholders revealed recurring instances of indiscipline among students. The study population comprised of head teachers, prefects and students from the six randomly selected secondary schools' representative of the seventeen secondary schools in Mbarara City North.

Responses to the questions were rated using Likert Scale of 1-5, in which 1 was the lowest score and 5 the highest. The data was analyzed using SPSS version 20 to obtain the mean and standard deviation. Sample Size was determined using Morgan and Krecjie's table of sample size determination as indicated in table 1 below

Table 1. Sample size

No.	School	School Code	Male Students	Female Students	Total
1	Mbarara Central School	A	137	224	361
2	Clever Land High School	B	137	287	424
3	St. Paul's High School	C	201	347	548
4	Kashari Secondary School	D	141	175	298
5	Viena High School	E	209	274	483
6	Nana High School	F	79	132	211
TOTAL					1,901

Source: Education Office, Mbarara City, 2023.

Sampling Techniques, both simple random and purposive sampling techniques were used. Data was collected using a questionnaire and focus group discussion. Under Research Procedure, clearance was obtained from the Dean Faculty of Education, university the Research Ethics Committee (REC) and Mbarara City North Education. Regarding the Validity and reliability of Instruments, the researchers computed content Validity using the

level of agreement on the items between the two knowledgeable persons as and the results was above 0.7 which showed a high level of validity. Cronbach Alpha (α) was computed for reliability = 0.70 indicating a high level of reliability. Data was analyzed using descriptive and thematic analysis. Ethically, the researchers observed the highest levels of prudence, respect and objectivity in the subsequent levels of research. Consent was

obtained from respondents, pseudo names for anonymity, and participation was purely free will.

Geographical Scope of the Study

The study was carried out in selected secondary schools in Mbarara City North. The city lies west of Masaka on the road to Kabale, about 270 kms (168 mi) by road South-West of Kampala (Lukendo, 2015). The city coordinates are 00 36 48S, 30 39 30E (Latitude: -0.6132; Longitude: 30.6582); lying at an average elevation at about 1,147 metres (3,763 ft) above sea level (Floodmap, 2019). The population of the study comprised of

head teachers, prefects and students from six randomly selected secondary schools' representative of the seventeen secondary schools in Mbarara City North. The study considered a span of ten years; that is from 2013 to 2023.

FINDINGS

The quality of student leadership was measured using the following domains, namely: teamwork among student leaders, possession of conflict resolution skills, and being effective in communication. Below are the scores on each domain.

Table 2: Scores on the Domains of Student leadership quality

Quality Domain	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teamwork among Student Leaders	4.25	0.904
Conflict Resolution Skills	4.16	0.999
Effective Communication	4.27	0.962
Average	4.202	0.806

Team Work among Student Leaders

Teamwork among student leaders was assessed basing on asking whether the leaders were working as a team in executing their duties. From Table 2, above, the mean score on this domain was 4.25, with a standard deviation of 0.904. This implies that the assessment of teamwork among student leaders of Mbarara City North secondary schools was above average.

While assessing the teamwork among the student leaders, one of the head teachers revealed that the prefects in his school were holding weekly meetings to make resolutions that enabled them to check the management of their duties in school. From these meetings, the prefects assign themselves teams of operations which they call "team for ..." such as for checking smartness of students, orderliness in dormitories, and punctuality for meals, among others. These teams are made up of a minimum of 10 prefects and a maximum of 15 prefects who are specially chosen as team leaders to man a given resolution. The headteacher said

"..... these teams of prefects are formed periodically, normally weekly, so that they lead inspection of a given area of concern. A member of the team may be assigned a different role in

the following week. The teams are usually headed by the respective prefects of the particular area such as a dormitory prefect, Kitchen prefect, sports prefect, among others" (Headteacher, School C, 2024).

Related to the above, the Headteacher of another school noted that student leadership in her school worked as a team in effecting the various assignments under their mandate as prefects. It was noted that the student leaders in this school collectively manage their duties mainly because there is a school norm of weekly allocation of duties to prefects, from whom a report of their work is always required by the office of the deputy head teacher in charge of discipline. These reports are then discussed by all the prefects once every month with their patron. From these monthly discussions, an evaluation is made. Under here, prefects are always reminded to work as a team in executing their duties. He said:

".....our prefects are obliged to execute their duties as a team, and always hold monthly meetings with their patron. The patron then gives feedback to the headteacher. We are glad that our prefects have assisted in the management of the discipline of their colleagues, and this has been achieved

collectively as a team of prefects”
(Headteacher, School B, 2024).

The head teacher of School D was proud of their prefects’ teamwork in effecting their duties. The school orients them into building this teamwork through workshops and meetings in which special lessons about this are given. He was happy to report that their prefects were easing the work of administration since most of the disciplinary issues are handled by the students’ leadership body depending on the gravity and area of discipline.

While interviewing some prefects from School B, it was reported that prefects of the school have high levels of collaboration which has created a strong bond of leadership and has enabled togetherness in decision-making. Through this collaboration, prefects of this school set standards for objective decision making and some pronouncements on certain matters come as a result of voting. Moreover, these prefects confessed that because of their togetherness, some matters are conclusively handled by the prefects themselves to the extent that the administration is not involved. This trust from the administration emanated from the preference of their modus operandi.

Related to the above, prefects from School A testified that their togetherness in leadership has earned them a lot of trust from their colleagues, to the extent that students feel their matters are more quickly attended to when addressed to prefects than when forwarded to the administration. This has been achieved as a result of a better understanding of their issues amongst their age mates, and hence the trust.

Prefects from one of the schools showed disappointment from some of their colleagues for failure to work together as a team mainly because of pride and laziness. This was reflected in reports on abandonment and neglect of duties, refusal of fulfilling particular tasks, selective obligations, among others. On the same matter, the headmaster of the same school showed similar concern and added that this could be attributed to students’ loss of interest in their duties of state. He noted that some of the prefects were contesting for positions not to

serve, but to show off and enjoy the privileges of prefects.

Conflict Resolution Skills among Student Leaders

Conflict resolution skills among student leaders were assessed based on student leaders’ ability to resolve conflicts and disputes. From Table 2 above, the mean on this domain was 4.16 with a standard deviation of 0.999. This implies that the assessment of conflict resolution skills among student leaders of Mbarara City North secondary schools was above average.

While interacting with some student leaders of School F, it was noticed that their leaders were instrumental in resolving most of the conflicts that arose in school. Several cases of conflicts such as dissatisfaction with meals, entertainment, inter-class conflicts, sports, and dormitory conflicts among others were majorly handled by student leaders. It was noted that most student leaders are always easily accessible to the students and possess highest levels of understanding such conflicts more than any other person, and so are trusted in bringing about harmony and reconciliation.

The head teacher of School D noted that majority of the conflicts among students at his school arise due to failure of students to obey and negotiate with prefects on proper solutions to the committed offences. As a result, some students are forwarded by student leaders to the administration for adamancy. In such cases, the forwarded students face tougher penalties. He however noted that the students who listen to the advice of the student leaders always resolve their conflicts at that level and this has saved the students and administration a lot of troubles, and eventually discipline is managed.

The head teacher of School E was proud of their school’s student leadership on grounds of possessing strong emotional intelligence that has enabled the school to keep orderly and with less trouble to the administration. He cited a few instances in which some student leaders were tipping off the administration about background plans of violence by some students. This prepared

the administration to swing into action responses in order to arrest the situation.

Related to the above, the prefects of School A reported that they possess high levels of impartiality and objectivity while resolving any issues that arise among their colleagues. Particular to this school, whenever a case of conflict is registered, there is always a group of prefects assigned to investigate the details of the matter from which the findings are based on in resolving that particular conflict. In such instances of deliberation, more prefects are engaged to attain the highest levels of objectivity.

Communication Skills among Student Leaders

Communication skills among student leaders were assessed by asking respondents if these leaders were effective in communicating to students about important issues. From Table 2 above, the average score on the question was 4.27 with a standard deviation of 0.962. The assessment on possessing effective communication skills among student leaders of Mbarara City North secondary schools was relatively high since it was above average.

The Headmaster of School B noted that their student leaders have sufficient communication skills that have facilitated proper management of students' discipline. It was reported that majority of the student leaders are good listeners to their colleagues. Consequently, there is notably timely feedback delivered to the administration pertaining a particular matter of concern. This chain is reciprocal from the administration to the students. The headteacher is pleased with the communication status of the student leadership.

The administration at School E was pleased with the effective communication skills especially regarding feedback from students to the administration through their student leaders. The headmaster noted that a series of information from the administration is easily and effectively passed on to students through the student leaders. Reciprocally, there has been harmony, concord and satisfaction between the administration and students.

While discussing with some student leaders of School A about the matter of communication skills among the student leaders, it was reported that there

was a high level of effectiveness in this area basically because the school facilitates trainings on leadership from which such skills are taught and emphasized. These workshops have sharpened student leaders and consequently aided them to be good leaders.

The Headmistress of School F however testified that some of their student leaders have not yet attained the desired communication skills, as they would wish on the side of administration. It was reported that there have been instances of hierarchical mishaps in communication and these have sometimes led to bad and undesirable situations. She noted that some student leaders have made decisions on behalf of the administration some of which was contrary to the mind of the administrators. These discrepancies have at times been detrimental to the peace of the school.

Discussions

Teamwork among student leaders

The study found out that the average score on teamwork was 4.25 with a standard deviation of 0.904. The mean score shows a high level of teamwork. This factual finding represents a datum that majority of the respondents in Mbarara City North Secondary schools credit the student leaders for working in teams. This is in line with Skyline's definition of teamwork as a structural approach to working together with others in order to achieve a common goal (2023). This brings in an element of pooling strength and skills of individuals to move in a unified direction to achieve common goals, as noted by Korovesis (2023).

This teamwork among leaders is however at times threatened by some individuals who may not value this aspect. Some respondents, though minority were not pleased with teamwork levels among their student leaders. As noted by Simkhada and Bhattarai (2023), teamwork in leadership necessitates high levels of ability to analyze behaviors, resolve conflicts, motivate students towards positivity, and build trust in both the students' body and the administration. This has however been missing among some student leaders

in some of the schools in Mbarara City North as revealed in some interviews.

Conflict Resolution Skills among Student Leaders

Research findings showed that the mean score on this was 4.16 with a standard deviation of 0.999. This presentation shows that majority of the student leaders in Mbarara City North secondary schools possessed skills that can mitigate conflict and other related disagreements. This is a necessary skill for harmony, understanding and settlement.

Most respondents held that majority of conflicts in secondary schools arose due to lack of negotiation between students and administration. As a result, there is a gap which results into conflict yet there should be negotiation to bridge this gap, as held by Maranga and Sampayo who taught that good leadership (administration) should have the ability to influence others to agree or take a particular course of action (Maranga & Sampayo, 2015). In order to avoid some of the conflicts in secondary schools, administrators ought to have the ability to thoroughly examine the root cause of conflicts among students (Sintapertiwi et al., 2019). This requires strong emotional intelligence among the leaders, as held by some of the interview respondents. By this, student leaders are able to understand the diversity of the school community they are serving.

In order to exhibit conflict resolution skills, student leaders ought to collaborate with both teachers and administrators. This reflects the knowledge of the benefits of collaboration in leadership. As noted by Shayna (2020), collaboration builds and leads diverse teams together and brings different departments for opportunities of learning from one another. Moreover, collaboration motivates students towards positivity and builds trust (Simkhada & Bhattarai, 2023).

Communication Skills in Student Leadership

From the research findings, the mean score on this domain was 4.27, with a standard deviation of 0.962. This shows a high level of agreement, to the extent that majority respondents held that their student leaders possessed clarity of information

during communication. Kathleen (2014) taught that this clarity requires use of clear and concise language, organizing thoughts logically among others. This is on the basis of the fact that communication entails exchanging information, ideas and thoughts between individuals and groups as held by Garg & Mishra, (2020).

Relatedly, some of the interview responses revealed that a good student leader should be a good listener to his/her colleagues and administration. This is what is called active listening. Wood (2015) explains this active listening as involving asking questions and paying attention to rational messages which eventually brings about mindfulness. In the process of communication, there ought to be empathy, as held by some of the respondents. West and Turner (2020) explain this as the ability to understand and share the feelings, perspectives, and emotions of another person. In student leadership, prefects therefore need to empathically listen to their colleagues in order to clearly understand the matters. In addition, complete communication necessitates giving feedback. This is in line with the idea of Ashu (2023) who held that the chain of communication is incomplete without feedback.

Conclusions

In relation to the first objective concerning assessing the quality of student leadership in Mbarara City North Secondary schools, it is crystal clear that respondents credited the leadership with a high bar, that is, the findings reflected good quality student leadership. This is evidenced by the scores on the various identified aspects of leadership, namely teamwork, representation of students' interests, conflict resolution skills, collaboration with staff and administration, and effective communication skills. As noted above, all these aspects scored high levels of agreement from the majority of the respondents. This is a clear sign that student leaders in Mbarara City North secondary schools are of good quality.

Recommendations

To School Administrators

There is need to organize trainings meant for the development of leadership skills such as workshops, seminars and special training sessions to equip prefects with leadership skills, communication, and other skills. These sharpen student leaders and consequently enable them to be more effective in their duties since they are equipped with the necessary knowledge.

There should be clear roles and responsibilities given to the student leaders. This enables them to clearly understand their duties and expectations, and consequently serve better. Clear knowledge of one's responsibility is an impetus to dutiful service to the school.

There should also be mentorship especially from experienced teachers and mentors who can guide and support them in their leadership journey. Given the research findings, there was an observation of a gap in effective leadership emanating from lack of proper mentorship. As a result, some student leaders were lacking guidance to grow their leadership skills, a reason mentorship is highly recommended by the researcher.

Empowerment of the student leaders should be prioritized in schools. This basically means enabling and authorizing individual student leaders or teams of individuals to take ownership, make decisions, and act on behalf of the school. This enables the student leaders to confidently and authoritatively handle any issues in their jurisdiction and so assist the administration in the management up to a certain level. This also gives them a chance to take calculated risks.

Student leaders should be recognized and rewarded by the school authorities as a way of motivating them in their service to the school. This boosts confidence, encourages healthy competition, retains top talent, builds trust, enhances reputation, and drives continuous improvement among student leaders.

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