

Democratic School Governance in Public Secondary Schools in Kenya: Rhetoric or Reality

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Abstract

This study set out to establish the extent to which public secondary schools in Kenya practice Democratic School Governance (DSG). The study was prompted by the challenges in the Management of Public secondary schools in Kenya such as recurrent student unrest, lack of financial transparency, poor results at KCSE and teacher absenteeism. The study utilized descriptive survey strategy that employed mixed methods approach. The target population of the study was all principals, senior teachers and students of all the 122 public secondary school in Baringo County, Kenya. The study sample was selected using stratified sampling, simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. Data was collected by use of questionnaire and interview schedule and was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Keywords: Democratic School Governance, Extent, principals, Students, Secondary Schools.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Many countries are reforming the way schools are run and looking in particular at issues of leadership and management (Bush, 2011, Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). Democratic school governance is one of the emerging trends in the developed and developing world. The concept of the democratic school has its origins in the writings of John Dewey. Dewey believed that a democratic society was one in which the divisions between groups, no matter on what criteria, should be minimized and that shared values, meanings and goals should be maximized (Soltis 1994). The school, according to Dewey, should be a microcosm of the type of society that is desired and thus to achieve a democratic society, it is necessary to first have a democratic school (Dewey, 1916) as cited by Dworkin (2000). Democratic school governance (DSG) has been hailed by many researchers as the best way to lead schools in the 21st century where the participation of major stakeholders in school governance is imperative. Bäckman and Trafford (2007) assert that the term democratic denotes that school governance is founded on values centered on human rights, empowerment, involvement and participation of all stakeholders.

According to Sithole (1995), a key principle of democratic school governance is that decisions be based on consultation, collaboration, cooperation, partnership, mutual trust and participation of all affected parties in the school community. Naidoo (2005) provides an exhaustive list of democratic principles which, include purpose and vision, collaboration, consultation and communication, participation and shared decision-making, accountability, transparency and openness, informed choice, rights of individuals, integrity and trust, critical thinking, common good, interconnectedness of the community, respect and equality and equity. He opines that in creating democratic schools it is necessary to infuse democratic principles in the daily school activities such that they become a way of life or, simply stated, a democratic culture. Backman & Trafford (2007) add that DSG governance is good for a school because it improves discipline, enhances productivity for both teachers and students, reduces conflict and secures the future existence of democracy.

According to Dewey (1944) democratic education can be presented through the schools, adopting democratic education method. It is expected for individuals to be tolerant, know their responsibilities, to respect different opinions, to be compatible, ability to work in teams, to participate in decision-making processes, and obey to the decisions made by the majority. Chapman, Froumin and Aspin (1995) support this view by stating that policies and actions are based on decisions and are not arbitrary; all powers and rights are to be made available to the people in the state or an organization accordingly; and the will of the majority prevails whilst the rights of minorities are preserved and respected. In a school situation this means that powers and responsibilities will be distributed more equally between all the stakeholders of the school. This way, democracy is manifested. Birzea (2000) argues that school is a small representation of the society. Birzae summarizes the duties of a democratic school. In his opinion school should; perform integration and social cohesion, evoke desire in individuals for change and development, provide opportunities for learning and personal development, and create a safe and supportive learning environment. He adds that it should remain faithful to basic democratic principles such as equality, respect for human rights and freedom, while carrying out its duties.

Educational leadership in Kenyan schools is expected to be focused on statutes such as the new constitution, and the Basic Education Act of 2012. The view on the democratic governance of schools echoed by the Ministry of Education is evident in Article 10(2) of the Constitution of Kenya which sets out the national values and principles of governance. These include *inter alia*, the sharing and devolution of power, the rule of law, and the participation of the people, equity, inclusiveness, equality, human rights, non-discrimination and the

protection of the marginalized, good governance, integrity, transparency and accountability, and sustainable development. Further, Article 174 of the constitution establishes a devolved government which gives self governance to the people and enhances their participation in the exercise of the powers of the state and in making decisions that affect them. It further recognizes the right of communities to manage their own affairs. This means that institutions including public secondary schools should be governed in accordance with the provisions of the constitution.

In terms of management, a democratic school should pay attention to participation of all associates to the important decisions. According to Bellingham (2003), to create a democratic climate in the organization, the school leaders should; be consistent, create trust, think in a long-term manner, be fair, respect for different thoughts, ensure the solidarity, share the power, be honest, give value to people and consider the issues in a broader perspective.

In the light of these, democratic school governance is defined as school governance in which there is a sharing of power by the principal and all the other relevant stakeholders such that policies made at school are democratically arrived at by all the democratically elected representatives of different constituencies of the school, namely parents, students, teachers and other stakeholders.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Cases of students' unrest have been reported in Kenya as far back as 1908 when Maseno Secondary School students went on strike (Republic of Kenya, 2001). Since then, there has been an increase in the frequency and number in recent years. In 2008, nearly 200 secondary schools were involved in unrests. There have been recent incidences of school unrest. In October 2012, Students of more than seven schools in Embu went on rampage demanding to be allowed to go for midterm break (Githinji, 2012). In the same year Students of Kesogon mixed secondary school in Trans Nzoia County staged peaceful demonstrations to protest against the school principal for what they called highhandedness. Kiprop (2007) argues that lack of democratic leadership together with communication breakdown is a major cause of indiscipline in schools. Jwang (2011) suggest that the leadership practices perceived by most principals and teachers to be in the 'best interests' of students were contentious and in direct contrast to what the students considered to be in their best interests.

A study undertaken by Kiprop &Kandie (2012) in public secondary Baringo County on teacher participation in decision making revealed that teachers are not involved in decision making this could be the reason for student unrests and low performance in Kenya Certificate Secondary Education (KCSE) in the County. Bäckman & Trafford (2007) argue that democratic school governance enhances learning as learners are provided opportunities to maximize their potential. Previous Studies on democratic school governance in public secondary schools in Kenya have centred their research on student participation in school governance, the significance of teacher participation in school decision making and parental involvement in school governance. However few empirical studies have been undertaken to establish the extent to which public secondary practice democracy.

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized descriptive cross-sectional survey strategy that adopts mixed methods approach of inquiry. According to UNESCO (2005) this type of research provides information about conditions, situations and events that occur in the present. In cross-sectional surveys, data is collected at one point in time from a sample selected to represent a larger population (Owen, 2002). The target population of the study was principals, teachers and students of public secondary schools in Baringo County. This study adopted stratified, simple random and purposive sampling techniques. From the 122 public secondary schools in Baringo County, 92 schools were selected on the basis of the Krejcie and Morgan table for determining sample size.

The 92 schools were stratified into 6 sub counties using a ratio. Simple random sampling was then used select the schools within each strata. The principal, one senior teacher, two student leaders were be purposively sampled from each school. The researcher also chose two schools as sample sites where their principals were interviewed. The two schools were selected because of their characteristics relevant to the study; they had some established democratic structures and processes based on the findings from the questionnaire. The total sample was 372 respondents. The research instruments used in the study were questionnaire and interview schedule.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents and interprets data which answers research question of the study: To what extent is school governance is democratic? The questionnaire had items that describe a democratic school. According to Bäckman & Trafford (2007) the extent to which school governance is democratic can be measured by school governance and leadership, value centered education, cooperation, communication and involvement and student discipline. Their responses vary along a three point likert scale. This section will also include presentation and discussion of data obtained through the interviews.

3.1 Principals and Teachers Response to Extent of Democratization in their Schools

In a bid to answer research question, principals and teachers responded to similar questions. Principals and teachers described the extent to which specific behaviour or practice occurred in their school by responding to the statements on the questionnaire.

Table 1: Principal and Teachers Responses on Extent to which schools practice Democratic School Governance

ITEM	Respondents	NO. & %	Always/Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	TOTAL
Principal upholds democratic principles in daily running of the school	Principal	NO. % 61 66.6%	24 25.8%	7 7.6%	92 100%	
	Teacher	NO. % 38 42.2%	20 18%	36 37.8%	92 100%	
Principal gives autonomy to teachers in decision making	Principal	NO. % 53 57.6%	25 27.3%	14 15.1%	92 100%	
	Teacher	NO. % 28 30.1%	29 31.3%	37 38.8%	92 100%	
School has open forums for students	Principal	NO. % 31 33.4%	10 10.6%	51 56%	92 100%	
	Teacher	NO. % 32 35.6%	16 17.9%	43 46.6%	92 100%	
Students and parents rep. invited to school staff meetings	Principal	NO. % 7 7.6%	15 16.7%	70 75.7%	92 100%	
	Teacher	NO. % 15 16.7%	14 15.6%	63 67.7%	92 100%	
Policies stress on the importance of values e.g respect, hard work	Principal	NO. % 91 98.5%	1 1.5%	0 0%	92 100%	
	Teacher	NO. % 73 78.9%	7 7.6%	12 13.4	92 100%	
principal and teachers interact freely	Principal	NO. % 38 40.8%	39 42.4%	15 16.7%	92 100%	
	Teacher	NO. % 43 46.7%	28 30%	21 23.3%	92 100%	
Formulation of rules and regulations is through consultation students	Principal	NO. % 29 31.8%	10 10.6%	53 57.6%	92 100%	
	Teacher	NO. % 31 34.5%	16 17.8%	45 47.8%	92 100%	
Principal interprets school rules for students	Principal	NO. % 80 87.8%	6 6.1%	6 6.1%	92 100%	
	Teacher	NO. % 14 15.6%	27 28.9%	51 55.5%	92 100%	

The study findings from table 1 reveal that 66.6% of the principals stated that they always and often upheld democratic principles in running of their schools while 25.8% indicated sometimes and 7.6% rarely. While on the other hand 37.6% of teachers indicated that their principals are rarely and never democratic respectively.

These findings show that there is still need for school principals to be enlightened on how to lead to democratically. From the interviews principals from both Fanaka and Pendo secondary schools understood the notion of a democratic school. When they were asked what they understood by democratic school governance (DSG), the principal of school Fanaka stated:

"It is a situation where the leader and the lead take part in governing the school."

The Principal of Pendo School also concurred by declaring that:

"It is when a principal involves major stakeholders such as parents, teachers and students in school governance."

They also explained that school leaders cannot be fully democratic. The Principal Fanaka secondary in his response when asked the extent to which his school is democratic remarked:

"I can't say my school is fully democratic but as time goes by I try to embrace it in most of the school activities and programs."

Bäckman and Trafford (2007) in agreement to the above notion refer to four stages of democracy development in schools. In stage one there is no trace of democracy, stage two have some aspects of democracy, three further progression and in stage four; the ideal, where there is sharing of responsibilities even in difficult areas such as budget, curriculum among others.

Study findings from table 1 show that most of the principals 57.6 % strongly agreed and agreed that they give autonomy to teacher and in decision making when carrying out their duties. Contrary to these findings, only 30.1% of teachers strongly agreed and agreed with the aforementioned notion, 38.8% disagreed and strongly disagreed. These findings show a disparity in the findings of the two respondents. The principals viewed themselves as flexible in making decisions in school but the teachers thought otherwise. Principals should work towards creating a democratic school. Blase & Blase (1997) noted the importance of facilitative leadership by school principals in initiating, implementing and sustaining viable forms of teacher empowerment and shared decision making at the school level. From the interview responses, the principal Fanaka secondary school stated:

"Teachers play a very important role in the school. Thus, I promote teacher participation in most decisions because better decisions will be made and greater satisfaction and commitment will prevail."

From the principal's response, it is evident that the principal is cognizant of the importance of teacher participation in school governance. According to Blum (2007) teachers who are given more autonomy and control over their work have higher morale.

Additionally, principals and teachers were also asked if they had open forums where students could discuss their welfare issues. Findings show that most of principals 56% stated rarely and never. On the other hand, 46.6% of the teachers indicated that they never and rarely have student forums. From the findings, it was clear that most secondary schools in Baringo County do not provide opportunities for students to give their views on issues which affect them. To corroborate these findings, a Study conducted by Kiprop et.al (2012) investigating hindrances encountered by students and school administrators in involving students in decision making processes in secondary schools in Kenya revealed that students lacked forums to express their views; meaning that students were excluded from key decision making bodies.

On students Open forums the principal Pendo Secondary school remarked in the interview:

"In my school I always have students' forums once a month for each class. We hold these meetings on Saturdays. I really work to create an open environment where I can react with my students freely. I also build the confidence of my students so that I can obtain their views on many issues"

This view is supported by Blum (2007) who opines that effective principals are good listeners and are open to suggestions from every stakeholder in the school.

Table 1 also reveals that majority of the respondents 75.7% and 67.7% of teachers and principals respectively stated that parents and students are rarely and never invited to staff meetings to give their views on issues that affect them. From the interview responses, the principals of both Fanaka and Pendo secondary schools stated that their students and teachers are not represented in their School Boards of Management (BOM) meetings. Holdsworth (1999) states that it is of necessity that all the stakeholders are involved, and have a voice: a fundamental principle of democratic schooling and therefore pupils have the right to have their views heard and taken into account by having student representation on school decision-making bodies.

Furthermore, when respondents were asked if school policies stress on important values such as respect, trust and hard work 98.5% of the principals and 78.9% of the teachers pointed that such values are always stated in their policies. Moreover, the respondents were asked if principal and teachers interact freely. Only 40.8% of the principals stated always and often, 42.4% pinpointed sometimes. On the other hand, majority of the teachers 46.7% indicated that they always and often freely interact while 30% sometimes and only 23.3% indicated rarely and never. The findings show that there is interaction between principals and teachers. These findings corroborates a study undertaken by Mauluko et.al (2009) who revealed that school heads used their superior

knowledge and experience to direct and control the entire working of the school. A school principal plays a pivotal role in promoting democracy in school and thus need to demonstrate sound leadership and interpersonal skills to create welcoming, inclusive and trusting collaborative cultures in their schools (Blase & Blasé, 1999).

The study also sought to find out whether school rules are formulated through negotiations and consultation with students. Only of the principals 31.8% of the principals stated always and often while the majority 57.6 % indicated that they rarely and never consult. On the other hand, 47.8% of teachers indicated rarely and never. This is a clear indication that in most schools, there is no consultation with students when formulating school rules. Bäckman and Trafford (2007) suggest that the schools entire behaviour code and rules should be devised through consultation and negotiation with the student body and that student council should play their part as authority figures in implementing them and seeing that they are enforced.

The respondents were also asked if the school principals interpret school rules for their students. Majority of the principals 87.7% indicated often and always but on the contrary most of the teachers 55.5% % stated that principals rarely and never interpret school rules to students. It can be concluded from the teachers response that school principals do not interpret school rules for their students. According to Bäckman and Trafford (2007) democratic process stages, these schools are in step one; where the school management sets and enforces rules even when students clearly resent or resist them.

3.2 Students Response on Extent to which School Governance is Democratic

In seeking to investigate more about extent to which school governance is democratic. Students responded to questions similar to the principals and the teachers based on the school leadership, value centered education, cooperation, communication, involvement and students discipline to assess the extent to which their schools are democratic. This is shown in table 2:

Table 2: Students Response on Extent to which School Governance is Democratic

ITEM	NO. & %	Always/Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	TOTAL
Your school has open forums for students to discuss their welfare issues	NO. 35 % 19%	52 28.3%	97 52.7%	184 100%	
Students and parents rep. invited to staff meetings to give their views on issues which affect them	NO. 24 % 13%	33 17.9%	127 69%	184 100%	
School policies stress on the importance of values such as respect, hard work etc	NO. 171 % 92.9%	2 1.1%	11 6%	184 100%	
Students and teachers interact after class	NO. 67 % 36.4%	23 12.5%	94 51.1%	184 100%	
The principal and teachers interpret school rules for students	NO. 66 % 35.9%	29 16.3%	89 47.8%	184 100%	
Formulation of school rules and regulations is through negotiations and consultation with students	NO. 16 % 8.7%	1 0.5%	167 90.8%	184 100%	

The study findings from table 2 reveal that only 19% pointed that they always and often have forums where they can discuss welfare issues without victimization, while the majority 52.7% pinpointed rarely and never. This is clear indication that most schools in Baringo County under estimate the importance of providing forums

for students to air their views. To corroborate these findings Tikoko *et al* (2011) argue that students hardly have the opportunity to express themselves because school administrators have remained autocratic in the way they manage their institutions. This could be the reason student unrests which have been experienced in the recent past in some public secondary schools in Baringo County.

The students were also asked if they are invited to staff meeting to give their views on issues which affect them. An astounding 69% stated rarely and never. These findings affirm the principals and teachers response on the same (see table 1). Based on these results, it can be concluded that students in Baringo county public schools are not given a chance to air their view in staff meetings. To corroborate these findings, a study by Chemutai & Chumba, (2014) revealed that student councils were excluded from key decision making areas of the school such as curriculum issues, school budget, school fees, formulation of school rules, and discipline of students and deciding on the nature of punishments. There is need to give students a chance to attend meetings especially when their consent or contributions is required on some issues. This will help create a democratic environment in a school.

Majority of the respondents 92.9 % stated that their school policies always stressed on the importance of value such as respect, trust and hard work among others. These findings are similar to the principals and the teachers response fig 1. which establishes the fact that school policies uphold values that encourage democracy in schools. Renuka (2012) suggest that values should not only be expressed in printed curricular but should be fundamental and central in the operation of school life. Further Inman & Burke (2002) see treating pupils with respect as a vital element in this democratic ethos thus like so much of the living reality of democracy in a school, respect given and respect received create a virtuous circle.

It is further realized from table 2 that 36.4% of the respondents stated that they always and often interact with their teachers after class, 12.5% sometimes, the majority 51.1 rarely and never. These findings are congruent with findings on table 1 where we have only 46.7% of teachers stating that they always and often interact with their students after class hours. These findings reveal that teacher-student interaction in Baringo County is minimal.

Moreover the respondents were asked if they take part formulating school rules and regulations; the majority of the respondents 90.8% pointed that they rarely and never take part. These are similar to findings in table 1 where the principals and teachers affirmed that students are not involved in setting up of school rules. Furthermore, most of the respondents 47.8% stated rarely and never on the issue of the school principal and teachers interpreting school rules for them. It can thus be concluded that meaningful student participation in school governance in Baringo County public schools has not taken root as expected. A study carried out by Rianga (2013) on methods used to enhance students discipline in public secondary schools also revealed that teachers and students were not closely involved in the creation as well as review of school rules.

Conclusion

The study findings show that there is still need for school principals to be enlightened or how to lead schools democratically because they are still in the process of democratizing their schools and some democratic procedures such as student participation in BOM are in the introductory stages thus they need training on how to involve them meaningfully. Principals viewed themselves as autonomous and flexible in school governance though teachers thought otherwise. Also, most school principals do not interact freely with their teachers though they appreciated the importance of teacher and parents' participation in school governance. It was also clear that most public secondary school do not provide opportunities for their students to give their view on issues which effect them and they were excluded from key decision making bodies. It was also concluded that there was no consultation with students when formulating school rules and that principals and teachers do not interpret these rules for their students. Thus in it can be concluded that meaningful student participation in school governance has not taken root as expected.

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