Principals’ Challenges In Use of Suspension as an Alternative Disciplinary Method In Public Secondary Schools In Kitui County, Kenya

Dr. Janet K Mulwa, PhD¹, Prof. Jeremiah M. Kalai, PhD²

¹Lecturer, South Eastern Kenya University, Kenya
²Associate professor, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Corresponding author*

Abstract: Students’ discipline is a matter of global concern. However, the effectiveness of use suspension as an alternative disciplinary method in schools still remains largely unexplored and a matter of conjecture in Kenya. This study sought to investigate Principals’ challenges associated with use of suspension as an alternative disciplinary method on students’ discipline in public secondary schools in Kitui County. Kenya. The study objective sought to establish the challenges faced by principals in using suspension as an alternative disciplinary method on students’ discipline. The study adopted the ex-post-facto research design and was guided by the systems theory. The study targeted 333 public secondary schools which included 333 principals, 333 Deputy Principals, 333 Guidance and Counselling Heads of Departments (HoDS), and Kitui County Director of Education. The sample size was obtained by a stratified proportionate sampling procedure and purposive sampling to obtain a sample of 101 schools which included 101 principals, 101 Deputy Principals, 101 HoDs guidance and counselling and the County Director of Education. The data collection tools included questionnaires for Principals, Deputy Principals, HoDs guidance and counselling and interview guide for the County Director of Education. Instrument reliability was determined by a test-re-test technique. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse data which was presented using Frequency distribution tables. Qualitative data was organised in themes and presented in a narrative form. From the findings, students were suspended upon recommendation by the school discipline committee. The major challenge of using suspension in management of school discipline included uncooperative parents (reported by 60.4% of the principals). The parents requested for reduction of suspension period, they also sided with their children (students) and the parents also failed to report back to school on the given date. Suspension was time consuming and this was said by 37.6% of the principals, with 7.9% of the principals saying that suspension had a challenge of refusal of students to tell their parents the truth, while 6.9% of the principals said that some students did not change at all after suspension. The study concluded that the challenges associated with principals’ use of suspension as an alternative disciplinary method are many. However, effectiveness in use of suspension as an alternative disciplinary method could be realised if schools could design and utilize disciplinary approaches that could directly address students’ discipline problems. Hence, such approaches could assist students who have signs of misconduct in schools.

Key words: Student discipline, student suspension, alternative disciplinary method, challenges, principal, management, misbehaviour

I. INTRODUCTION

Discipline refers to educating someone to acquire desired behaviour for both remediation and prevention purposes (Cotton, 2005). Discipline is about positive behaviour change. Discipline is guidance and instruction that is meant to teach and enhance a social order where the rights and responsibilities of students in the school are balanced (Squelch, 2000). Were (2006), notes that discipline means a system of guiding the individuals to make reasonable decision responsibly. According to Simatwa (2010), discipline is the practice of training people to obey rules and orders and punishing them if they do not. However, students’ discipline is a major concern in many parts of the world (Stewart, 2004, Republic of Kenya, 2001). Nakpodia (2010), noted that it has become normal in many secondary schools for students to break school rules with impunity. According to Gaustad (2005), any serious learner misconduct involving violent or criminal behaviour defeats achievement of educational goals. However, Wandeo (2002), observed that good discipline will have a tradition of good achievement and disciplined students from such a school emerge as individuals who are well molded with internalized personal discipline and indeed good citizens, parents and workers in future.

Kiprop (2007), avers that discipline in school is a function of the administration. Therefore, the principal as a leader must have a clear discipline policy of what is required for the successful management of school discipline. Thus, it is observed that with a wide range of disciplinary methods for use on students’ discipline in schools, suspension is one of the alternative disciplinary methods that could be used by school principals to manage school discipline with an ultimate aim of achieving good school discipline.

Evans (2011), posits that there are two types of suspension. These include; out-of-school suspension and in-school suspension. In-school suspension refers to the removal of students from their regular classrooms while requiring them to remain in school. Theriot and Dupper (2010), observed that
in-school suspension usually involves removing a student to an alternate location within the school for a specified period of time. Furthermore, this alternate location is often isolated from the general student body and the student is expected to sit or study quietly for the duration of the punishment. Stewart (2004), argues that suspension of students from schools involves temporary exclusion of a student from school. Therefore, it is noted that both types of suspension involve barring a student from attending normal classes during the teaching and learning processes while servicing suspension as a sanction.

According to Adams (2000), School administrators' use of out-of-school suspension began as a method of reducing student misbehavior in the 1960s. This has continued to be used since that time. This is consistent with Morrison and Skiba (2001); Sauter (2001); Skiba (2002), who found that out-of-school suspension has still been reported to be one of the most commonly used disciplinary consequences for student misbehavior. According to Brakebill (2018), students' misbehavior can be extremely disruptive to learning. It causes teachers and administrators stress and costs classmates the valuable instructional time that the teacher has to instead spend on addressing behavior issues. According to Afullo (2005), indiscipline cases that have become a major concern in schools include, arson, sexual assault, theft, sneaking out of school, fighting, bullying, drug abuse, truancy, lateness, obscene language and noise making.

United States of America has experienced the higher rate of school crime in the past decade; Canada as well as Britain has experienced increased use of firearms in public schools. Pupils have turned to violence not only on fellow pupils but also on teachers (Kriener, 2000). According to Afullo (2005), teachers apply various methods to cope with the tasks of managing student discipline. This is done through: suspension, caning, pinching, ridiculing and forcing pupils to kneel for long hours outside the classroom. Harris and Bennet (1982), posits that suspension is popular as a tool for administrators in United States because school officials feel that it is effective. In 1971, the Ohio law allowed a principal to suspend students for up to ten days from school for misconduct. Notification had to be made to parents within 24 hours of the suspension stating the reason for the action. According to Stewart (2004), the major objective of removing an offending learner from the classroom is to allow the teacher to get on with the lesson in hand.

Suspension as noted by Stewart (2004), in United States of America (USA) is a popular tool for administrators and can be used as a mechanism for punishing unacceptable behaviour. Additionally, Australia has a range of measures which teachers use to ensure appropriate standards of learner behaviour which range from preventive action by individual teachers to punitive measures such as suspension. Therefore, most Australian education authorities have passed regulations providing principals with the power to exclude misbehaving learners from their school and this power includes suspension.

Indiscipline problems in South African schools have been described by Naong (2007), as a disproportionate and intractable part of every teacher's experience of teaching. According to Marais and Meier (2010), teachers in South Africa are becoming increasingly distressed about disciplinary problems in schools. Masitsa (2008), posits that learners in south Africa are alleged to have murdered others inside the school premises, openly challenged teachers and have a “don’t care” attitude towards their work. However, according to Aziza (2001), suspensions are highly prevalent in the Western Cape schools due to physical and verbal confrontations, theft, substance abuse, and pornography.

However, the ban of Corporal punishment in South Africa since 1996 South African Schools Act (1996), brought about Alternatives to Corporal punishment as a discipline strategy (Tungata, 2006). According to Msweni (2008), after the banning of corporal punishment in schools teaching has become a “stressful and challenging occupation” and many teachers are de-motivated and feel hopeless. However, Cicognani (2004), and Tungata (2006), found that teachers preferred alternative disciplinary methods such as in-school suspension, more counsellors, psychologists, support groups and parental involvement. However, Nene (2013), established that alternative measures to corporal punishment in South Africa were not very effective in curbing learner discipline in schools for it is difficult to choose and implement the correct alternatives to corporal punishment. This could probably affirm the findings of Msweni (2008), who noted that most teachers feel incapacitated and helpless in dealing with learner indiscipline in schools. Therefore, this underscores the challenges arising from use or choice of any alternative disciplinary method aimed at managing students’ discipline by school principals owing to the fact that teachers are very key in the implementation process of alternative disciplinary strategies.

Students in Botswana are suspended from school, when a student’s conduct and behaviour must habitually or continually be such that the maintenance of a proper standard of discipline or conduct in school is endangered, or when a student has committed an act of a gravely reprehensible nature or fails to attend school regularly (Ministry of education, 1967). Before the school head could suspend the child, he/she should warn the student and inform his or her parents with regard to the nature of the offense and the action intended to be taken thereof. The copy of the letter to the parents should be sent to the Permanent Secretary who will in turn inform the Minister. While the school head can suspend the student for days not exceeding 20, it is only the Minister who can expel the same. However, parents are given a democratic right to contest against the school head’s decision, in writing, to the Minister within 20 days after suspension has taken place. The Minister can either endorse the
There are many barriers to the effective management of discipline in schools. The Head Teacher or teacher acting in that capacity shall, within fourteen days of the suspension, report the suspension to the board of Management of the school and convene a meeting within 14 days to discuss the discipline issues. The fact of the suspension shall be conveyed directly to the parent or legal guardian of the pupil by means of a letter. In cases of mass indiscipline involving the whole or part of the student body, the head teacher or teacher acting in that capacity may declare the school closed and the students suspended. This study was done in order to unearth principals’ challenges associated with use of suspension as an alternative disciplinary method in management of students’ discipline in schools.

However, there are many barriers to the effective implementation of alternatives to corporal punishment (Republic of Uganda, 2017). Kimani, Kara and Ogetange (2013); Ajowi and Simatwa (2010) argue that administrators and teachers are not thoroughly prepared to deal with indiscipline in the absence of corporal punishment. Kimani, Kara and Ogetange (2013), posit that teachers should be trained on alternative strategies to deal with discipline problems. It is noted that use of alternative disciplinary methods such as suspension means a learner’s exclusion although for relatively a short duration from school. Therefore, administrators ought to be cautious to avoid making costly mistakes while using suspension in management of discipline of students.

Stewart (2004), argues that measures such as the exclusion of misbehaving learners should be treated with caution for they might not reflect accepted international principles and practices and should only be exercised in the most extreme circumstances. It is observed that suspending a student implies barring the student from carrying on with the normal learning routine. Although some students manage to return back to school after suspension, some students may reform and change for better while others may not be remorseful at all and may end up committing worse offenses which could land them into more problems.

According to Kindiki (2009), suspension punishes the parents/guardians who normally have to accompany the errant students back to school. Arising from the aforementioned, this underscores the challenges associated with use of suspension in schools. This study was carried out in order to investigate Principals’ challenges in use of Suspension as an Alternative Disciplinary method in public secondary schools in Kitui, County, Kenya

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The issue of students’ indiscipline is a challenge that cuts across many schools in Kenya despite availability of many alternative disciplinary methods of managing learner indiscipline, suspension being one of them. Afuollo (2005), reveals that in Kenya, school teachers find it difficult to enforce discipline particularly after the abolishment of corporal punishment. The Kenyan government banned the use of corporal punishment in schools on March 13th 2001 and enacted the Children’s Act. Section 127 (1) of the children act says that nothing takes away the right of a parent, guardian, or custodian of a child to punish a child reasonably (Government of Kenya, 2001). According to Busienei (2012), cases of students’ indiscipline have not reduced with the use of alternative disciplinary methods. According to Kimani, Kara and Ogetange, (2012)school principals mainly focus on reactive and administrative methods of instilling discipline rather than giving appropriate leadership designed to inspire alternative and positive behaviour in students. However, public Secondary Schools in Kitui County have been experiencing students’ discipline problems of various forms. They are characterized by destruction of school property and attempted arsons, unrests, burning of school structures, refusal to take exams and walkout to Sub-County Education offices. Some of these indiscipline cases were handled depending on the magnitude of the offences committed by the students. Some culprits were suspended in order to meet with BoMs (Kitui County Education Office(CDE), 2013). A study by Mutua (2004), found that public secondary schools in Matungulu division, Machakos District, Kenya had embarked on the use of alternative strategies of discipline after the abolition of corporal punishment. In dealing with indiscipline the study revealed that teachers had a range of alternatives that they used namely; guidance and counseling, punishment in form of manual work, extra class work and kneeling down and dialogue, withdrawal of privileges and at times they used suspension. However, this justifies the need for this study in order fill a knowledge gap on Principals’ challenges in use of Suspension as an Alternative Disciplinary method in public secondary schools.

The study objective

The study used the following objective:

To determine the challenges encountered by principals’ in use of suspension as an alternative disciplinary method on students’ discipline in public secondary schools in Kitui county

Challenges of use of suspension and discipline of students

Suspension is a disciplinary action that has academic implications. It is also noted that the implications of suspension cut across the family level because once a student is suspended from school, it requires the involvement of the parent until the indiscipline case is fully resolved. However, Kelly (2020), avers that parents make a difference in student achievement and behaviour. Parents can often provide solutions to difficult classroom problems. Schools should institute policies requiring teachers to contact parents periodically throughout the year. However, when students are suspended from school, it also becomes a challenge to the
parents because according to Brakebill (2018), when younger students are suspended from schools, parents are left to figure out what to do with their child for the day. This may mean working from home, missing work, paying for a babysitter, or even leaving a young child home alone if there isn’t another option. For many families, this is an inconvenience they can’t afford.

According to Harris and Bennet (1982), those students who are repeatedly suspended sometimes make the discipline problem appear greater than it is. This concurs with Sauter (2001), who argued that removal of students from the general education classroom promoted more poor behavior and in fact did not address the students’ behaviors at all. When students are suspended from school, Brakebill (2018), posits that students lose valuable instruction and learning time whenever they are taken out to the classroom, and many schools have a no-makeup policy for work missed because of suspension. This time adds up quickly, and it’s not uncommon for students’ grades to drop as a result. This is consistent with Liu (2013), who found that lengthy and repeated suspensions result in lost learning; it also contributes to students’ feelings of alienation from school and perhaps most importantly does little or nothing to address the root cause of the behaviour.

According to Kindiki (2009), the suspended students will take advantage of the suspension to engage in other harmful activities outside the school, such as drug abuse and petty theft. The suspended students will lose out academically. Some suspended students also never come back to school. They opt to drop out of school altogether as they feel stressed. Others may even resort to other drastic measures, like suicide, to protest against what they feel is an injustice to them. However, the aforementioned studies did not investigate principals’ challenges in use of suspension as an alternative disciplinary method in public secondary schools, hence the need for the study in order to fill a knowledge gap.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the ex-post-facto research design. The design attempted to determine the challenges of principals’ use of suspension as an alternative disciplinary method and students’ discipline in public secondary schools in Kitui County. The target population for the study was 333 public secondary schools which included principals, Deputy Principals and Guidance and Counselling Heads of Departments (HoDS), Kitui CDE. The sample size of 101 principals, 101 Deputy Principals and 101 Guidance and Counselling Heads of Departments (HoDS) and one Kitui CDE was obtained by a stratified proportionate sampling procedure and purposive sampling. Questionnaires for principals, Deputy Principals and Guidance and Counselling Heads of Departments and an interview guide for the CDE were used as tools for data collection. Instrument validity was established by pretesting the data collection tools during a pilot study in schools which did not participate in the main study. Instrument reliability was determined by a test-re-test technique during the pilot study. The Pearson’s Product-Moment correlation(r) formula was used to correlate the pre-test and post-test results in order to determine the coefficient of reliability or stability.

Once data was collected, it was post coded and analysed using descriptive statistics with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software. To integrate qualitative data gathered from open ended questions into quantitative data, it was post coded and tallying of similar responses per item was done after which frequency counts were made of all responses making similar responses. Data presentation was done by use of frequency distribution tables. Qualitative data was organised into theses and explanations of the were findings made based on study objectives and presented in a narrative form.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Principals’ responses on challenges facing them in using suspension as an alternative disciplinary method

This study sought to establish principals’ challenges of using suspension as an alternative disciplinary method. The results are as indicated in table 1.1

Table 1.1 Principals' response on challenges facing them in using suspension as an alternative disciplinary method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncooperative parents</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>60.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time wasting</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusal of students to tell parents the truth</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some students don’t change but like it that way</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students inciting others and refusal to go home</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional rights of a child</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of legal implications</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instead of bringing parents/ guardians some hire parents or bring in siblings</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N= 101

From the findings, majority (60.4 %) of the principals indicated that the parents were uncooperative for they requested for reduction of suspension period, the parents also sided with the students and parents failed to report back to school on the given date. This implies that parents were not willing to admit that their children could make mistakes instead they supported the students’ misconduct. The results agree with the views of Kitui CDE (2013) who noted that some parents feel embarrassed while others deny whether their children could do anything wrong in school. Some parents sided with their problematic children and the suspended students also deny having done anything wrong completely. The parents’ reaction could be explained by the views of Kindiki (2009) who established that suspension punishes the parents or guardians who normally have to accompany the errant students back to school. It is worth
noting that whereas the act of a parent having to accompany a student to school is a good gesture in ensuring parental involvement in management of school discipline, this move could be interpreted otherwise and could incalcate a feeling of being punished hence the parents are likely to be on the defensive in order to justify the innocence of their children.

The other challenges of use of suspension as an alternative disciplinary method as cited by 53.6 per cent of deputy principals indicated that some parents opt to take their children to other schools once suspended, with 40.6 per cent of the deputy principals noting that parents of suspended students don’t own up suspension of their children. The findings also indicated that 48.2 per cent of guidance and counselling teachers said that some parents opt to take their children to other schools once suspended with 32.6 per cent of guidance and counselling teachers indicating that parents of suspended students did not own up suspension of their children. This view agrees with Kitui CDE (2013) who reported that the parents side with their children and deny that their children could have ever done anything wrong at school. This is consisted with Kindiki (2009), who observed that some suspended students never came back to school. They opt to drop out of school altogether as they feel stressed. This means that some students were never accompanied by their parents to meet with the BoM to discuss the discipline issues.

Another challenge that featured well in the study was time wastage for the students, time taken by BoM to make decisions on the discipline case, time taken by the discipline committee and time taken on settling discipline issues. This view agrees with Kindiki (2009) who noted that students lose out academically. This is also consistent with Liu (2013) who noted that lengthy and repeated suspensions for disruptive behaviour results in lost learning. The study also established that suspension rarely encouraged students to control their behaviour. This is consistent with Stewart (2004) who noted that any suspension becomes a reward and thus, it serves to reinforce the form of behaviour the teacher or school was trying to eliminate. However, the study also established that suspension gets the parent to school. This is consistent with Huczynski and Buchanaan (2001); Kipro (2012) who observed that managing students’ behaviour requires a concerted effort of the parents, teachers and school principals as the key players for effective management of school discipline. This agrees with the views of Bosire, Sang, Kiumi and Mungai (2009) who argue that the management of school discipline is a corporate responsibility between the principal, the teachers and parents. Thus, it is noted that the principal, the teacher and the parent are the key core players in controlling discipline of students in schools and each one of them has an important role to play in managing school discipline.

Kindiki (2009), also agrees with this view by noting that suspended students rarely changed their behaviour and would most likely carry on with the same delinquent behaviour after suspension. According to Smit (2010), suspension pushes students out of school and may only contribute to the broader problem of violence. The other challenges that the study identified included the constitutional rights of the child, fear of legal implications and some students instead of bringing parents/guardians hire parents or bring in siblings. Thus, it is imperative for Educational managers to properly scrutinise suspended students in order to curb all forms of mischief.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that principals in public secondary schools face different types of challenges in management of students’ discipline using suspension as an alternative disciplinary method hence jeopardising its effectiveness. However, effectiveness in use of suspension could be achieved if schools could design and utilize alternatives to suspension as disciplinary approaches that could directly address students’ discipline problems. The study recommended that schools should make every effort to curb all forms of mischief from students that could possibly lead to their suspension from school. This could be achieved by helping students learn to control their own behaviours through involvement of school discipline committees, prior parental involvement before suspension of a student, utilization of guidance and counselling programmes and peer counselling and this is likely to assist those students who have signs of misconduct.

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