Extent of Student Participation in Decision Making in Secondary Schools in Kenya.

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Abstract

This study investigated the extent of student participation in secondary schools in Kenya. The study was prompted by the recurrent student unrest in Kenya; often blamed in media and research to unequal decision making opportunities in schools. Data was collected by means of a survey questionnaire distributed among 300 secondary school learners and thirty teachers. The findings revealed that though there attempts to include views of students in school policy, such attempts were mainly tokenistic and did not extend to core management issues. Students were only allowed to participate in student welfare issues but were deemed to be immature and therefore unable to participate neither in administrative issues such as managing funds and budget nor in curriculum issues such as teaching methods or number of exams. It was thus concluded that student participation in secondary schools was still wanting and needed to be expanded to include issues beyond student welfare issues.

Key words: Participation, students, extent, decision making, secondary schools.

1.0 Introduction

Student participation in decision making refers to the work of student representative bodies - such as school councils, student parliaments and the prefectorial body. It is also a term used to encompass all aspects of school life and decision-making where students may make a contribution, informally through individual negotiation as well as formally through purposely-created structures and mechanisms. Student participation also refers to participation of students in collective decision-making at school or class level and to dialogue between students and other decision-makers, not only consultation or a survey among students. Student participation in decision making in schools is often viewed as problematic to school administrators, parents and society at large. This is often due to the fact that students are viewed as minors, immature and lacking in the expertise and technical knowledge that is needed in the running of a school. Thus student participation in decision making is often confined to issues concerned with student welfare and not in core governance issues.

The extent of student involvement in decision making is debatable with often conflicting viewpoints propagated by differing stakeholders depending on their background and world view. Basically there are three view points that guide the extent of student involvement in decision making. The first is that students must remain passive and receive instructions from parents and teachers (Sithole, 1998). This view will mean that policies must be designed by adults and students are to follow them to the letter. The second viewpoint suggests that students can participate but only to a certain degree (Squelch, 1999; Magadla, 2007). In support of this view, Huddleston (2007) suggests that there is a tendency among some teachers and school leaders to define the issues which affect students quite narrowly. Student consultation and decision-making is often limited to aspects of school life that affect students only and which have no immediate relevance to other stakeholders, e.g., playgrounds, toilets and lockers.

Aggrawal (2004) adds that while student representatives may not participate in matters relating to the conduct of examinations, evaluation of student performance, appointment of teachers and other secret matters, their participation should be ensured in all other academic and administrative decisions taken by these bodies. Though this view appears to support student participation in decision making, it however confines student involvement in decision making to specific areas of school life. Defining the limits of student participation in this way is however not only likely to give students the impression that the school's commitment is tokenistic and therefore not to be taken seriously, but it also severely limits the possibilities for experiential learning (about the nature of schooling and the education system as well as in different forms of public decision-making) (Huddleston, 2007).

The notion is authoritarian and paternalistic, rather than democratic. It not only assumes that school students have a legitimate interest only in student-specific issues, but it also assumes that students have no right to decide for themselves the issues in which they want or do not want to be involved. For this reason many commentators have suggested that opportunities for student participation should go beyond specifically student-related issues and extend to wider aspects of school life, as well as to society beyond the school. Effective involvement, it has been said, would go beyond student comment on aspects of their lives which are seen as safe or without significant impact on the work of adults in the school, embedded at classroom level, at institutional level and at the interface between local, national and international communities (Fielding *et al*, 2003). There are very few aspects of school life and decision-making in which, principle at least, school students cannot be meaningfully involved – depending upon their age and experience hence the need to examine the third level of student involvement in decision making.

The third viewpoint suggests that students should fully participate in decision making (Magadla, 2007). This view is supported by Njozela (1998) who points out that principals and other stakeholders should not underestimate the contributions of students especially if they are given the opportunity to develop their skills and their level of maturity. In their support, Huddleston (2007) feels that students should be involved in all areas of school life. He adds that the range of activities that make up the work of a school can be categorized in a number of different ways, but, however it is categorized, one should expect students to have opportunities for involvement in each major area – in particular in a school's: ethos and climate – including rules, rewards and sanctions, curriculum, teaching and learning, management and development planning.

Involvement in curriculum and teaching and learning methods is frequently recognized as being one of the least explored areas of student participation. Hannan (2003) points out that for one thing, school curricula and evaluation criteria are often prescribed in detail by state or regional authorities, apparently leaving little room for involvement by teachers or students. However, in reality, the curriculum as experienced in the classroom and the learning methods employed present a range of different opportunities for student involvement – from decisions about the nature of assignments and projects, for instance, to assessment strategies and marking. This applies equally to the topics chosen by students for discussion in class and or school councils. The most effective school councils do not exclude anything from being discussed, apart from matters of personal confidentiality. If rigid limits are imposed on councils at the outset, students are unlikely to develop any enthusiasm for them (Huddleston, 2007). Hord *et al* (1999) further adds that student consultation relating to curriculum and examination reform is mandatory.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Over the last few years there have been increased calls for increasing the extent of inclusion of students in decision making in secondary schools in Kenya owing to the frequent occurrences of student unrests in the sector (Kamuhanda, 2003; Ogot, 2003; Buhere¸2008; Kindiki 2009). Proponents of student participation in decision making have justified their support for this idea on premise that decisions in a school affect the student in latent and manifest ways. Largely they are recipients of final decisions (Sushila *et al,* 2006) hence the recommendations made by students may be very constructive and if approached in the right manner would work positively. In this way, students rejectionist tendencies of decisions imposed upon them by school administrators would change to ownership and acceptance of decisions arrived at with their participation. Calls for inclusions of students in the decision-making structure in schools have led to various attempts by the Ministry of Education to put in place structures for inclusion. The most prominent of this was the formation of the Kenya Secondary School Student Council (KSSSC) formed in 2009 with a view to making secondary school governance more participatory. In this new arrangement, students would be part and parcel of decision-making to ensure their interests are adopted in the administration of schools. However, the thesis of this paper is that despite this laudable move by the government, not much research has been conducted to find out how far or to what extent students are involved in decision making in secondary schools since the formation of the student councils. It is light of this therefore that this study aims at finding out the extent of student participation in secondary school decision making process with a view to filling the knowledge gap between theory and practice in participatory secondary school management.

2. 0 Materials and Methods

The study adopted a descriptive cross sectional survey research design and was based in Central Rift Valley Province of Kenya.

The target population of this study was the students, teachers and head teachers of boarding secondary schools in the province. The sampling unit was the school rather than the individual learner or teacher. There are 87 boarding secondary schools in the province. By means of simple random sampling technique, 15 schools were selected to form the sample of study. Thereafter, using the same procedure, 300 students (20 from each of the schools in the sample) and 30 teachers (two from each school sampled) were sampled to respond to the questionnaire. Data analysis involved descriptive statistical technique.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The main objective of the study was to establish the extent of student participation in decision making. To establish this objective, respondents were required to identify from a list of possible decision making tasks the level of student participation in decisions regarding each. The tasks were grouped into various areas namely administrative tasks, curriculum activities and welfare decisions. The objective of the categorization of the tasks was to find out whether students input was accepted in all areas of school governance or it was only confined to those issues that directly affected them or rather student welfare issues. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Extent of student participation in decision making in administrative tasks.

Administrative area	Respondents	NI/SI	MI/DI	Total
School budget	Students	98	2	100
	Teachers	100	-	100
School fees	Students	98	2	100
	Teachers	100	-	100
School rules	Students	81	19	100
	Teachers	61	39	100
Discipline of students	Students	83	17	100
	Teachers	100	-	100
Discipline of staff	Students	99	1	100
	Teachers	100	-	100
Interview of staff	Students	99	1	100
	Teachers	100	-	100
Planning and developing physical facilities	Students	98	2	100
	Teachers	99	1	100
Managing FSE funds	Students	98	2	100
	Teachers	100	-	100
Nature of punishments	Students	79	21	100
	Teachers	66	34	100

Results indicate that majority of respondents reported that students were not involved in all the administrative decisions made in their schools. Ninety four percent (98%) of the students and 100 % of teachers reported that students were not involved in making decisions on the school budget while 98% students and all the teachers (100%) felt that students were not involved in decisions concerning school fees. Similarly, 98% of the students reported that they were not involved in managing FSE funds and 100% or the teachers reported a similar finding. This implies that students were not consulted on issues to do with finances. Lack of student involvement on disciplinary matters either of students or teachers was also reported to be lacking in student involvement as a majority of students (97%) reported that they were not involved in disciplining errant fellow pupils.

The above finding contravenes observations made by various scholars on effective discipline in schools. For instance Christie *et al* (1998*)* note that active involvement of students in discipline process is viewed as central to having long-lasting results. They add that co-creating discipline solutions contribute to ownership for the students- a catalyst for long-term responsible behaviour. In study investigating disciplinary strategies employed in Kenyan secondary schools, Kiprop (2007) also found a large degree of agreement among her subjects on student involvement in discipline task forces on their fellow pupils. A minority (17%) reported that they were involved in disciplining students. This probably could be through prefect body which in all schools was reported to be active. Prefects are used by teachers to mete out punishments to fellow students in secondary schools (Rajani, 2003). A majority of students (99%) reported that they were not involved in discipline of staff. 100% of teachers were categorical that students were not involved in staff discipline.

This implies that students were excluded in certain administrative tasks in order to safeguard the authority of the teacher. Democracy can be interpreted to be lacking in this area. In matters of employee recruitment, majority of students (99%) and teachers (100%) felt that students were not involved in interviewing staff. This also means a demarcation by school administration as to the extent of pupil participation in decision making and goes against democratic theory that calls for involvement of all members of polity to be included in the decision making process without regard to age, gender, social status or race (Young, 2000). The study also sought the extent of student involvement on formulation of school and nature of punishments. A greater percentage of students (81%) reported that they were not involved in rule formulation while 61% of the teachers reported a lack of student involvement in the same administrative issue. A minority (33%) of the teachers felt that students were sometimes involved. A majority of students (79%) felt that they were not involved in deciding on nature of punishments while 21% of them reported that the students were sometimes involved.

On the same matter of punishments, 66% of the teachers reported student involvement while 34 % reported that the students were sometimes involved. The disparity in percentage response between student and teacher reflects the conflict between the two sides as the students feel cheated out of decision making while teachers would like to guard their authority hence the view that whatever concessions that students have been given is sufficient. The teachers seem to subscribe to the proverbial philosophy that given an inch of ground, students would thereafter take a mile by asking to participate in all areas of decision making even those considered confidential. The figures however point to involvement of students on these welfare issues which are considered 'safe' for students to be involved as they affect them directly. Having established the extent of student involvement in administrative decision making tasks, the study sought to find out the respondents' perceptions on whether students should be included in decision making in certain administrative areas. The respondents were also questioned on the reasons for their answer. Their responses are shown on Table 2 below.

Table 2 Responses concerning the extent of student participation in   decision making (figures in %)

Responses	Respondents	SA/A	D/SD	Total
Students should participate in matters affecting their learning	Students	97	3	100
	Teachers	99	1	100
Decisions should be left to experts such as teachers	Students	79	21	100
	Teachers	78	22	100
Students lack necessary expertise	Students	69	31	100
	Teachers	97	4	100

To summarize the findings on the extent of student participation in decision making the study sought to find out the perceptions of the respondents on the same. The results shown on Table 2 above reveal a high degree of agreement on the statement that students should participate in matters affecting their learning. A large percentage of respondents (97% of the students and 99% teachers) agreed that students should participate in matters to do with their learning. A common reason for this large support was that such participation would boost their academic performance. It was also reported that involving students in curriculum issues would motivate them since students are the main players in academics. Respondents were however categorical about the extent of student participation in curriculum decision making.

A majority felt that students should only be involved in certain issues to do with their learning. Technical issues or those that required expert opinion of the teachers should be left to teachers as students lacked the knowledge and expertise. Thus 79% of the students and 88% of the teachers agreed that decisions on the curriculum should be left to teachers. Similarly, a majority of respondents (69 % students and 94% teachers) agreed that students lacked the necessary expertise to warrant their involvement in the curriculum. This view is consistent with Sithole's (1998) viewpoint that argues that students must passively receive instructions and behave in accordance to the instructions from teachers.

Table 3. Extent of Student Participation in Decision Concerning the Curriculum.

Curriculum Area	Respondents	Not Involved	Sometimes involved	Moderately Involved	Involved	Total
Choice of textbooks	Teachers	100	-	-	-	100
	Students	98	2	-	-	100
Number of exams	Teachers	96	4	-	-	100
	Students	98	2	-	-	100
Teaching Methods	Teachers	70	30	-	-	100
	Students	69	34	-	-	100
Nature of assignments	Teachers	65	26	-	-	100
	Students	70	20	10	-	100
Appraising teachers performance	Teachers	65	35	-	-	100
	Students	80	20	-	-	100
Setting achievement targets	Teachers	-	-	11	89	100
	Students	-	-	21	79	100
Grading system	Teachers	94	6	-	-	100
	Students	100	-	-	-	100

Generally, as depicted in Table 3 above, respondents were of the view that student participation was limited in choice of textbooks, number of exams, teaching methods, nature of assignments, appraising of teachers performance and setting the grading system. All the teachers (100%) and 98% of students reported lack of student involvement in choice of textbooks use in the school. The main reason given was that the textbooks had already been identified at the Ministry of Education level and the schools had nothing to do with their choice. As Huddleston (2007) observes, opportunities for student participation are often perceived to be constrained by the requirements of nationally or regionally prescribed curricula and testing regimes and other external expectations. Others felt that teachers were the experts and had the knowledge on which book was suitable to their students. Majority of teachers (96%) and students (98%) responded that students were not involved in decisions on number of exams to be done every term. According to Table 3 both students and teachers agreed with this arrangement. Their reasons were mainly the fear that students would lower the standards of education by reducing the number of exams to be done. This was attributed to laziness by students who naturally desire an easy life at school.

On the issue of decision related to teaching methods to be used in class, majority of both teachers (70%) and students (69%) reported that students were not involved. However a good percentage (30% teachers and 34% students) reported that students were sometimes involved. This gives a window of opportunity to participation in decision making given to students to give suggestions on teaching methodology. This view contradicts the tenets of democracy as it suggests one sided control by the teachers of the learning process. Indeed, Sifuna (2000) affirms that secondary schools in Africa are very authoritarian due to the fact that lessons are very much teacher centered with little student participation. The overall result is an experience that encourages dependence and passivity rather than independence and self discipline.

Reporting a similar finding, Backman *et al* (2006) notes that the students they 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 and that no one listens to what they said 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 As Buhere (2008) suggests, such a state of affairs perpetuates a tradition of dominance and ends with the pupils who have become passive receivers. This view is supported by Aggarwal (2008) who asserts that in order to develop secondary school students into democratic citizens, teaching methods need to be active, participant, cooperative, investigative and critical. Another decision making area which drew mixed reaction was student participation in teacher appraisal. Sixty five percent (65%) of the teachers responded that students were not involved in their appraisal and 70% of the student concurred with this view. This shows that teacher appraisal was mainly done by the head teacher as the Ministry of Education regulations stipulate. Though students are on the receiving end of teacher effectiveness or lack thereof, it is presumed that they have no authority to judge teachers due to their position as minors.

Majority of the respondents also felt that students should were left out on decisions on the grading system. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (94 % of the teachers and 100% of students) gave this result. The main objection to this involvement was that students would place the system too far below standards thus negatively affecting performance in the school. Despite this general exclusion of students in matters curriculum, majority of the respondents agreed that students were involved in setting achievement targets. This was corroborated by 89% of the teachers and 79% students. This finding can be explained by the fact that setting achievement targets is considered as 'safe' area for student to be involved in as it offers no threat to teachers as the authority figures in the school. It is also considered appropriate in so far as improving academic standards is concerned. Students are thus encouraged to set targets of achievement which they would strive to achieve hence improving the standards of achievement in the school. None the less this finding implies a paternalistic attitude on the part of school administrators that views student participation as necessary within some limits. Such an attitude views some decision making areas as being beyond the students' age and experience.

Table 4. Responses on whether or not there are areas students should excluded in curriculum issues (figures in %)

Respondent	YES		NO		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Student	168	56	44	132	100
Teacher	23	73	27	7	100

The study further sought the respondents' opinion on whether or not students should be excluded in certain curriculum issues. This was to support the findings elaborated on in the foregoing findings. A majority of the students (56 %) and teachers (73%) agreed that there were certain issues concerning the curriculum that student should not be involved in. According to Huddlestone (2007), defining the limits of student participation in this way is not only likely to give students the impression that the school's commitment is 'tokenistic' and therefore not to be taken seriously, but it also severely limits the possibilities for experiential learning (about the nature of schooling and the education system as well as in different forms of public decision-making). The notion is authoritarian and paternalistic, rather than democratic. It not only assumes that school students have a legitimate interest only in student-specific issues, but it also assumes that students have no right to decide for themselves the issues in which they want or do not want to be involved.

Majority of the teachers felt that students may make decisions which would be counteractive to their performance especially on deciding on number of exams. A reason offered was that students were too young and lacked expertise on matters to do with teaching methods and grading system and their views might be in conflict with those of the school administration. This therefore meant that student participation was not required nor was it solicited in what was deemed to be sensitive and secret matters (Aggrawal, 2008). Cunningham (2000) affirms that involvement in curriculum and teaching and learning methods is frequently recognized as being one of the least explored areas of student participation. For one thing, school curricula and evaluation criteria are often prescribed in detail by state or regional authorities, apparently leaving little room for involvement by teachers or students. However, in reality, the curriculum as experienced in the classroom and the learning methods employed present a range of different opportunities for student involvement – from decisions about the nature of assignments and projects, for instance, to assessment strategies and marking.

Table 5: Extent of Student Participation in Decisions Concerning their Welfare

Nature of decision	Respondent	N/I	S/I	M/I	D/I	Total
Type of co –curricula activities	Teachers	50	17	10	3	100
	Student	43	28	17	11	100
Kind of diet	Teachers	30	52	11	4	100
	Student	60	18	9	7	100
Standards of cleanliness	Teachers	8	17	35	40	100
	Students	15	20	25	39	100
School routine	Teachers	45	26	2	7	100
	Students	69	21	8	-	100

Key:N/I (Not involved) SI(Sometimes Involved)MI (Moderately Involved)DI(Deeply Involved)

The study also aimed at establishing the levels of student participation in decisions on their welfare. This was because a holistic picture was desired of student participation in all school activities. Responses were sought on three welfare variables namely types of co- curricula activities, standards of cleanliness and school routine. Both groups agree on the whole that students do not participate in co curricula decision making. Sixty seven (67%) of the teachers indicate that students were not involved in decision making on the type of co curricula activities in the school. This view was confirmed by the students. A majority of the students (78%) reported that they were not involved in deciding on matters concerning type of co-curricula activities. This goes against what research has uncovered about the attitudes of teachers and students about their participation in decision making. In a survey of high schools asking students and teachers about their expectations and their experiences with school decision making, Manefield (2007) found that both groups strongly agreed that students should be involved in decisions about extracurricular issues, which classes students take, how time is used during the day, and discipline and classroom management policies.

The two groups of respondents concur that students are not involved in decisions on the diet offered in the schools. This could be explained by the fact that the diet has implications on finances. Perhaps school authority excludes students from involvement on this issue because of unrealistic demands from students which may have cost implications to the schools. On decision making in setting standards of cleanliness, majority of students (74%) and teachers (75%) responded that students were involved in setting standards of cleanliness in the school. Cleanliness as already referred to in the foregoing discussions, is one of those 'safe' areas that according to Magadla (2007) offer no threat to school administration in terms of ceding power and ground to students. School administration therefore gives students their heads in participation in this area.

In support of this, Fielding & Rudduck (2002) aver that attempts to define student participation in decision making refers to token consultation with students over such matters as school uniform, or how to reduce littering. However if democratic culture is to prevail, students should be enabled to understand why things are done as they are and be able to voice their views about change and to have those views heard. The majority of respondents (91% teachers and 90% students) believe that students are not involved in deciding on the school routine. This could be explained by the fact that school routines are longstanding and were formulated at school inception. They are therefore not subject to frequent changes. It would therefore be difficult to ascertain whether there was any kind of student input in their formulation owing to the history involved.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it can be surmised that in as far as student participation in decision making is concerned; students are not invited to participate in majority of administrative, curriculum and student welfare issues in secondary schools in Kenya. This is excepting those issues which are deemed by school authority to be student related. Examples of these include disciplining students, nature of punishments, setting achievement targets and setting standards of cleanliness. The study found out that students were excluded from key decision making areas of the school. Such included the curriculum issues and administrative tasks. Students' views were excluded when making decisions on the school budget, school fees, formulation of school rules, interview of staff, discipline of students and nature of punishments. Similarly, decisions on choice of textbooks, number of exams, and nature of assignments, teaching methods, grading system and appraising teacher's performance excluded student input. Respondents were categorical that student participation was unnecessary on the aforementioned decision making areas mainly due to their youth and lack of expertise on technical tasks. It was also felt that students should concern themselves with core issues such as learning and not in affairs they knew nothing about. However, it was established that student input was encouraged while making decisions on student welfare issues namely setting standards of cleanliness and type of co curricula activities. In addition, student input was encouraged in setting achievement standards in their academic work. The main reason for this was the idea that such involvement would enhance student academic performance; an acceptable objective to all respondents as it tied up with student purpose for being in school.

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