Promoting Reading Culture: The Case of Student-Participation in Selection of Reading Materials in Public Secondary Schools in Kakamega County, Kenya

Solomon Simwa

Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Educational Media, Moi University, Kenya

Abstract: Following introduction of Free Tuition Programme (FTP) in Kenyan public secondary schools in 2008, there has been an unprecedented increase in procurement of reading materials (RM) in these institutions. This paper examines the extent to which students participate in selection of RM as a critical determinant of development of reading culture in schools. It is based on a cross-sectional descriptive survey of public secondary schools situated in Kakamega County, Kenya. A total of 372 Form Four students responded to questionnaire and 31 library teachers were interviewed. The participants were selected through stratified, simple random and purposive sampling procedures. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to analyse data. Findings reveal that there is limited student participation in selection of RM in these schools due to weaknesses among teachers namely; poor attitudes towards the concept; and lack of relevant knowledge and skills. The study recommends capacity-building of teachers in effective management of reading programmes in schools.

Key terms: Reading Culture, Student-participation, Reading Materials, Free Tuition Programme, Public Secondary Schools

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of a good reading culture to students and a nation as a whole is widely known. It boosts one's language development, refreshes the mind besides exposing readers to new development ideas. In short, the more a person reads, the more educated and productive she becomes. It is no wonder research has identified a positive correlation between societies' socio-economic development and reading levels among citizens (Ryanga, 2002).

The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Kenya appreciates this concept. That is why upon introduction of Free Tuition Programme (FTP) in all public secondary schools in 2008, the MOE set aside Ksh. 1284 per student annually for procurement of reading materials (RM) and other school supplies (MOE, 2010). To fully utilize the RM, every school is expected to conduct a reading lesson popularly known as *library lesson* every week. In addition, teachers are encouraged to ensure school libraries are open and accessible to students as much as possible for independent reading (MOE, 2006).

Another aspect regarding selection of RM in public secondary schools is found in the study of literature in English. As part of Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (K.C.S.E.) examination, candidates are required to select one optional set book from a list of three (a novel, a play and an anthology of short stories). Apart from fulfilling examination purposes, the freedom to select also aims at catering for students' reading tastes ranging from authors, genres to themes (MOE, 2010). This phenomenon helps to encourage reading culture among students. Poor reading culture has, however, persisted in secondary schools and among Kenyan youth in general (Mwangi, 2009; Nyanchwani, 2011). Some research studies have cited shortage of RM, lack of funds to construct libraries, and adverse effects of electronic media as the main causes (Nalusiba, 2010). While all these are true, little is known about student-participation in selection of RM - a psychological and very critical factor determining development of reading culture among students. Research has actually revealed that in situations where constraints of poor funding have been addressed (like the Kenyan one), student-participation in selection of RM accounts for up to 80% enthusiasm displayed by students in RM procured by schools (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). The best teachers of reading usually ensure student-participation in selection of RM through class discussions, interviews and administration of questionnaire to ascertain their (students) reading interests (Manning, 2000). This study, therefore, explores the extent to which secondary school students in Kenyan public schools participate in selection of RM with a special focus on Kakamega County.

A. Statement of the Problem

Following increased funding for procurement of RM in Kenyan public secondary schools, the MOE encourages every school to form a School Instructional Materials Selection Committee (SIMSC) under chairmanship of library teachers to undertake selection of RM. Reading materials selected should cater for various reading tastes such as class readers, magazines, newspapers and textbooks (MOE, 2010). However, poor reading culture has persisted among secondary school students in Kakamega County (Maingi, 2010). This

suggests that there might be challenges related to poor management of the RM and especially an important factor determining reading in schools like student-participation in selection of the materials. It is for that reason that this paper examines level of student-participation in selection of RM in Kakamega County, Kenya.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study was a survey based on cross-sectional descriptive design. This design is advisable when dealing with a population drawn from a wide area (Creswell, 2003). The population comprised all public secondary schools in Kakakmega County. Purposive sampling was used to select candidates (Form Four students) due to their reading of optional set books in English and long exposure to RM in schools compared to other students. Library teachers were also purposively sampled due to their heavy involvement in selection of RM.

Through multi stage stratified and simple random sampling procedures, a sample of 372 students and 31 library teachers was selected. First, all schools were stratified into three categories commonly found in the county as: Mixed Day Schools (MDS), Girls' Boarding Schools (GBS), and Boys' Boarding Schools (BBS). Secondly, 30% sub-counties were selected through simple random sampling. Thirdly, 30% schools in each sub-county and category were again selected using simple random sampling. Fourthly, 30% students were selected from every selected school. According to Gay (2002), a 30% sample is adequate when dealing with a population distributed in a wide area. Finally, all library teachers in selected schools were purposively sampled because each school had only one. Table 1 presents a summary of sampling process.

TABLE 1

SAMPLED STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

30% of Sub-counties	30%of Schools Respectively (MDS+GBS+BBS)	30% of Students (MDS+GBS+BBS)	Library Teachers
Likuyani	(7+1+1) =9	(90+14+18) =124	9
Butere	(8+1+1) =10	(96+15+21) = 132	10
Ikolomani	(10+1+1) = 12	(87+13+16) = 116	12
Total	**31**	**372**	**31**

Two data collection tools were used namely students' questionnaire and an interview guide for library teachers. The questionnaire mainly focused on student-participation in SIMSC operations and selection of optional set books in English. The interview guide for library teachers sought to find out initiatives the teachers were taking to involve students in SIMSC operations and their general perception of the concept. After editing and coding, qualitative and quantitative approaches based on frequencies, percentages and themes were used to analyze data. Data presentation was done mainly

in form of circle graphs, frequency tables and narratives for quantitative and qualitative data respectively.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Background Information

It was established that out of the 31 library teachers sampled, 19(61%) were female while 12(39%) were male. Most library teachers also happened to be teachers of English, a subject favoured by female teachers. This was the main reason behind distribution of the teachers in terms of gender. On the side of students, 216(58%) were boys while 156(42%) were girls. There are many ways through which students may participate in selection of RM. This study, however, restricted itself to the major ones namely; questionnaire prepared by teachers, suggestion boxes, individual student selection and class discussions.

B. Student Participation in SIMSC Operations

From the questionnaire, it was established that majority of students did not take part in selection of RM in their schools as indicated in Table2.

TABLE 2

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN SIMSC OPERATIONS

Selection of:	agree	disagree	undecided
Textbooks	04 (1%)	290 (78%)	7(2%)
Newspapers & magazines	04(1%)	331(89%)	30 (8%)
Bibles & dictionaries	00(0%)	350(94%)	04(1%)
Storybooks	45(12%)	246(66%)	11(3%)

From Table 2, students who acknowledged having participated in selection of various RM ranged between 1 – 12%. The leading area was storybooks with 12% followed by newspapers, magazines and textbooks, while the least was bibles and dictionaries. A possible explanation is that storybooks come in many titles and genres, something that gives teachers a reason to try and seek students' reading preferences. Further analysis revealed that the commonest method used to involve students in selection of storybooks was suggestion boxes. In addition, all students who gave this response (45) were from one GBS and were taught by a male teacher.

Participation by way of filling questionnaire was reported by six students in boarding schools (four from GBS and two from BBS). It was not clear how such few students in a given school could be targeted by teachers for participation in selection of RM and not the others. This response, therefore, appeared unreliable.

Interviews with library teachers revealed a different perspective. Out of the 31 interviewed, 23 (75%) admitted having delegated selection duties to Heads of Department (HODs). They expected the HODs (as per the library teachers'

directives) to ascertain students' reading interests before presenting to them (library teachers) requisition lists. Failure to make any follow up was evidently their main undoing in this regard. They did not bother to guide the HODs on how to conduct selection exercises or ascertain whether their directives were being implemented or not.

Although all the teachers appreciated value of student participation in selection of RM, the majority 23(75%), did not know how they could go about it. One of them wondered: "*At what stage should we allow students to participate? Should we invite them to our meetings? I like the idea but I don't know how it can be implemented.*"This response pointed to lack of relevant knowledge and skills related to development reading culture among teachers. As noted in the introduction, there are various strategies at the teachers' disposal when handling such responsibilities. Another contradictory area that arose during the interviews was related to whether students made any suggestions regarding their reading preferences. The questionnaire revealed that 197(53%) of students did so but none of the teachers acknowledged having received such information. That disharmony indicated either dishonesty on the part of the teachers or heavy use of teacher-centred approaches in selection activities. However, the general pattern of responses both in the questionnaire and interviews tended to put more weight on latter. Reading like any other teaching and learning activity should, ideally, be learner-centred. Teachers who do not involve students in teaching and learning situations do not stand a high chance of getting feedback from the students.

C. Student Participation in Selection of Optional Set Books in Literature

To simplify investigation of this aspect, three categories representing a summary of approaches open to teachers in selection of these set books were delineated. These were: individual selection by every student with or without guidance of the teacher (IS); class selection as a group with or without guidance of the teacher (CS); and unilateral selection by the teacher (US). The first two indicated student-participation while the last one signified non-participation.

The study found that out of 372 students surveyed, 231 (62%) were not involved at all in selection of optional set books in literature. Figure 1 presents a summary of the findings.

FIGURE 1: SELECTION OF OPTIONAL SET BOOKS IN LITERATURE
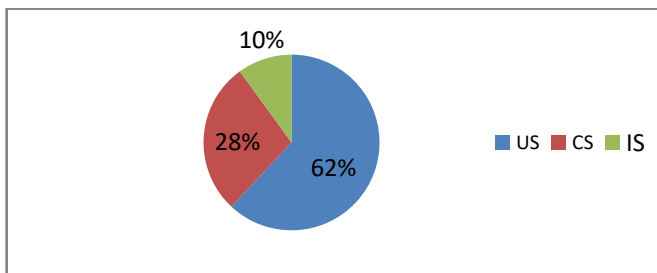
Key: US = Unilateral Selection by the teacher CS= Class Selection with or without teacher assistance IS= Individual Selection with or without teacher assistance

From figure1, it was discovered that the greatest attempt teachers made to involve students in selection of optional set books in literature was through class selection (28%). Participation through individual selection, though the best method, was negligible. Since all teachers who were not in charge of libraries did not participate in the study directly, this selection trend in English shade light on general negative attitudes among teachers towards student participation in selection of RM.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is very limited student participation in selection of RM in public secondary schools in Kakamega County. The exercise faces challenges related to teacher-centred management of reading programmes. They include delegation of selection duties by library teachers to other teachers without proper follow up; blantant disregard for students' reading preferences among teachers, and lack of relevant knowledge and skills among teachers on how to exercise this concept.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for library teachers to be fully in-charge of slection of RM in their schools. This will ensure selection of RM is handled in a professional amanner. Alternatively, they should make a follow up whenever they delegate such duties to offer necessary guidance. Another solution would be creation of reading programme specialist positions in schools to replace libarry teachers. For instance, in quite a number of schools with librarians, library teachers seemed to have forgotten their roles with regard to development of reading culture. Positions of reading specialists may act as constant reminders to teachers concerned of their specific duties in the schools besides normal teaching activities. Above all, there is need for regular in-service courses for teachers in charge of reading to boost their attitudes, knowledge and skills on proper management of reading programmes.

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