



THE ROLE OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN ENHANCING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: RESPONSES FROM A SURVEY IN NAKURU COUNTY, KENYA

Onditi Kennedy*

Moi University Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating the role of student leadership in enhancing academic achievement in secondary schools in Kenya. Despite student leadership being a key factor that would affect several aspects of the school, its role in enhancing academic achievement has not been critically examined, especially in the context of developing countries. This study adopted a mixed method approach where both quantitative and qualitative data was collected using questionnaires and interview schedules. The target population was secondary school head teachers and student leaders from public secondary schools in Nakuru County, Kenya. The total sample size, which was selected using stratified and simple random sampling, was 226 respondents; comprising of 113 headteachers and 113 student leaders. The quantitative data collected was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics; whereas themes were developed from the qualitative data and presented as voices. The findings of this study showed that student leaders play a significant role in enhancing academic achievement in schools. These findings will be useful in helping all education stakeholders in coming up with ways of strengthening the role of student leaders in enhancing academic achievement in secondary schools; especially in the aspect of monitoring of student progress.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Students' academic achievement is one of the key correlates of an effective school, with emphasis placed on learning outcomes as a measure of a school's success or failure. Studies have emphasized the school leaders' efficiency in performing their roles as one of the defining factors for enhanced students' academic achievement in schools (Lezotte, 2010; Hargreaves *et al*, 2006; Musungu *et al*, 2008). However, such studies have only emphasized the role of the head teacher as the school leader, with very little empirical evidence on how other leaders within the school, especially student leaders, can be engaged to enhance academic achievement in schools. As Marzano *et al* (2005) observe, students can often "slip through the cracks" and go unnoticed in school improvement efforts, especially in larger schools. The result of this is that students are less likely to affect their own academic achievement; and end up feeling that their future is dependent upon the actions of others, rather than on their own efforts. Thus, discussion about how to involve the students in key aspects of the school is necessary for enhancing a more cohesive school community and a more conducive learning environment.

This study therefore sought to fill this gap by exploring ways in which students can be involved, through student leadership, in enhancing school effectiveness; with specific reference to students' academic achievement.

Study Objectives

- i. To examine the role of student leaders in setting standards of academic achievement
- ii. To examine the role of student leaders in monitoring students' academic progress
- iii. To examine the role of student leaders in monitoring students' lesson attendance
- iv. To examine the role of student leaders in enhancing cooperative learning among students in secondary schools in Kenya

Literature Review

Academic achievement as a correlate of school effectiveness

Research on school effectiveness has suggested that some schools are more effective than others; which invokes the questions: what is effectiveness? and, what constitutes school effectiveness? Botha (2010) acknowledges that many public schools world wide have limited resources and this may generally affect how their effectiveness is perceived. Thus, in the process of pursuing multiple school goals using scarce resources, every school experiences different pressures, and therefore each school develops different priorities and criteria

*Corresponding author: **Onditi Kennedy**
Moi University Kenya

for its own effectiveness. However, in the long run, a school should be able to create harmony among all the competing criteria for effectiveness, and also determined which of these criteria is mostly attributed to its effectiveness.

Students academic achievement, in most cases, is the golden standard criteria of success in education, and the effectiveness of a school. Robertson and Miller (2007) argue that improvement in students academic achievement is recognized as the foremost objective of school planning efforts, and that the primary purpose of schools concerns teaching and learning. This is evidenced in most developing countries, where the yard stick for school effectiveness is mostly students' academic achievement and examination results. Studies on school effectiveness in South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya point out that the concept of school effectiveness is mostly linked to learner achievement; with great emphasis on the academic results of students in schools (Makoelle, 2014; Musungu *et al*, 2008; Unpublished paper by Dike, 2001). This means that schools with 'poor' results are generally assumed to be less effective than schools with 'better' results. The resulting effect is that students' academic progress and results are measured frequently, monitored frequently, and the results of those assessments are used to improve the individual student's performance (Oduol, 2006).

In wider support of this emphasis placed on student academic achievement, Lezotte (2010) also argues that in an effective school, there is a climate of high expectations and a belief that all students can obtain mastery of the school's essential curriculum and achieve academically. Schmoker (2005) and Reeves (2007) further suggest that an improving school is one that increases its effectiveness over time by increasing the value addition it generates for students over time; in comparison with other schools serving similar intakes. By contrast, in an ineffective school students make less progress than expected given their characteristics at intake. Additionally, effective schools should successfully progress the learning and personal development of all their students and demonstrate the joint presence of quality and equity in academic achievement. Gross *et al* (2009) further emphasize that in effective schools, data is collected and analyzed in order to monitor progress toward school targets and in order to determine the next steps to assure continuous improvement in students' academic performance.

Waters *et al* (2006) further identify strategies that have the potential to increase student learning and academic achievement. These strategies include encouraging cooperative learning, setting learning objectives and providing feedback. Thus, in high achieving schools, teachers' and principals' expectations are expressed in such a way that the school academic norms are recognized as setting a standard of high achievement. In contrast, the schools that are achieving at lower levels are characterized by the students' feelings of futility in regard to their academic performance (Pashiordis, 2007).

Frequent and systematic monitoring of the progress of students and classes has also been shown to be an important ingredient of the work of an effective school (Lezotte, 2010). First, monitoring is a mechanism for determining the extent to which the goals of the school are being realized, and it also informs planning, teaching methods and assessment. Additionally,

monitoring gives a clear message to students that teachers are interested in their progress. Scheerens (2013) emphasizes the importance of also monitoring the opportunity given to students to learn, which may be expressed as the officially available or allocated learning time; or more specifically as the number of lessons attended.

The need for student involvement in enhancing academic achievement

Shannon and Bylsma (2007) argue that school effectiveness should flow and draw on the entire school environment - including teachers, students and school leaders. Consequently, school improvement literature has put a great emphasis on the role of school leaders and has gone as far as concluding that effective school leadership is key to large-scale, sustainable education reforms (Leithwood *et al*, 2006; Kara *et al*, 2013). Schools especially require good leaders to organize the process of teaching and learning to ensure that the mission of the school is achieved.

However, educational leadership is most often associated with the role of the school administration team, and more specifically, the school principal or headteacher. Thus, much of the focus in education leadership literature is with regard to the principal's role as an instructional leader. Such literature has shown that the school principal is supposed to provide guidance, align and monitor school programs, and structure school processes, resources and staff in order to improve teachers' classroom practices and support student academic achievement (Dempster, 2002; Draper *et al*, 2003). In support of this argument, a study done in Kenya by Musungu *et al* (2008) on the instructional leadership roles of secondary school headteachers revealed that headteachers, as school leaders, supervise teachers' work by inspecting records such as schemes of work, lesson books, records of work covered, class attendance records, and clock in/clock out book.

However, effective school improvement projects should not always be initiated from the top leadership, such as headteachers, but should build on non-hierarchical relationships in the school to include all stakeholders. Research shows that in order to meet the heightened, multiple expectations placed on them and become effective, schools must develop new relationships and strive to have engaged students and teachers. The key in these new types of relationships is to engage students more directly in their learning, and to make them co-workers with teachers in the learning process; rather than for them just being recipients of knowledge. Langer (2004) and Mule (2011) point out that when students feel at least part of the management process in their schools, they will help carry forward change more effectively and also strive to achieve at higher levels. Therefore, as noted by several other studies, the real challenge facing most schools is no longer how to improve principals' leadership but, more importantly, how to maintain and support the leadership capability of the many others in the school, especially student leaders (Fletcher, 2009; Mugali, 2011; UNICEF, 2009; Ghanem, 2012). The findings of these studies support the argument that most of the improvement in a school must come from the people who are directly affected by the leadership actions, especially the students.

This would be a strong and valid argument to involve students in initiatives to enhance students academic achievement in the school. Students can be involved through student leadership; which refers to the work of student representative bodies, through which the school has the perceived role of instilling leadership knowledge and practices in students (Huddleston, 2007). The concept of student leadership is based on distributive leadership. As pointed out by Spillane (2006), distributive leadership moves beyond identifying leadership solely in the traditional leader (the Principal), to recognizing the leadership functions that may be assumed or assigned to other leaders within the school, including student leaders. Distributive leadership is characterized by a form of collective leadership in which all members of the school community work for the achievement of school goals.

Proposed solution

While secondary school administrators and educators in developing countries may have diverse viewpoints of the nature, purpose, place and structure of student leadership in schools, the bottom line is that effective school leaders should learn to use student leadership as a vehicle to share and implement their vision and expectations for their schools; especially in reference to academic achievement. As Gamage *et al* (2009) observe, teachers are not fully aware of the need and impact of embedding student leadership into their daily classroom activities. This study therefore examines the role of student leadership in enhancing academic achievement in secondary schools; with specific reference to the role of the student leaders in setting academic standards, monitoring academic progress, monitoring lesson attendance and enhancing cooperative learning among students in secondary schools.

The information from this study crucial for developing; especially in light of the evidence from studies from developed countries which has alluded to the fact that students respond to having a choice and opportunities to participate in decisions about their academic achievement; rather than encountering only predetermined results (Ghanem, 2012; Ryan *et al*, 2009, Bergen, 2004; Hancock, 2004; Glatthorn *et al*, 2006; Chin, 2007; Allen, 2010; Thomas *et al*, 2010). Schools in developing countries should thus provide opportunities for students to be involved in decisions impacting their educational experiences and outcomes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Approach

This study adopted a pragmatic world view as its philosophical paradigm. As noted by Creswell (2009), this pragmatic option allows for the choice of a mixed methods approach to the design of the study, applying both the quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. Data that answered the research questions was collected through questionnaires and interviews using the Survey strategy. Since a survey research is mainly descriptive in nature, the data collected was summarized in a way that provided the desired descriptive statistics.

Target Population

The study targeted headteachers and student leaders of public secondary schools in the nine Sub – counties of Nakuru County, Kenya. As laid out in the Nakuru County Education

Office Returns (2014), the County had a total of 281 public secondary schools at the time of study. The target population for this research therefore comprised all the 281 headteachers, and 281 student presidents of these secondary schools.

Sampling

The study adopted a multi – stage sampling approach, where both stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used. In the first stage of sampling, a sampling frame consisting of a list of all the 281 secondary schools in the nine Sub – counties was made and schools in each of the Sub - counties were stratified into three categories; Boys, Girls and Mixed school. Schools were then randomly selected from each stratum in each Sub - county to proportionately make up the 162 schools required for the study; as per the recommended sample size by Krejcie & Morgan (1970). The schools were put into the categories of Boys, Girls, and Mixed schools, to enable the assessment of the role of student leadership in academic achievement across these three types of schools. In the second stage of sampling, simple random sampling was used to pick 113 headteachers and 113 student leaders from each of the 162 schools selected for the study. This gave a total sample size of 226 respondents.

Research Instruments

Data for this study was collected using questionnaires and interview schedules. One questionnaire was developed and administered to both the headteachers and the student president from each of the targeted schools. This was done so that responses from these two categories of respondents could be compared in the data analysis. The questionnaire used was semi-structured, containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Interviews were used as the second method of data collection in this study, for purposes of triangulation. An interview schedule was drawn up and administered in face-to-face interviews with 10% (11) of the 113 sampled headteachers. The reliability of the research instruments for this study was tested through a pilot study which was conducted in 10 schools in Baringo County, thus, using respondents who were not sampled during the main study. The test-retest technique was used in determining the reliability of the instrument. The research instrument was administered twice to the same group of subjects with a two – week time lapse between the first and second test. The results of the two tests were subjected to a Pearson Correlation, and a correlation coefficient (r) value of 0.79 was obtained after the two tests. The research instrument was therefore considered reliable.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study was analyzed based on the research objectives. The analysis of data was first done using descriptive statistics and presented in the form of percentages. Secondly, the data was analyzed using inferential statistics. Specifically, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to determine the relationship between student leadership and enhanced academic achievement. On the other hand, the qualitative data from the open – ended questions and the interview schedule was analyzed by drawing out the key themes from the responses given for each question. A qualitative report based on these themes was then generated and the data presented in the form of continuous prose narratives and voices within the research report. This analysis

of data formed the basis of the results presentation, interpretation and discussion.

RESULTS

Objective 1: The Role of student leadership in setting standards of academic achievement

To examine the role of student leadership in setting academic standards in secondary schools, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that student leaders set high standards of academic achievement. Majority of the respondents (85.0%) agreed that student leaders play a role in setting high standards of achievement for other students. Only 8.1% of the respondents disagreed that student leaders set high standards of achievement for other students. The remaining 6.9% were undecided.

Objective 2: The role of student leaders in monitoring Students academic performance

To answer this objective, the respondents were also asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed that student leaders monitor the learning progress of other students. The analysis of data showed that majority of the respondents (58.9%) agreed that student leaders monitor the learning progress of other students. However, a total of 26.7% of the respondents disagreed that student leaders monitor the learning progress of other students. The remaining 14.4% of the respondents were undecided about the statement.

In supporting these findings, one of the respondents who were interviewed observed that:

...student leaders are able to provide feedback on whether the learning needs of the students are being met. They are also good at encouraging the other students to work hard, especially if they themselves are achievers and their effort is recognized.

(Source: School Headteachers' Interview)

Objective 3: The role of student leaders in monitoring students' lesson attendance

To answer this objective, the respondents were required to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that student leaders ensure that other students attend their lessons. The analyzed data indicated that majority of the respondents (71.7%) agreed that student leaders ensure other students attend lessons. In comparison, only 14.4% of the respondents disagreed that student leaders ensure other students attend their lessons. The rest of the respondents (13.9%) were undecided.

From the interview schedule, one of the respondents noted that:

If you want an accurate record of who was in class and who was not, then you better get that from the student representatives, not the class teacher! If you want class work well done, then you better have a student representative supervising the work... I tell you, these students are very good at monitoring themselves and encouraging each other to work hard..

(Source: School Headteachers' Interview)

Objective 4: The role of student leaders in enhancing cooperative learning among students

To answer objective 4, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that student leaders encourage cooperative learning among students. The majority of the respondents (86.6%) agreed that student leaders ensure cooperative learning among students. In contrast, only 6.4% of the respondents disagreed that student leaders encourage cooperative learning among students. The other 7.0% of the respondents were undecided.

Correlation between Student Leadership and Academic Achievement

A Pearson Correlation Coefficient was done to establish the statistical relationship between student leadership and academic achievement in secondary schools. The results of the correlation are as shown on Table 1.

Table 1 Correlation between Student Leadership and Academic Achievement

		Leadership	Academic Achievement
Student leadership	Pearson Correlation	1	.462**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Performance	Pearson Correlation	.462**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) ; N=226

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings on Objective 1 indicate that student leaders have a role to play in the setting of high standards of academic achievement for other students in the school. Setting of standards entails letting the students know what is expected of them and how to meet these expectations. The setting of such standards is important for students since as Waters *et al* (2006) observe, if high standards of performance is set for students, then the impact on their academic achievement can be considerable since the students are more aware of what is expected of them. In addition, high expectations are more effective when they are part of a general culture which places demands on everyone in the school, so that, for example, the headteacher has high expectations for the performance and commitment of all of the teachers and students; the teachers have high expectations of the students; and the students, through their leaders, have high expectations of each other.

The findings on Objective 2 indicate that although student leaders have a role in monitoring the learning progress of other students, there are still instances where this is largely not done as indicated by the total of 41.1% of the respondents who either disagreed (26.7%) or were undecided (14.4) about the statement. This is despite the fact that monitoring of students' learning progress is an important aspect of academic achievement in effective schools; as expressed by Lezotte (2010) who argues that frequent and systematic monitoring of students' progress is a mechanism for determining the extent to which the academic goals of the school are being realized. Such monitoring also gives a clear message to students that teachers and school leaders are interested in their progress. Student leaders should thus be given opportunities to provide quality assessment and feedback to classmates, and teachers in

relation to the predetermined criteria or set targets of academic achievement; in order to effectively develop plans that would positively inform the next steps in their learning.

Findings for objective 3 attest that in most cases, student leaders ensure that other students attend lessons. Attending of lessons is critical to academic achievement since the primary purpose of schools concerns teaching and learning. Similar conclusions about the role of student leaders in monitoring class attendance are alluded to in a study by Bergen (2004) which found out that one aspect of learning that student leaders can effectively control is class attendance. The recommended practice is that a student leader can record class attendance from a seating chart, and the teacher checks this later for accuracy. This means that while the student leaders takes responsibility for recording class attendance, the teacher is free to keep the class moving forward in other instructional and pedagogical aspects.

Findings presented for objective 4 are a strong indication that student leaders are instrumental in enhancing cooperative learning among students. Cooperative learning is a key strategy for increased student achievement because students with high peer orientation are significantly more motivated to learn than students with low peer orientation. This means that students, through their leaders, respond to having a choice and opportunities to participate in their class work, give a thoughtful analysis of the quality of their academic work and identify critical elements to becoming better performers. Reynolds (2000) observes that through cooperative learning, students work together, teach one another and converse about their learning.

From the Pearson Correlation Coefficient on Table 1, it can be inferred that there is a positive relationship between student leadership and academic achievement in secondary schools ($r=.462$, $n=226$, $p<.05$). This means that student leadership positively influences academic achievement in schools. The r value presented on Table 1 represents the measure of variability in the dependent variable (academic performance) that is accounted for by the predictor (student leadership). From the table, the r of .462 shows that the predictor (student leadership) accounts for 46.2% variation in academic achievement.

To further attest to this inferred relationship between student leadership and academic performance, the head teachers who were interviewed gave various views. One of the interviewees observed that

In order to enhance academic achievement in the school, the student leaders should be of high standards of discipline, be self-driven, perform very well academically and be able to set a good example for the other students in the school. They have the responsibility of being good role models and setting the pace for the other students

(Source: School Headteachers' Interview)

This argument was backed up by another respondent who further observed that

Student leaders should be elected on the basis of their academic achievement so as to encourage their fellow students to emulate them. Those student leaders who record a decline in their academic performance should be demoted from their student leadership positions.

(Source: School Headteachers' Interview)

CONCLUSION

The analysis of data shows that overly, student leadership plays a positive and instrumental role in enhancing academic achievement in the school. This is especially true when student leaders act as positive role models in as far as academic performance is concerned, and also monitor the learning progress of other students, reinforce learning efforts, ensure lesson attendance by all students, and encourage cooperative learning among the students. However, the percentage majority of respondents who agreed that student leaders monitor the learning progress of other students in the school was significantly lower than for the other three aspects of academic achievement. Consequently, it is recommended that mechanisms should be put in place for student leaders to be able to monitor the learning progress of other students. This is an important aspect of academic achievement since through such monitoring, student leaders will be better able to mentor and encourage the other student to achieve more academically.

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