

An Assessment of Students' Attitudes towards Peer Counsellors in Student Discipline in Secondary Schools in Kisumu Municipality, Kenya

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Abstract

The attitude of the counselee towards the counsellor is crucial factor in determining the results of the counselling process. Adolescents are readily guided and influenced by one who understands them, listens to them and is of their status. This paper examines the attitude of students on the role of peer counsellors in managing student discipline based on a study of public secondary schools in Kisumu Municipality. Cross-sectional survey design was used in the study. The study population consisted of 28 head teachers, 28 heads of guidance and counselling department, 532 peer counsellors and 3,250 students in 28 public secondary schools. Stratified random sampling was used to select 10 head teachers, 10 Heads of Department of Guidance and Counselling, 110 peer counsellors and 300 form two and three students. Questionnaire and interview guide were used to collect data. Questionnaires were administered to heads of guidance and counselling and students while head teachers were interviewed, face to face. Research instruments were piloted in three secondary schools to determine their reliability and validity. Descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the quantitative data generated by questionnaires while qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and organized into themes, categories and subcategories as they emerged during the study. The study established that students valued peer counsellors and had a positive attitude towards them. It was thus recommended that all peer counsellors be trained to effectively, efficiently and ethically handle counselling issues that students consult them about. The findings of this study may help teachers and education stakeholders to appreciate the role played by peer counsellors in managing student discipline and engage them more often.

Keywords: Students, Attitudes, Peer Counsellors, Student Discipline, Secondary Schools, Kisumu Municipality, Kenya

1. Introduction

According to the Education Act (1980), schools head teachers and Boards of Governors (BOG) maintain and enforce discipline in schools on behalf of Education Secretary, Ministry of Education (MOE). The Education Act and A Manual for Heads of Secondary Schools in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 1987) spell out methods of managing student discipline in schools, which should be applied consistently and fairly. Schools rules form an important backdrop against which adherence to school expectations are measured. The teacher on duty is to oversee minor punishments assigned while the head teacher deals with major offences that would warrant suspension and expulsion.

Prefects also play an important role in assisting the staff in the general discipline of the school. Some government reports (Republic of Kenya, 2000, 2001b) have revealed that some schools have poor prefecture system where prefects are not well guided and supported by teachers; furthermore, they have excessive powers and privileges. In most institutions, prefects are appointed without involving students in the process. Otieno (2004) reiterates that when responsibilities are delegated to prefects where proper guidance and counselling is not done, they get confused, stressed and demoralized while the students get upset. Despite the measures put in place, cases of student indiscipline and unrest have increased in secondary schools in Kenya over the years.

To curb student indiscipline in schools, several recommendations and regulations have been outlined. In legal Notice 40 of 1972, corporal punishment was legalized in schools to check the wave of increased student unrest in schools. The Gachathi Report (Republic of Kenya, 1976) observes that educational system in Kenya had failed to address the issue of student discipline and recommended the introduction of Religious and Social Education and Ethics into the curriculum to help students develop positive attitude. The report, however, did not explain how students would be actively involved to help in the management of their affairs so as to improve discipline.

The National 1973-1983 Development Plan underscored the importance, of among other things, the development of peer education and counselling clubs. This was emphasized by a report on Presidential working Party on Education, Manpower Training for the Next Decade and Beyond (Republic of Kenya, 1988). It also recommended that Social Education and Ethics be taught at all levels of education, to foster positive values, social obligations and responsibility. Both reports did not highlight the role of peer counsellors in improving student discipline in public secondary schools. The Koech Report (Republic of Kenya, 1999a) also expressed

concern about increased cases of violence in schools. It noted that Kenyan educational system had failed to produce socially responsible citizens. A management guide for schools, (Republic of Kenya, 1999b) stressed that Guidance and Counselling departments in schools should be used to sensitize students on the dangers of pre marital sex, drugs, undesirable behaviour and misconduct. However, these reports failed to highlight specific activities that peer counsellors could involve in enhancing discipline in secondary schools.

The National 1973-1983 Development Plan underscored the importance of establishing peer education was launched in 1999 in Nyeri High School. Students went on rampage, attacking and setting prefects' cubical on fire as the students were asleep. This was an effort meant to help the students overcome ht trauma and settle back in the school after the strike (Republic of Kenya, 2001b). However, even during this period, peer counsellors were not incorporated in the counselling process.

Report of the Task Force on Student Discipline Unrest in Secondary Schools (Republic of Kenya, 2001a) recommended that guidance and counselling be established and strengthened to check increased cases of student indiscipline in schools. The report noted that the department of guidance and counselling had to be fully functional in schools to be of help to students. However, the report did not specify activities that peer counsellors needed to be involved in to achieve that goal. This study set to identify specific activities of peer counsellors and how they enhance student discipline in secondary schools.

1.1 Students Attitude towards Peer Counsellors in Public Secondary Schools

The attitude of the counselee towards the counsellor is crucial factor in determining the results of the counselling process (Republic of Kenya, 2004). Adolescents are readily guided and influenced by one who understands them, listens to them and is of their status (Mutie & Ndambuki, 1999). Mutembei (2006) observes that in school, students prefer to share their concerns with peer counsellors rather than general friends. Students find counsellors helpful in talking about peer pressure, drugs and teenage pregnancy as opposed to friends whom they do not trust.

Some of the findings of the study by Mutembei (2006) agree with findings of a study by Perham and Tinsely (1985), which set to find out student preferences on teacher and peer counsellors. They reported that students prefer to seek assistance form a peer counsellor rather than from teacher counsellors. The respondents stated that peer counsellors were of their age, experience and could confide in them. The respondents also reported that peer counsellors were easily accessible and were free to talk with them any time as opposed to teacher counsellors with whom they had to arrange specific meeting time, and also found it difficult to confide in. The study was carried out among 10th grade high school students who were selected through random sampling Self Administered Questionnaires given to students were used by both researchers.

The Findings of Perham and Tinsely agree with those from a study by Gitonga (1999). He investigated factors that influence effectiveness of guidance and counselling services in secondary schools in Meru Central. Unlike Perham and Tinsely who randomly sampled students from one grade, Gitonga selected his respondents through stratified random sampling from various classes as was done in the present study. He investigated the perception of students on guidance and counselling and concluded that guidance and counselling teachers had little impact on students in secondary schools compared to peer counsellors because students had poor relationship with the teachers. They preferred to confide in their peer counsellors more frequently than teacher counsellors.

Migiro (1996) on his part has carried out a study to assess the level of students' awareness and preferences of counselling resources and attitudes towards seeking help. He used self administered questionnaires among randomly selected respondents. He reports that most students prefer peer counsellors and participated in individual counselling more frequently. While Migiro's focus was on the students' awareness and counselling seeking preferences, the study differed with the present study because the focus on the present study is the role of peer counsellors as viewed by students and teachers.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Seventy per cent of students in secondary schools in the Kisumu Municipality come from slums where there is easy access to illicit drinks and drugs, poverty levels and prevalence of HIV/AIDS were high and 35% are orphans (Republic of Kenya, 2002 - 2008). This makes students vulnerable, increasing the need of counselling in schools (Republic of Kenya, 2003). Absenteeism and truancy accounted for 20% of cases of indiscipline in day secondary schools. Other prevalent indiscipline issues included rudeness, fights, incomplete assignments, lateness to school and irresponsible sexual behaviour, with 8 percent female students dropping out of school due to early pregnancy yearly (District Education Office, 2005). A study by Otieno (2005) has further shown that secondary students who abused drugs in Kisumu Municipality had increased from 23% in 2001 to 37.1% in 2005. Ten per cent took alcohol more than three times a week, 16% smoked cigarettes and 14% bhang more than three times a week. The results of survey conducted by the District Education Office, Kisumu, in 2008 indicated that all secondary schools within Kisumu Municipality have Guidance and Counselling Department, supported by Peer Education and Counselling Clubs to help improve student discipline. Therefore, it was necessary to investigate the role of peer counsellors in enhancing management of student discipline in public secondary schools in Kisumu Municipality.

1.3 Limitations of the Study

Some questionnaires were not returned although the return rate was 97.6%, which the study considered reasonable. Few of the items in the student questionnaires were also not answered. Through triangulation by other sources of information, it was possible to get adequate data.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was carried out in Kisumu Municipality using a qualitative design. This design was suitable for the study as it employs response from a sample drawn from a pre-determined population consisting of teachers and students from different classes. It was preferred over others as it would enable the author to collect data within a short time and data collection procedure is easy and fast with high response rate (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000).

The study population consisted of 28 head teachers, 28 heads of departments of guidance and counselling, 532 peer counsellors and 3,250 students in form two and three in public secondary schools within the municipality as indicated by the Department of Statistics, Kisumu District. Thirty-six per cent of public secondary schools in the Municipality were used in the study. The schools were stratified based on gender, that is, single-sex (boys' and girls') schools and mixed schools. This gave a fair representation of the school between the single sex and mixed schools.

For the study, questionnaires and interview guides were used to collect data. The data collected using questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Quantitative data from questionnaires were tallied and converted to percentages. Qualitative data gathered from interviews were transcribed and organized into themes, categories and sub-categories as they emerged during the study. Some of the responses gathered during the interview were reported as direct quotes.

3. Results

During the interviews, 100% of head teachers noted that students appreciated the role of peer counsellors in their schools. They noted that the students agreed that peer counsellors' contribution to discipline was remarkable. Ten percent of the head teachers observed that though peer counselling club was young, only two year old in their school, students looked up to the peer counsellors with a lot of appreciation.

However, 20% of head teachers observed that some students were reluctant to confide in peer counsellors for help. When asked whether they would approach a peer counsellor when faced with a problem, the responses were as follows: 43% strongly agreed, 26% agreed, 11% were undecided, 10% disagreed while another 10% strongly disagreed. It is important to note that 60 students out of 300 students indicated that they would not approach a peer counsellor first when faced with a problem. This could have come up from the fact that some of peer counsellors were appointed by teachers and prefects. It is possible that students looked at peer counsellors as an extension of the teachers' authority students appeared to have trust and had confidence in peer counsellors. The peer counsellors were also asked to assess the attitude students had towards them. They responded as follows: 43% indicated very good, 61% indicated good, 3% indicated poor while another 3% indicated very poor. Such responses showed that students had a positive attitude towards peer counsellors.

Responses from the heads of department of guidance of counselling on students' attitudes towards peer counsellors indicated a positive response as follows: 2% indicated that it was very friendly, 7% indicated that it was friendly, while 10% indicated that it was not friendly. From the responses, it was concluded that students related well with peer counsellors. The students were also asked to evaluate their attitude towards peer counsellors. Their responses were presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Students Response on Attitudes toward Peer Counsellors (n=300)

Statement	Frequencies and Percentages				
	SA	A	U	D	SD
Peer counsellors activities should be organized more frequently	224(74.6%)	60(20%)	2(0.66%)	2(0.66%)	12(4%)
Students wish to have more longer sessions with peer counsellors	118(39.33%)	146(48.67%)	21(7%)	7(2.3%)	8(2.7%)
Most students do not understand the role of peer counsellors	54(18%)	102(34%)	30(10%)	60(20%)	54(18%)
Peer counsellors should be more confidential with students	217(72.6%)	66(22%)	6(2%)	2(0.6%)	11.9(2.7%)
Peer counsellors should be trained better	248(2.67%)	38(12.67%)	8(2.7%)	3(1%)	3(1%)
Number of peer counsellors should be increased	50(16.7%)	47(15.67%)	11(3.7%)	92(30.33%)	101(33.67%)
Peer counsellors are hasty and impatient	49(16.33%)	62(20.67%)	40(13.33%)	54(18%)	95(31.67%)
Peer counsellors are biased	47(15.67%)	61(20.33%)	40(13.33%)	52(17.33%)	100(33.33%)
Peer counsellors have helped improve student discipline in my school	112(37.33%)	116(38.67%)	17(5.7%)	29(9.7%)	26(8.7%)

From Table 1, the students expressed their attitudes and gave suggestions on how peer counsellors could

organize their activities to make them more effective. For instance, 39.33% strongly agreed and another 48.67% agreed that peer counsellors should organize their activities more frequently and with longer sessions. This could be due to the fact that in seven out of ten schools the peer counselling sessions fell at a time when other clubs also had their meetings. Therefore the students had limited time to move from the other clubs and attend the counselling sessions. They also responded that the number of peer counsellors should be increased and they should also be trained further.

Another 95.33% of students noted that peer counsellors should observe confidentiality. From the response, it was apparent that students valued the level to which their issues are treated with confidentiality. This could have been due to their stage of development, adolescence. In this stage, the adolescents are very particular about their self image which impacts greatly on their self esteem. As noted by Mutembei (2006), most of the students valued confidentiality due to the fact that they did not wish to be seen to be having issues or problems to sort out. This made them seem incapable of solving their own problems or not in full control of their situations.

While 50.67% of students appreciated that the peer counsellors were not biased in handling cases another 36% observed that they were biased. The response on bias communicated by more than a third of the students cannot be overlooked. It was probable that limited time available for counselling sessions made some students feel not well attended to. It was also possible that the students who had not had group

Counselling sessions only felt that those who had individual counselling got preferential treatment. It was also noted in the study that 74% of peer counsellors reported unresolved cases to prefects and heads of department of guidance and counselling. It was apparent that in such a case some of the peer counsellors gave their reports hardly protecting the identity of their clients. During the study, it emerged that 31 peer counsellors had not received any formal training and out of the 79 that are trained, 11 were trained by their colleagues. It is possible lack of uniformity in the training process accounted lack of confidentiality of the students and poor handling and client structuring of referrals to heads of departments of guidance counselling in their schools.

Another 37% of students also noted that peer counsellors were hasty and impatient. Counselling process demands adequate time to be able to understand the problems of the counselee, that hastiness can cause harm to the process. However, lack of adequate time could have come from the fact that there was only a general time clearly assigned to peer counsellors to do counselling for all those who needed their help. This meant that peer counsellors had to fit their individual counselling sessions within the short time provided for in the school program to conduct counselling for the whole student community. This would have made students feel that they had been hurriedly attended to. However, on the whole, a good number that is 76% indicated that peer counsellors had helped to improve student discipline in secondary schools.

4. Discussion

Responses from teachers and students showed that students had good relationship with the peer counsellors, hence a positive attitude. This relationship could be explained by the fact that students saw peer counsellors as their contemporary hence they had the ability to relate with them well, a finding that was also supported by Onyango (2004) in his study. It was also indicative of the fact that peer counsellors made an effort to work with students by developing a dependable relationship of counsellor-counselee well hence a friendly relationship.

The responses from the students confirmed the opinion of most peer counsellors during the study that they related well with students. The findings of the study were confirmed by the theory employed in this study that adolescents find it easier to confide and share their issues with peers because they seek to identify with peers than other people in their social circle. The response by most students that they would see a peer counsellor first if they had an issue in itself showed how the students held their peer counsellors in high esteem and regarded them highly. Following the theoretical basis of the study, it emerges that the idea of role identity with peers played a vital role in influencing students' attitude on peer counsellors.

However, according to the findings of the study, it was clear that in case peer counsellors were offered more training opportunities then students would have more faith in them hence improve discipline. The few identified issues that could have led to misgivings on students' part such confidentiality could easily be solved by such training.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Students valued peer counsellors, appreciated their activities. This is shown by the fact that most students consulted peer counsellors when in need of help students also felt that peer counsellors should be encouraged and trained to perform better. The Ministry of Education should develop and provide relevant implementation document and tools to enable schools create a uniform guide hence efficient counselling service delivery through peer counsellors.

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