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Influence of Principals Problem-Solving Skills on Management of Student Discipline in Public Secondary Schools in Bureti Sub-County, Kenya

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Student discipline is an issue that concerns several stakeholders across the globe. Despite the Kenyan government's commitment to upholding local and international trends in recognising children's rights, managing student discipline in schools through alternative disciplinary methods is mostly unexplored. The paper investigates the influence of principals' problem-solving skills on the management of student discipline in public secondary schools in Bureti Sub County, Kenya. The social cognitive theory was used as the study guide. This research study employed the descriptive survey research design. The accessible population was 3853, comprising 1 sub-county education director, 51 principals and 3801 form two students. The sample size 176 respondents comprised of 145 students, 38 principals and 1 sub-county director. The simple random and purposive sampling were adopted in selecting desired respondents. This study used a structured questionnaire and interview schedule as the main research instruments. The study produced both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data gathered through interviews was examined using content analysis of respondents' meanings and implications. Quantitative data was coded, cleaned, and analysed using the 24th version of the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to obtain descriptive statistics. The results indicated that students involved in addressing various issues during school assemblies scored the highest of all the items. Principals' used student leadership as a method of solving student issues, students' welfare and were entrusted in resolving conflicts among students. Student engagements in problem-solving, management of peer pressure and giving reasons before punishing the students had also positive impact on reducing indiscipline. However, students' leadership were limited to staff and BOM meeting especially during decision making. Principal's problem-solving skills has an important role in reducing indiscipline among the secondary schools. The study concluded that Principals with problem-solving skills played a significant role on students' discipline. The study recommended that the School Management should implement strategies such as training for the principals to learn various competency skills such as decision-making and conflict management to better suit them for managing student discipline in their institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goal 4 envisions education for all to enable upward social responsibility and eradicate poverty (Sightsavers, 2021). Around the world, development leaders and education stakeholders are putting policies in place to ensure free and equitable education. Despite the challenges, procedures such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and free primary and secondary education were welcomed. According to Part IV, Section 36 (1 and 2) of the Basic Education Act of 2013, the Kenyan government prohibited any form of physical or mental harassment of children in schools or at home (Wangamati *et al.*, 2019). The elimination of corporal punishment in Kenya's education system and home environment could be among the sources of increased indiscipline cases in schools and homes.

Radical social, political, and economic changes have impacted education systems globally. While the part played by school principals is very important in promoting student learning and attaining educational results, they must also deal with complicated transformation concerns. Principals struggle to cope with many changes, partly due to being ill-prepared for their roles or simply lacking the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to lead and manage schools successfully and efficiently. For principals to deal

effectively with the several dynamic challenges due to the changes of the twenty-first century, they have to be empowered (Mestry, 2017).

Nearly ninety per cent (90%) of principals in the United States rated the experience as extremely important to their success as principals (MacNeil & Prater, 2019). Principals are expected to be educational leaders with teaching experience who understand how children learn and teachers teach. In this scenario, it is apparent that the appointment of school principals is based on their years of teaching experience. Some of these characteristics are developed over time through extensive training. For example, one of the roles of any principal is to be a human resource manager, which requires one to complete a two-year training program, which is not the case in all countries. As a result, the principal faces challenges such as indiscipline in their management process, leaving some activities under management unfinished (MacNeil & Prater, 2019).

Secondary school principals in Africa are responsible for effectively managing instruction and student behaviour (De Jong, 2015). Students are expected to maintain acceptable behaviour during their interactions with fellow students, staff members, principals, and community members. These students are expected to respect teachers, follow school rules and regulations,

behave well, especially when using school facilities, live in harmony with other students, and adhere to the disciplinary culture to be responsible to themselves and society. In many instances, several students are bound to deviate from these acceptable standards of conduct. This typically results in disciplinary problems, impacting effective teaching, learning and overall performance. According to the law, school principals are tasked with planning, organising, leading, and monitoring students' behaviour to maintain discipline and achieve an effective learning environment (De Jong, 2015).

A minimum of 10 years' experience in the teaching profession is required in South Africa to qualify for the principal position (Sepuru & Mohlakwana, 2020). Principals who are married in South Africa stated that they had supportive spouses or partners who encouraged, advised and accompanied them to school or functions related to their school duties. These partners frequently helped in the school either by running errands or helping them in other challenges. As a result, they claim that their marital status benefits their work and that those who had children were more empathetic and fairer to students, allowing them to restructure their schools.

In Uganda, the principal has a significant impression on the quality of schools (Leithwood, 2016). The principal's leadership style dictates the type of climate in the school. The principal's primary responsibility is to help create a healthy work environment whereby students are happy and ready to learn and the teachers identify with the school's mission and goals. The principal's experience is important in that he or she has to be able to advise the students, thereby reducing the instances of discipline in the school. All the individuals charged with school management responsibility ought to have sufficient experience. Leithwood (2016) states that this allows teachers to avoid making irrational decisions that may hurt student discipline.

In Kenya, the absence of student discipline is a serious problem in public secondary schools, as most teenagers undergo reproductive and

emotional changes at this age (M'muyuri, 2021). The increasing number of pregnancies recorded and reported during the COVID-19 lockdown period adds to the disciplinary issues. According to experts, teenage pregnancies were common when the children were under the care of their parents. Parental guidance and care are thought to be deteriorating due to financial pressures forcing parents to abdicate responsibilities and, at times, leave teenagers alone. The most important component of school administration is the principal. Hence, their ability, skills, personality traits, and professional competence will largely determine the school's tune and efficiency (Namaulula, Kijana, & Injendi, 2023).

School principals have the authority to manage school discipline. According to research, the principal's competence skill is the most critical factor in determining student discipline (Sothy, 2019). The management of student discipline requires the principal to have competency skills that comprise communication, problem-solving, and decision-making. Resources management is critical in the jurisdiction of the principals of secondary schools, who are responsible for managing school resources, which includes the competence skills required for effective and efficient school performance (Muriuki *et al.*, 2020).

Discipline cases have been on the rise in Kericho County, which could be attributed to parental negligence, as they have delegated their roles to housekeepers, who are more convenient in terms of money and career development in Kenyan schools. Principals in public secondary schools are under fire as crime rates, arson attacks, and early pregnancies rise. Crime rates and early adolescent pregnancies reflect society's laxity in providing teenagers with guidance and counselling. It is the responsibility of principals to manage and maintain the discipline of students, which is accomplished through emotional intelligence to determine whether the students' problems warrant the type of misbehaviour displayed (Chalikias *et al.*, 2020). A study in Bomet County's Chepalungu sub-county found

cases of student unrest (Kosgei et al., 2017). A recent increase in fires affecting dormitories has been reported in newsrooms, indicating a disciplinary case in secondary schools. However, in Kericho County, there is little evidence of a link between principal competence and student discipline management. Therefore, this study seeks to assess the influence principals' competence skills have on the management of discipline of students in public secondary schools in Bureti Sub-County, Kenya.

The principal's ability to maintain student discipline and improvement is critical in public high schools. Common disciplinary cases in public high schools include student riots, school fires and arson attacks on teachers, poor performance, tardiness, and drug and substance abuse. The competency skills of principals are critical to managing, regulating, and controlling student behaviour in public high schools. The Teacher's Service Commission is a government agency in Kenya that hires and promotes teachers in public secondary schools. Principals are chosen based on their academic credentials. The principal's role in managing student discipline measures stems from their competence skills, which include timely communication on the school calendar, changes within the school such as teacher transfers and incoming at an appropriate time for examination timetables, school rules, student expectations, and alternatives available within the school through their departmental heads and teachers.

According to the Kericho County schools' census report 2017 (MOE, 2017), students' indiscipline has increased in Bureti Sub-Public County's secondary schools. Most schools were subjected to frequent strikes, resulting in burning school buildings and vandalism of school property. Bullying of students, drug and alcohol use, class boycotts, and theft were also prevalent. This observation corroborated (Achwata *et al.*, 2016) finding that indiscipline cases in Kenyan public secondary schools had increased by 19.7%. Unfortunately, the various efforts to mitigate the

challenges above have not yielded significant progress.

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the various principals' competence and the student's discipline (Ambayo & Ngumi, 2013; Katua, 2019). However, because these studies relied primarily on teachers' and students' perceptions, they did not quantify the variables or establish a link between the level of principles application of specific competence skills and the level of indiscipline among students using robust statistics. To that end, there has been a notable decline in the performance of the KCSE examination, which calls for a study of the possible factors that may be contributing to such a scenario in Bureti Sub County. The study aims to investigate the influence of principals' problem-solving skills on the management of student discipline in public secondary schools in Bureti Sub-County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Review

Al-Jaradat and Zaid-Alkilani (2015) researched secondary school principals' successful leadership practices in school problem-solving in the Irbid Educational Area. 473 male and female principals were included in the study. They completed a 40-item questionnaire tailored to this study. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: effective leadership methods for problem-solving by teachers, students, the local community, and parents, and the school environment and supplies. According to the study, successful leadership methods for school problem-solving were at a medium level. The results demonstrated statistically significant differences in principals' responses to successful leadership practices that may be related to gender, academic degree, and work experience characteristics. The current study focused on problem-solving practice on management of student's discipline.

Zamora (2019) investigated the processes principals use in decision-making and problem-solving in dealing with student discipline issues. Elementary principals were randomly sampled

from the district's principal population. The sample was ethnically stratified, with 12 Black, 12 Hispanic, and 12 White principals included. According to the study's findings, principals consider eight factors when dealing with student discipline. These are the factors: prior history of the students, additional evidence/information on their discipline, the teacher's problem/not the principal's, the student's personal characteristics, reason/motivation, the home environment, breaking of school rules/code of conduct, as well as the severity or magnitude of the offence. The findings also revealed 11 strategies principals use the most when dealing with student discipline issues. They are as follows: suspension, parent conference, resources, principal conference with student, removal or return of weapon to parents, obtaining all information about the infraction, maintaining uniform discipline records, counselling techniques, corporal punishment, in-school suspension, and strictly enforced rules and regulations. The current study sought to investigate principals' problem-solving considerations on student discipline rather than problem solving strategies adopted for successful disciplinary action.

Özgenel (2018) investigated the links between creative and critical thinking tendencies in school administrators and styles of decision-making and problem-solving skills. The study sought to explore the relationship between creative and critical thinking dispositions in school administrators and their decision-making styles and problem-solving abilities. 586 school administrators were chosen randomly from the district to participate in the study. Through their decision-making methods, school administrators' critical and creative thinking dispositions influenced their problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, the school administrators' creative and critical thinking dispositions and their decision-making approaches can be attributed to 45% of the shift in their problem-solving skills. In the current study problem solving skills was examined in terms of students' discipline.

The decision-making and problem-solving processes was examined by Regino and Lamera (2023) which was critical to an organization's ability to function in a complex global setting. This analytical study attempted to ascertain the perceived degrees of problem-solving and decision-making abilities of middle-and upper-level administrators at the Nueva Vizcaya State University campuses in Bayombong and Bambang, as impacted by their personal inclinations. It determined the prevalent organisational decision-making models as well as how profile characteristics relate to one's capacity for problem-solving and judgement. The research design used in the study was descriptive-correlational-comparative. The "Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Questionnaire," the main instrument, is used to collect the individual preferences using a three-factor model based on Carl Jung's research. The findings indicated that those who identify as ambiverts have "high" levels of proficiency in critical thinking, risk assessment, alternative weighing, data collection and processing, perception and judgement, tool selection, and "moderate" levels of proficiency in lateral conceptualization. Both routine and innovative organisational decision-making models are frequently used. It was discovered that the respondent's methods for solving problems and making decisions are influenced by their level of education, their title, and the length of time they have held a particular post. Compared to other problem-solving and decision-making abilities, individual preferences have a stronger correlation with critical thinking abilities. The current study was done secondary school level where problem-solving was examined on students' discipline.

Visone (2018) examined the improvement of prospective educational leaders' problem-solving abilities. This study aimed on developing the problem-solving abilities of prospective educational leaders, particularly through classroom instruction using real-world scenarios. In the autumn and spring, professional educators pursuing an advanced degree in educational administration at a public institution were asked about their problem-solving skills through

surveys. In addition, participants were asked to react to actual principal scenarios. Interviews for focus groups were done in the spring. The ability of the participants to solve problems in the actual world did not dramatically increase, but their confidence in their problem-solving skills did. During the discussion of the scenarios, participants acknowledged the significance of learning from one other as well as from real-world circumstances and instructors with administrative expertise. The current study targeted principals' problem-solving skills which was examined on students' discipline.

Theoretical Framework

The current study was founded on Canter and Canter's Assertive Discipline Model (2001). This theory addresses significant issues concerning student discipline management, which impacts students' educational attainment. According to the principle of the Assertive Discipline Model, teachers should construct a plan for disciplining and come up with four to five rules with precise consequences, first, by recognising the rules and expectations and then giving them to their students to ensure they are understood. Moreover, this theory holds that rather than punishing the negative rules, parents should encourage these rules through positive repetition. When rules are broken, the Assertive Discipline Model prescribes a five-step punishment hierarchy based on rising repercussions.

The first infraction should lead to a warning to the students, whereas the fourth leads to the student's parents being summoned. The involvement of school management is required for the fifth sanction. The theory, on the other hand, emphasises awareness and input by the student. The theory is pertinent to this study mainly because schools, which are organisations as it is, are regulated by rules and regulations to which every student must adhere. However, principals ought to endeavour to include students in creating both rules and sanctions to ensure that as many students as possible comply. On the other hand, principals and teachers desire to influence the level to which students demonstrate good

behaviour patterns by implementing an open-door policy, peer counselling, and student mentorship.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was founded on the pragmatist paradigm, where a descriptive survey research design was adopted. The research was conducted in public secondary schools in Bureti Sub County because indiscipline cases have been rampant in the past few years. This study had 51 public secondary schools as its accessible population. As a result, the accessible population was 3,853 people, including one sub-county education director, 51 principals, and 3,801 students in form two. The study used Krejcie (1970) to obtain a sample of 145 students, 38 principals and 1 sub-county director were given questionnaires and an interview schedule, respectively. The students were selected using simple random sampling technique but the Principal and Sub-County director were selected using purposive sampling. The expert's comments were applied in improving the data collection tools before the commencement of data collection procedures. Besides, the instruments were piloted to a specific sample of principals in the neighbouring Sotik Sub County, which has comparable characteristics to Bureti Sub County. Piloting the instrument is considered important in establishing the instrument's content validity and enhancing the formats, questions, and scales. The study instruments were administered consistently to verify reliability by determining Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha for every item to establish the research instrument's reliability. A reliability coefficient of 0.7 or higher was considered to reflect the internal reliability of the instrument (Taber, 2018). The instrument was found to be after obtaining a Cronbach Coefficient of 0.873.

Content analysis was employed in the analysis of the qualitative data acquired through interviews to bring out the meanings and implications of the interviewees. Gathered data was coded into Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 24) and then cleaned and analysed so as to obtain descriptive statistics. To evaluate major evaluation variables and measures of central

trends, for instance, means and standard deviations, descriptive statistics of frequency distributions and percentages were used. **The study utilized the content analysis and descriptive statistics to draw influence of problem solving on students' discipline.**

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to investigate how a principal's problem-solving skills affect students' discipline

in public secondary schools. Students were required to respond to the items. The responses were coded so strongly disagree (SD) was rated as 1 while strongly agree (SA) was rated as 5. Further, the mean of the responses, as well as the standard deviations, were calculated such that a mean response of above 3.0 was regarded as agreeing, while one below 3.0 was regarded as disagreeing. *Table 1* tabulates the findings.

Table 1: Principals' Problem-Solving Skills and Students Discipline

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	STD
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)		
My school principals involve the student in problem-solving.'	64 (46%)	53 (38%)	13 (9%)	5 (4%)	5 (4%)	3.2	0.8
My principal involves student leaders in setting or revising school rules and regulations	5 (4%)	27 (19%)	59 (42%)	30 (21%)	20 (14%)	2.7	1.1
My principles usually reason before punishing students.'	32 (23%)	69 (49%)	19 (14%)	15 (11%)	5 (4%)	3.0	0.7
My school involves the student in the management of peer pressure.'	24 (17%)	78 (56%)	20 (14%)	10 (7%)	8 (6%)	3.4	0.9
Representatives of student leaders are sometimes invited to a staff meeting.'	0 (0%)	30 (21%)	60 (43%)	40 (29%)	10 (7%)	2.5	0.8
Representatives of student leaders are sometimes invited to the school BOM Meetings.'	0 (0%)	28 (20%)	65 (46%)	27 (19%)	20 (14%)	2.2	0.8
Student leaders are entrusted with resolving conflicts among students	35 (25%)	80 (57%)	25 (18%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.4	1.1
My principal involves student leaders in students' welfare.'	55 (39%)	60 (43%)	25 (18%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.5	1.3
My principal involves students in setting the school rules	25 (18%)	35 (25%)	45 (32%)	25 (18%)	10 (7%)	3.2	0.9
Student leaders are involved in addressing various issues during school assemblies	73 (52%)	67 (48%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.1	0.8

The results showed that 84% of students agreed that the school principals involved the student in problem-solving as opposed to total of 8% of the respondents (mean of 3.2). This revealed most principals encouraged student's engagement and participation in problem-solving. However, the student leaders were slightly involved in setting or revising school rules and regulations as 23% were in agreement against 35% who were of the contrary opinion (mean of 2.7).

The results also revealed that 68% of the student were in agreement that the principal usual

reasoned before punishing students (mean of 3.0). The school also involved the students in management of peer pressure as 73% of student were in agreement (mean of 3.4). The Principal and management developed an inclusive model of solving problems through information sharing with students to reduce indiscipline.

On the contrary the student leaders were mostly not invited in staff meeting as disagreed by 36% while 25% agreed (mean of 2.5). Similarly, students' leaders were not invited to school BOM meeting as disagreed by 33% and accepted by

20% with mean of 2.2. This indicated that staff and BOM meeting were exclusively for staff and BOM members respectively.

The finding also revealed that 83% of students were in agreement that the student leaders were entrusted in resolving conflicts among students (mean of 3.4). Similarly, the principal involved student leaders in students' welfare as revealed by 82% who agreed with mean of 3.5. Similar that students were also involved in setting the school rules as agreed by 43% as oppose to 25% with mean of 3.2. The results also indicated that the student leaders were involved in addressing various issues during school assemblies as indicated by all the students with mean 4.1.

The collected data in the interviews from the principals showed that there are several problems that lead to several diverse forms of indiscipline in the school. They reiterate that these problems, when handled with caution and diligence, the students develop better behaviour, which means their discipline also improves. The results show that principals who are well equipped in problem-solving are the best place to influence the students' discipline and, thereby, reduce indiscipline cases in their schools. A response from Principal twelve revealed that;

Having problem-solving skills has helped me in dealing with issues that have arisen in the past as well as it has also helped me in being proactive in that I have detecting and deterring issues that would have been detrimental to the institution.

The results from interview further revealed that the involvement of the students is not the ultimate solution to student's indiscipline but in requires the Principals to apply numerous skills where problem solving skills plays an important role. The response from Principal five explain more on the role of problem-solving skills as indicated;

This is my 12th year been a Principal but over the years, I have learned that students' discipline required collective approach. This is involved bring students, teachers and management to agree on what is considered

indiscipline and how such indiscipline is solved. However, I have a big role in improving students' and teachers' engagement which I could not do it's at start until I was able to master problem solving technique that were more objective rather subjective to students who were indiscipline. Hence, there is no one strategy that can fit all but different situation requires us to use different approach of problem-solving skills.

Further, results indicated the limitation of engagement between students and Principal. The responses showed that the management can engage student in learning areas, problem-solving but limited to decision making process. The responds from Principle twenty-one showed the following;

Our role as Principals is to use our problem-solving skills. However, the most effective way of solving problem is to engage the stakeholders. We can involve students in students' welfare meeting, assembly meetings, general events, students' leadership meeting, running and management and trainings. However, the student body are rarely invited in staff meeting, BOD meeting or disciplinary meeting unless it is an issue that touch the students' body where their contribution are crucial. The students body assist a lot in achieving discipline through reporting of indiscipline, handling small disciplinary issues and bringing order.

According to sub-county director interview, the rate of indiscipline has reduced in the county. However, school that have reported indiscipline cases related to either management issues or grievances that have not been solved. The responses indicated as follows;

In the Bureti Sub-County as well as in Kericho County, there have being few reports of indiscipline that warrant my input. However, cases of burning of schools has being report in some public secondary schools in the county. The cases of burning of schools is associated with grievance of student that have

not being handled well by the administration. This is common when a new Principal comes with new rules or with different approach in problem solving leading to such vices. This indicate that Principals should be trained in management and problem solving to gain more problem-solving skills. This will reduce the issues of indiscipline among the students in secondary schools.

The results therefore note that Principal's problem solving skills plays a crucial role in maintaining order and discipline among the secondary schools. The results concur with Al-Jaradat and Zaid-Alkilani (2015) which demonstrated that a successful Principal showed have leadership qualities that enable them to effectively solving problems that touch all the stakeholders. The Principal in Bureti sub-county engaged students' leaders in solving problem in assemblies, student's welfare and entrusted them solve minor indiscipline cases. Özgenel (2018) pointed out that problem-solving abilities was influenced by creative thinking and decision-making methods which concurred with Regino and Lamera (2023). However, the Principal in Bureti sub-County utilized staff and BOM meeting in decision-making without involving the students' leaders but involved the student leaders in implementation as well as problem solving. Visone (2018) results showed that training increase the confidence in problem-solving but not the participation in problems. The current study can adopt the input of Visone

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The leaders involved in addressing various issues during school assemblies scored the highest of all the items. This means that students themselves are the best approach to solving student issues, and most principals in Bureti have subsequently adopted this technique. Student leadership as a method of solving student issues scored highly, as Principal involved student leaders in students' welfare and student leaders were entrusted in resolving conflicts among students. Student engagements in problem-solving, management of

peer pressure and giving reasons before punishing the students had also positive impact on reducing indiscipline. On the contrary, the students noted that they were not involved in matters that concern setting and revising school rules, as there were no representatives of the students in either the staff meetings or the BOM meeting. The response from the Principal and Sub-County director showed that Principal's problem-solving skills has an important role in reducing indiscipline which can be improved through engaging the students and students' body in problem solving. However, there is limited in engagement of students especially in decision making especially at staff and BOM level.

The study concluded that this is indeed one factor that has a resounding influence on managing student discipline in public secondary schools. This research study revealed that the principal was pivotal in managing discipline in the school and that their problem-solving skills were essential. The use of student leaders was underscored to be most effective in addressing and dealing with fellow students' issues, such as their welfare, and in resolving conflicts. It was also realised that student involvement in managing peer pressure was vital and needed to be adopted more for a more proactive approach rather than the usual reactive one. Finally, management of student discipline was seen to be accessible in instances where the principal reasons with the students. This calls for negotiation between the principal and the students for discipline to be maintained in public secondary schools.

The study recommended that School Management implement strategies such as training for the principals to learn various skills such as decision-making and conflict management to better suit them for the leadership role of student discipline in their institutions.

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