

Principal leadership and its impact on student discipline in Kenyan secondary schools: a case of Koibatek district

M.J. Kibet,¹ J.N. Kindiki², J.K. Sang³ and J.K. Kitilit⁴

Department of Educational Management and Policy Studies, Moi University, P.O Box 3900, Eldoret (30100)
jebimari@yahoo.com

This paper attempts to establish the relationship between leadership approach and students' discipline in secondary schools. A descriptive survey design was adopted to obtain data allowing the accurate description of situations or relationships in schools in Koibatek District. The study targeted principals, teachers and students in the schools; the results are presented in form of descriptive statistical techniques. The study found that principals frequently or sometimes involve other stakeholders, particularly teachers, students and to some extent parents, in the management of their schools. They communicate clearly to students but frequently retain the final authority over most issues. The study found the existence of a significant relationship between leadership approach and student discipline. It is recommended that principals embrace democratic leadership in their capacities as school leaders by involving teachers, students and other stakeholders in decision making processes.

Key words: Leadership style, discipline, secondary schools, Koibatek District, Kenya

Introduction

All over the world, people are rejecting poor leadership and demanding more participatory and democratic approaches. A case at hand is the recent United States of America presidential elections, where people chose President Obama who was perceived to be charismatic and democratic in his style of leadership, coupled with his slogan of "change: yes we can" (Juma 2009). According to World Bank report as cited by Standard (2009), school leadership is central in improving the efficiency and quality of schooling as it motivates teachers to work.

In the African context, Salim (2002) admitted that the continent is littered with failed institutions, mostly due to bad leadership. Devastating conflicts have been provoked and sustained by leadership factors. As we move on in the new century and Africa faces up to its challenges, it is important that the leadership factor be given due attention.

The school situation in Kenya demand that the head teacher be effective in maintaining discipline by emphasizing goal oriented, relevant, immediate and consistent types of disciplined behaviour. Unqualified school managers are likely to be the major cause of many of the management related crises (Ndiku 2004). The primary role of school leadership is to maintain an efficient and transparent administration system to enhance instructional quality and discipline and develop links with the local community (Leithwood et al. 2004). Leadership at work in educational institutions is a dynamic process involving group tasks, collaboration and commitment in achieving goals in a particular context as stated by Cole (2002). Leadership recognizes the need for effective discipline in schools as it examines tasks to be accomplished and the individuals to execute them. This is achieved by the inclusion of greater reinforcement characteristics like recognition, conditions of service and morale building and remuneration (Day 2000). Whereas school leadership is well articulated by these authors, its correlation with leadership style cannot be underestimated.

Okumbe (1998) wrote that leadership style refers to a particular behaviour applied by the leader to motivate his or her subordinates to achieve the objectives of the organization. The styles are usually identified as points on a continuum and includes; autocratic, known as authoritative; democratic, also referred to as participative; *laissez faire* or free-rein; bureaucratic and transactional styles. Leadership in school organizations is important because it is responsible for providing direction, support to members of staff, students and parents. Okumbe (1998) outlines how leadership style plays out in organizational dynamics and fills many of the voids left by conventional organization designs. He observes that an effective leadership style allows for greater organizational flexibility and responsiveness to environmental changes providing a way to coordinate the efforts of diverse groups within the institutions and facilitating membership and personal satisfaction.

The principal determines the active managerial climate, and the amount of teacher and parent input, in academic social spheres in a school setting (Morrison and McIntyre 1973). The principal plays a critical role in determining the

1. Maria Jebiwott Kibet is a lecturer/principal at GK Magereza High School in Eldoret, Kenya.
2. Jonah Nyaga Kindiki PhD is an associate professor in the department of Educational management and policy studies, Moi University, Kenya.
3. James Kipngetich Sang PhD is an associate professor in the department of Educational management and policy studies, Moi University, Kenya.
4. Jackson K. Kitilit is a lecturer in the department of Animal Science and management, University of Eldoret, Kenya.

stakeholders' contributions and effective implementation of policies in the school set-up. The extent to which the principal can bring the staff, students and parents on board depends on the attitude he/she holds towards them. If the principal believes that they are crucial partners, he/she will devolve power and widen their action space in the formulation and implementation of policies (Mcmanus 1989). D'souza (1994) affirms that if the leader has a negative attitude towards the stakeholders, he/she is likely to adopt an exclusive management approach, but if the attitude is positive, the leader is likely to apply an all inclusive style to attain organizational goals. The way the leader approaches the task and people's needs within a given situation is commonly referred to as a leadership style (Cole 2002). One of the crucial areas where leadership is called for in a school is in achieving, maintaining and restoring student discipline.

Discipline is defined as the process of training or controlling, often using a system of punishment, aimed at the causing the recipients to obey rules (Sushila 2004). It is the most important component of running an educational institution and is manifested when the school becomes a harmonious, respectable and secure place where students behave responsibly, are aware of their actions and the consequences of these actions. According to Kiprop (2007) discipline in school is a function of the administration and therefore the principal as a leader must have a clear policy of what he/she wants for the school to ensure successful management of the school.

Nyabisi (2008) asserted that discipline should not be a way to control students, but a process of education to improve and perfect behaviour, aimed at obedience to rules based on self-control and self-discipline: discipline can be assessed by the degree of academic achievement or students' behaviour. Academic discipline may mean handing in homework on time, being attentive in class, preparing fully for examinations and other activities related to academic pursuits. Behavioural discipline, however, is different and should be dealt with differently. The school code of conduct normally spells out the ways a student is expected to behave while in school.

Between June and August 2008, there was a wave of strikes that saw many secondary schools in Kenya losing a lot of property and forcing closure of some schools. Koibatek District Schools were also affected by the skirmishes which the District Education Officer (DEO) linked to student indiscipline. The District Quality Assurance Officer (QASO) confirmed that the problem existed and adduced evidence of 14 schools in the District that were involved in strikes during the period. Interestingly, the officer brought up the fact that some of the schools also experienced a change of headship frequently, noting that some principals had to be persuaded to step down from their position of leadership in schools. This raised the question whether school leadership style was responsible for the upsurge in student strikes.

The objectives of the current study were to establish the leadership styles used by the principals and how they affect the discipline of students. We attempt to investigate if principals of secondary schools are to be blamed for poor leadership and hence justify the relationship between leadership style and students' discipline in secondary schools.

Methodology

The study was carried out in secondary schools in the Koibatek District of Baringo County. Koibatek District has a total of 40 secondary schools with a population of about 8492 students. The breakdown of the 40 schools is as follows; 4 boys', 7 girls' and 29 mixed schools. The study targeted the principals, teachers and students in the schools. Given the diverse and large number of schools, the research stratified the schools into three groups using student gender. Secondary schools in the district were classified as either boys', girls' or mixed schools. Stratified proportionate sampling procedure was then used to select 20 secondary schools that participated in the study, as the method enabled both quantitative and qualitative processes of research to be undertaken (Cohen *et al.* 2003). This formed 50% of the total number of secondary schools in the District. The advantage in stratified proportionate random sampling is that it ensures inclusion of the sample subgroups. All the principals (20) from the selected schools automatically qualified for inclusion in the study. Simple random sampling was used to select 10% of students in the selected schools. We also selected a total of 60 teachers from the selected schools using simple random sampling in which three teachers were selected from each school participating in this study.

Tables 1 and 2 below show the explanation given above.

Table 1 Selection of schools and respondents to the sample frame

School category	Total no. of schools	schools selected	H/T	Teachers	Total
Boys	4	2	2	6	8
Girls	7	3	3	9	12
Mixed	29	15	15	45	60
Total	40	20	20	60	80

Several methods of data collection were used during the study. This included primary and secondary sources. In the category of primary data, key informant interviews were instrumental where in-depth interviews were conducted. The key informants were the district education officer, the staff in the district education office, school principals and teachers.

Questionnaires supplemented the interviews and were also administered to students to identify their experiences with varied leadership styles. The questionnaires were based on factors that are deemed significant in leadership, challenges encountered and lessons learnt in order to improve school management and reduce or eliminate cases of indiscipline. Secondary sources of information used included examination of academic publications on the subject.

The data obtained from the questionnaire was coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques as described by Mugenda and Mugenda (1999).

Data presentation and discussion of findings

Leadership approach

The null hypothesis that leadership approach by principals has no effect on teachers and student behavior will be tested in the current study. Teachers and students from the various schools perceived the principal's leadership approach in various ways. Their responses were as shown in Table 2, 3 and 4.

Table 2 Teachers' perception of leadership styles applied by principals in their schools

Responses on Principal	Never	Rare	Sometimes	Frequently	Very frequently
	%	%	%	%	%
Exercises final authority	5.3	10.5	21.1	42.1	21.1
Consults other staff	0	0	15.8	31.6	52.6
Encourages voting on key decisions	31.6	5.3	31.6	15.8	15.8
Favours majority decision	0	5.3	10.5	52.6	31.6
Calls a meeting to deliberate issues	0	0	21.1	68.4	10.5
H/T creates an environment where members of staff take ownership of school project	0	0	5.3	47.4	47.4
Delegates authority to staff members	5.3	0	31.6	21.1	42.1
Incase differences in role expectation, H/T works with staff	0	0	15.8	42.1	42.1
H/T does not consider suggestions made, have no time for them	47.4	42.1	10.5	0	0
H/T uses letters , memos, emails, notice boards & assemblies	42.1	31.6	21.1	5.3	0
When something goes wrong H/T tells staff the procedure is not working	10.5	31.6	10.5	36.8	10.5
Members of staff must be directed or threatened with punishments to get them to achieve school goals	36.8	26.3	36.8	0	0

Table 2 shows that 63.2% (36) of the teachers believed that their principal frequently and very frequently retains the final authority in the school. Another 21.1% (12) were of the view that their principal sometimes retains the final authority over a decision in school. A small proportion 5.3% (3), however, stated that principals never retain the final decision making authority in school, but involves teachers.

It was also found that the majority of the teachers (84.2% (48) find their principals trying as frequently as possible to include one or two members of staff in making decisions, whereas 15.8% (6) said the principals sometimes try to include one or two members of staff before taking a decision on a matter. This means that although the teachers are involved in decision making the principals can overrule them and their decision is final. They said that this sometimes led to principals arriving at unpopular decisions, raising tension among teachers and students. This was supported by Mcmanus (1989) who asserted that the principal is the policy maker and the executor and by influence the leader as an educational manager. Everything relies on him or her in the school in this regard, therefore the principal plays a critical role in determining how effective the school is by giving staff, students and parents the opportunity to participate in the implementation of policies. However, the extent to which the principal would bring the staff, students and parents on board depends on the attitude he/she holds towards them. If the principal believes that they are crucial partners he/she will devolve power and give them more space in the formulation and implementation of policies. However, if they elect to act alone or disregard advice from other stakeholders, there is a potential of stoking conflict.

Further, Table 2 shows that 31.6% (18) of the teachers stated that principals and their staff frequently vote whenever a major decision is to be taken, while 31.6% (18) and 5.3% (3) stated that principals and staff sometimes and rarely vote wherever major decision is to be made. Another 31.6% (18) said that principals and staff members never vote to make major decisions. It is also indicated that 84.2% (48) of the teachers stated that frequently, for major decisions to pass concerning student discipline, it must be approved by each individual or the majority while 10.5 % (6) stated that sometimes for major decisions to pass, it must have the approval of each individual or the majority. Only 5.3% stated that rarely do major decisions get approved by each individual or majority for it to pass. Table 2 also indicated that 78.9% (45) believe that the principal frequently calls for a meeting to get teachers' advice when things go wrong, while another 21.1% (12) stated that principals sometimes call for a meeting to get teachers' advice.

It is further revealed that 94.8% (54) of teachers believed that principals frequently and very frequently create an environment where the members of teaching staff take ownership of the school project, whereas 5.3% (3) indicated that principals sometimes create an environment where members of staff take ownership of school project. Another 63.2% (36) of teachers stated that Principals frequently and very frequently delegate authority to members of staff. The remaining 5.3% (3) were adamant that principals never allow members of staff to set students' discipline measures with his or her guidance. Another 84.2% (48) stated that principals frequently work with members of staff to resolve differences in role expectations, while 15.8% (9) contend that he/she sometimes works with them.

Table 2 indicates 47.4% (27) of the teachers asserted that Principals do not consider suggestions made by members of staff as he/she does not have time for them. There were 42.1% (24) and 10.5% (6) who stated that principals rarely and sometimes he/she listens to them respectively and considers suggestions made by members of staff. Also 42.1% (24) asserted that principals never use letters, memos, e-mails, notice boards and assemblies to pass information. There were 31.6% (18) who stated that principals rarely and 21.1% (12) sometimes use letters to pass information. Only 5.3% (3) of the teachers stated that principals frequently use letters to pass information. When something goes wrong, the principal rarely (31.6%) tells members of staff that a procedure is not working correctly and therefore goes ahead to establish a new approach alone. Another 47.3% of the teachers stated that the principal frequently told staff that a procedure is not working. This implied that on most occasions about 50% of principals tell members of staff when a procedure is not working.

Table 2 indicates further that 36.8% (21) of the teachers reported that principals do not direct or threaten members with punishments in order for them to work; the same number 36.8% (21) stated that Principals sometimes threaten members of staff with punishment for them to perform work and 26.3% (15) said that principal rarely threaten members of staff with punishment. Teachers' views on the leadership styles commonly used by their principals are provided in Table 3.

Table 3 Leadership approaches used by principals in management of school affairs

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Delegation and supervision	3	5.3
Democratic	33	57.9
Semi democratic	18	31.6
None in particular	3	5.3
Total	57	100

As shown in Table 3, the majority (57.9%) of the teachers stated that their principals commonly use a democratic leadership approach. According to Weihrich and Koontz (2005), a democratic leader derives power from his/her followers, although the final decision remains with the leader. The groundwork of leading to the decision might have been done by a team of people and not necessarily the leader. The democratic or participatory leader consults with subordinates and encourages their participation. Another 31.6 % (18) stated that their principals use a semi-democratic leadership style. This implies that the principals apply authoritarian and democratic leadership styles depending on the situation at hand. It should be noted that 5.3% of the teachers are of the view that their principals use delegation, supervision and sometimes a wide range of leadership approaches.

The students' responses on leadership styles used by school principals is indicated in Table 4.

Table 4 Students responses on aspects of principals' leadership approaches

Responses	Never		Rarely		Sometime		Frequently		Very frequently		TOTAL	
	f	%	F	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	F	%
Principal involves prefects	15	6.3	25	10.4	62	25.8	76	31.7	62	25.8	240	100
Principal encourages use of open forum	34	14.2	28	11.7	68	28.3	63	26.3	47	19.6	240	100
Principal allows students to elect leaders	18	7.5	10	4.2	37	15.4	87	36.3	88	36.7	240	100
Principal encourages students/teachers Baraza	32	13.3	38	15.8	55	22.9	45	18.8	70	29.2	240	100
Principal devotes his time to be in school to attends to students/ teachers	3	1.3	38	15.8	42	17.5	75	31.3	82	34.2	240	100
Principal communicates clearly	21	8.8	28	11.7	30	12.5	59	24.6	102	42.5	240	100

It is instructive to note that 56.5% (138) of the students indicated that principals frequently and very frequently involve prefects in decision making, whereas 25.8% (62) and 10.4% (25) stated that principals, sometimes and rarely respectively, involve prefects in decision making, but a small proportion of 6.3% (15) observed that principals never involve students in decision making. This implied that principals involved students in decision making as proposed by Day (2000) who reported that leadership does not only examine tasks to be accomplished and the individuals to execute them, but also seeks to include greater reinforcement characteristics like recognition, conditions of service, morale building, coercion and remuneration.

Further, 45.9% (110) of the students asserted that principals frequently and very frequently encourage the use of open forums in solving students' problems. There were 28.3% (68) and 11.7% (28) who said that principals sometimes, and rarely, respectively, encourage the use of an open forum in solving students' problems. However, 14.2% (34) stated that principals encourage, but not most frequently, the use of an open forum in solving students' problems.

Table 4 shows that 73% (175) of the students believed that principals frequently and very frequently allow them to elect their leaders, while 15.4% (37) and 4.2% (10) stated that principals sometimes and rarely allow students to elect leaders respectively. The remaining 7.5% (18) said that principals never allow students to elect leaders. It is also indicated that 48% (115) of the students asserted that principals frequently encourage students' and teachers' Baraza to discuss matters of concern. A further 22.9% (55) thought that principals sometimes encourage students and teachers to Baraza (open discussion forums) whereas 15.8% (38) and 13.3% (32) said that principals rarely and never, respectively encourage students and teachers' Baraza. This implies that the majority of the principals do not frequently encourage students and teachers Baraza to discuss matters of concern. This then implies a lot about the school and is a pointer to the kind of leadership in place. A democratic leader would encourage an open forum where students are not afraid to air their views for fear of victimization. This would instil a sense of responsibility in students since they would feel part of the decision making process, reducing cases of rebellion and strikes.

Table 4 further shows that the majority (65.5%) of students who participated in this study indicated that principals frequently and very frequently devote much of their time to be in the school and readily attend to students and teachers. The rest, 17.5% (42), 15.8% (38) and 1.3% (3), stated that principals, sometimes, rarely and never, respectively devote much of their time to be in the school to readily attend to students and teachers. Further, 67.1% (161) of the students stated that principals frequently communicate clearly to students while 17.5% (42) and 15.8% (38) of the students believe that the principal sometimes and rarely communicates clearly to students respectively. Only 8.8% (21) stated that principals never clearly communicate to students.

Relationship between leadership styles and student discipline

The study sought to establish the relationship between leadership styles and student discipline in the various secondary schools in the District. The hypothesis was tested and $\chi^2 = 30.173$ $df=16$ and $sig = 0.017$ was found. This implies that a significant ($P < 0.05$) relationship between the principal's leadership and students' discipline in secondary schools existed. In situations where the principal involves both the teaching members of staff, students, parents and other stakeholders in the affairs of the institution, the chances are high that harmony and better learning environment will prevail.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the principals frequently or sometimes involve other stakeholders, particularly the teachers, students and to some extent parents, in the management of secondary schools at Koibatek District. The study reports that principals used democratic or semi-democratic approaches with both teachers and prefects to handle various pertinent issues and used open communication channels to pass information to the rest of the student body. This resulted in the high level of discipline found and reported in the current study. Current trends in the education sector in Kenya encourage a participatory approach to issues. The students have appreciated the new approach more readily than the teachers, who are used to hard-line handling of students by both themselves and the principal. Teachers also develop the feeling that the principal is seeking more appreciation from students when involved in decision making.

The study found a positive relationship between leadership style and student discipline, hence a need to strengthen school leadership. Principals should be encouraged to embrace democratic leadership in their capacities as school leaders by involving teachers, students and other stakeholders in decision making processes. This would have a positive impact on the overall management of the school and deter students from engaging in costly skirmishes that also disrupt school programmes.

Acknowledgements

We are indeed grateful to the District Education Officer and his staff and all the principals, teachers and students of the schools we visited at Koibatek District for the information they provided for the current study.

References

- Cohen, L. and Manion, C. (ed) .2003, *Research Methods in Education*, London: Croom Helm Ltd.
- Cole, G.A. (ed). 2002, *Personnel and human resource management (5th Edition)*. Ashford Colour Press.
- D'souza , A. (ed) .1994, *Leadership*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa,
- Day, C. 2000, *Beyond Transformational Leadership*. Educational Leadership.
- Juma, K. 2009, *His winning formula in investing in people*. The Standard Newspaper January 18th Standard Media house, Nairobi
- Kiprop, C.J. 2007, *Disciplinary Strategies for managing Student Discipline in public secondary Schools in the post canning era in Kenya*. PhD thesis. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa.
- Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. 2004, How leadership influences student learning. (Review of research). The Wallace Foundation, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- McManus, M. 1989, *Troublesome behaviour in the classroom: A teacher's survival Guide*. New York: Routledge.
- Morrison, A. & McIntyre, D. (ed). 1973, *Teachers and Teaching. (2ndEd)*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
- Mugenda, M. O.& Mugenda, M.D. (eds). 1999, *Research Methods: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. Nairobi: Acts Press.
- Ndiku, D. 2004, "Only seed leadership can save us from woes". The East African standard, August 19th, Nairobi.
- Nyabisi, E. 2008, *The influence of Effectiveness of communication on student Discipline in Secondary Schools: study of Nakuru District, Kenya*. M.Phil. Thesis Moi University.
- Okumbe, J. A. (ed). 1998, *Educational Management Theory and Practice*. Nairobi: Nairobi University Press.
- Salim, S.A. 2002, Africa peace leadership and governance challenges. African news service July 2nd. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Standard Team. 2009, *Time rife to redefine the role and Skills of School heads*, Standard Newspaper February 25th, Standard Media house, Nairobi
- Sushila, B. (ed). 2004, *Management and Evaluation of Schools*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.