Suggestion Boxes as A Principals' Communication Strategy and Management of Students' Discipline During Covid 19 Era in Public Secondary Schools in Kisasi Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate principals' use of suggestion boxes as a communication strategy in management of students' discipline during Covid 19 Era in public secondary schools in Kisasi Sub-County, Kitui County, Kenya. The study objectives sought to establish the availability of suggestion boxes in schools for management of students' discipline and to determine the frequency at which Suggestion Boxes were opened by the Principal during Covid 19 era. The study targeted 20 principals, 140 teachers who consisted of 20 deputy principals, 20 heads of departments, guidance and counseling, 20 form four class teachers and 20 presidents of the students' council from which a sample of 18 principals, 54 teachers, and 18 students were picked using census sampling, making a total of 90 respondents. Descriptive survey research design was used in the study. Data collection was done using Questionnaires. Data was analyzed with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Both quantitative and qualitative data generated from the study was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data generated from the study was organized into themes based on common responses and reported in a narrative form. Quantitative data was presented using frequency distribution and cross tabulation tables. The study established from majority of the principals 55.6% that they had suggestion boxes in their schools and only 44.4% of the schools did not have them. The study concluded that use of suggestion boxes could help in alleviating most of the students' related indiscipline issues during Covid-19 era. The study recommended that more schools should be encouraged to have adequate suggestion boxes. The suggestion boxes should be strategically placed in their premises and opened regularly.
Key words: suggestion boxes, discipline of students, communication strategies, management of students' behaviour

1. Introduction

Communication is the means through which message travels. It is any act by which one person gives to or receives from another person's information about that person's needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge, or affective states (Anderson, 2006). Prien (2010) opines that choosing the right strategy for communication is determined by how rich a communication strategy provides substantial understanding of the message and how it reduces message ambiguity. However, Sevan and Ross (2010) posit that principals typically select the most appropriate strategy that matches their message content, communication requirement and the perceived tasks of communication.

According to Thomas (2009) communication strategy, choice and use is subject to social influence and may be subjectively rationalized. Prien (2010) argues that the school's structure has a significant impact on the choice of communication strategy and implementation process. The structure may shape the type of formal communication strategies that an organization adopts to communicate students' discipline. The school's structure and its impact can facilitate communication or form a barrier to communication which can have a positive or negative influence on students' behaviour. Thus, principals' choice of a communication strategy may give or fail to give students an opportunity to participate in decision making endeavors in the school.

According to Nasibi (2003) discipline is the systematic instruction given to a person or disciple to train him or her to carry out an activity. He or she is supposed to perform or to follow a particular code of conduct or order. However, discipline carries out a negative connotation some time. This is because enforcement of order in ensuring instructions is often regulated through punishment. Wekesa (2005) points out that discipline is considered as a measure of efficiency and good academic performance of a school. Since a school exists to offer educational services to learners in the local community as well as the nation at large, discipline requires a lot of attention as a cross cutting issue. A school is a socializing agent and helps in shaping up the learners. If care is not taken, the school can produce social deviants that become a burden to the community.

Katolo (2016) opines that globally, communication serves as means of conveying information such as policies, rules, changes and developments from the principal to staff members and students. Moreover, it is also used as means of providing feedback to the departments about the performance of teachers and students. He stated that, communication is very crucial in administration and all the activities of a school principal involve communication. Frequent communication of principals with staff members and students is therefore paramount. Poor communication, misunderstood massages and unclear instructions have led to failure in many institutions; hence communication contributes greatly to effective administration. Frequent communication of principals with students is therefore paramount using suggestion boxes during the Covid 19 era.

Gottsfredson (1990) established that students' disruptive behavior in South Carolina, was associated with unclear school rules and regulations. There was unfair enforcement of rules. Balyejusa (2001) and Ogunsaju (2004) established that appropriate means of communication implemented by the principal fostered students' good behaviour in Nigeria. The high level of moral laxity made it impossible for any means of communication to be used to maintain students' discipline.

Mbiti (2007) observed that a large amount of information conveyed is through written form, not only interpersonal, but also across generations. Official letters, circulars, memos, notices, suggestion boxes, minutes, reports, print outs, school magazines and hand books are some means of communication in a school. Mbiti (2007) also attributes a higher performance and less liability of the written work to misinterpretation. Republic of Kenya (2001) stated that it is important to maintain open communication channels between the principal and students' performance. Republic of Kenya (2008) too indicated a need for clear, unambiguous and continuous means of communication between the principal and students. According to Barasa (2007) principals should employ three major communication channels namely downward, upward and lateral or horizontal communication.

Anderson (2006) posits that there is a desired effect which communication should produce. What the communicator wants is what it results in. Communication results in generation of the desired effect, maintenance of effect and increased effect. Kimemia, et al. (2007) argue that the planned or designed purpose of communication is what it serves. The purpose could be a generation of action, information, creation of understanding or communication of a certain idea or point. In secondary schools, communication would ensure the shaping of students' attitudes, values and beliefs. The uniqueness of communication as a mechanism that integrates management functions in an organization cannot be over emphasized. According to Thomas (2009) communication enhances effective management and consequent achievement of organizational goals, either formal or informal.

Pandey and Garnett (2006) posit that communication influences perceptions and opinions about persons, communities, organizations, governments, and even society. In educational institutions communication is usually key to the progress of many academic activities. It is through communication that the teachers can give instructions and even deliver lessons in classes. Communication is also important especially regarding handling discipline in schools.

According to Muyiera (2002) the form and way of communication used in a given school will affect the way people interact, and it will have an impact on the general atmosphere of the school, which will affect the general quality of instructions that the students receive. Communication helps to control the behaviour of the teachers, students, and non-teaching staff. According to Kabandize (2004) communication is a strategy of managing student discipline through sharing of views between students and administrators. One of the communication strategies of managing students' discipline that remains widely unexplored is use of suggestion boxes.

Wango (2009) observed that the use of the suggestion box is an important form of effective communication in the school. Anonymous suggestions or queries will be raised by the students and school fraternity in general concerning pertinent school issues, some critical to be addressed. This form of communication does not discriminate or pass penalties to the person passing on the information. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE) (2008) the Teachers Service Commission (T.S.C) installation of suggestion boxes to allow students and staff to 'let off steam' from the strain and stress of the educational process is allowed to principals according to the employer's mandate.

Barasa (2007) posits that suggestion boxes can help students to address general problems they face, thus preventing them from resulting to destructive measures like strikes. The school administration should also have the wisdom to regularly check the suggestion box and where possible address the students' concerns. Use of suggestion boxes is therefore a good mechanism of keeping a tab on the mood of the student population, thus averting disastrous situation.

Betts (2007) opines that a suggestion box is a device for obtaining additional comments, questions, and requests. Suggestion boxes provide some degree of detachment from the person or services offered that a customer may be critiquing, and may therefore yield more frank and open feedback, thereby providing greater opportunities for obtaining accurate information and improving the school public relations. The internal routing of comments within a school may also provide those without direct contact with education stakeholders or school clients a realistic appraisal of the quality services being given. The school addresses the students concerns and improves its image.

Nasibi (2003) observed high rate of indiscipline cases in Kenya public secondary schools in which every stakeholder refuses to be accountable for such indiscipline and as such each blames the other. They refuse to take time to think, reflect and take stock of their direct or indirect contribution to the problem through their acts of omission and commission. The police will blame the teachers for indiscipline yet some of the acts of indiscipline take place not in school but rather in the market where they are in charge. The church is also not helping much as they are overwhelmed. Any indiscipline among students while outside the school gate is the work of the parents, church, police and other stakeholders. This is where teachers and other stakeholders differ. To them matters to do with students is the work of teachers irrespective of where they are; holidays and weekends teachers are in-charge! This is where we lose it!

In the recent past, the education system in Kenya has experienced wide ranging cases of student indiscipline emanating from breakdown in communication. According to the Republic of Kenya (2001) 250 schools were involved in various levels of serious unrests. Among other issues, the cause of students' unrests was lack of clear channels of communication, lack of freedom by the students for self-expression developed mistrust, hence they resorted to riots and disruptive behaviour as a means of expressing themselves.

Katolo (2016) opines that effective communication enables principals to enhance sound school administration which motivates students' discipline and consequently leads to continuous improvement in quality learning. School systems which insist on perpetuation of moral values of students embrace discipline as a basic element that plays a fundamental role. The efforts by the government and schools to curb indiscipline through instituting appropriate communication means such as involving students in making decisions, use of suggestion boxes in schools have not been successful. In spite of government's efforts, strikes in the form of burning of schools and riots among others have been evident in secondary schools due to unbecoming students' behavior. However, Indiscipline of students has continued to be a problem in public secondary schools in Kenya during Covid -19 era.

According to Kisasi Sub-County Director of Education (2018) recent issues of students' indiscipline have been of great concern. The period between 2015 and 2018 has indicated 41 reported cases of indiscipline in public secondary schools within the sub-county. Studies carried out to investigate discipline problems in secondary schools in Kenya as found by Mulwa (2014) found that schools in Kitui county experience students' discipline problems of worrying magnitudes. Kalanza (2010) revealed that the challenges faced by Principals in Kitui central subcounty included poor time management by students, strikes and sneaking out of school. However, this study was carried out in order to fill a research gap on principals' communication strategies and students' discipline during Covid-19 era in Kisasi Sub-County, Kitui County, Kenya. However, it is noted that the success of a school is determined by the school principal who should ensure the setting of standards of good communication strategies for management of students' discipline hence easing the achievement of organizational goals.

This study was guided by the following two study objectives:

(i) To establish the availability of suggestion boxes in schools for management of students' discipline in public secondary schools in Katulani sub county.

(ii) To determine the frequency at which Suggestion Boxes were opened by the principal in management of students' discipline in public secondary schools in Katulani Sub County.

This study was based on Ginott's Congruent Communication Theory developed by Haim Ginott (2003). Ginnot's Theory is based on the belief that the behaviour and the language of the instructor set tone for learning in the classroom. The theory is characterized by teachers demonstrating to students brief yet clear expectations for that invites and encourages co-operation as well as the use of discipline in place of punishment. One strength of Ginott's Theory is that it can be weaved in relatively easily to any existing classroom or school management system without disruption. The theory also avoids confrontation and seeks to validate the feelings of others. The theory is weak in that it assumes that students themselves know how to communicate their ideas and opinions when in actual fact they may not. The theory may also not work for all students considering their cross-cultural differences. In addition, the theory is less effective in dealing with severe behaviour infractions. The theory assumes that for effective or congruent communication to occur, students must feel valued. Despite these challenges, the theory fits well in this study which focuses on communication between teachers and students on a day-to-day basis.

2. Methodology

To achieve its set research objectives, the study used descriptive survey design. Kombo and Tromp (2013) state that a research design is a plan showing how the problem of investigation will be solved. Orodho (2003) noted that this research design enables the collection of information about the attitudes, opinions, values and behaviours of people on educational or social issues. It is a systematic method of studying behaviours that cannot be observed or experimented without manipulating the environment. The target population for this study was 20 principals, 140 teachers who consisted of 20 deputy principals, 20 heads of departments guidance and counseling and 20 form four class teachers and 20 presidents of the students' council who were also targeted. Mugenda (2011) states that in order to provide an accurate and reliable description of the characteristics of a given population, it is usually not necessary to study the entire population. In most cases, studying a sample is sufficient. Best and Kahn (2011) describe a sample as a small proportion of a population selected for observation and analysis. According to Kombo and Tromp (2013) sampling is the procedure a researcher uses to gather people, places or things to study. Statements about the samples should also be true of the population. However, the larger the sample size, the smaller the sampling error.

Mugenda (2011) noted that a sample of 30% is appropriate in social science study. In a population of less than 30, all of it should be sampled for study. A total of 18 public secondary schools in Kisasi Sub-County were sampled for the study. All 18 school principals were sampled for the study since the total number was less than 30. Census inquiry is the complete enumeration of all items in the population. The 18 school principals were sampled using census inquiry. Also using census inquiry 54 teachers were purposively sampled who included 18 deputy principals, 18 HoDs guidance and counseling, 18 form four class teachers. 18 students were also sampled using census inquiry and they included presidents of the student council in each of the 18 schools. The 18 HODs guidance and counseling were purposively sampled for the study since they are in charge of guidance and counseling. The 18 form four class teachers were also purposively sampled since they are in charge of the senior most class. This study used questionnaires as tools for data collection. The Data collection tools were validated through a pilot study which was done in two schools (10%), which were excluded from the main study. Expert judgment enabled the researcher to identify weaknesses of the instruments after which appropriate adjustments were made.

Instrument reliability was established by the test-retest technique during a pilot study involving schools which were excluded from the main study. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Quantitative data generated from closed ended questions was analyzed descriptively and presented using frequency distribution and cross tabulation tables. Qualitative data generated from open-ended questions was organized and presented based on themes and patterns according to set objectives. To ensure Ethical Considerations there was informed consent, the respondents were assured of confidentiality and they were informed that the information would be used for research purposes only.

3.Results and Discussions

This study sought to determine the influence principals' use of suggestion boxes as a communication strategy on students' discipline in public secondary schools in Kisasi Sub-County. The principals were asked to give their honest responses on availability and use of suggestion boxes in their schools. The findings are as indicated in table 1.

Table 1: Principals' Response on Availability of suggestion Boxes in their   Schools

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	10	55.6%
No	8	44.4%
Total	**18**	**100%**

From Table 1, above it was noted from majority 55.6% of schools had suggestion boxes and only 44.4% of the schools did not have suggestion boxes. Availability of suggestion boxes was confirmed by the students who reported that, most suggestion boxes were kept in a strategic place thus giving the students an opportunity to freely express themselves.

The study also sought to establish the frequency at which suggestion boxes were opened by the principal. The results are as indicated in table 2.

Table 2: Results from Respondents on the Frequency of Opening of Suggestion Boxes by the Principal

Durations	Response by Principals	Response by teachers
Daily	1 (5.6%)	2 (4.3%)
Twice per week	5 (27.7 %)	20 (37%)
Weekly	10 (55.6%)	27 (50%)
Fortnight	2 (11.1 %)	5 (9.3%)
Total	**18 (100%)**	**54 (100%)**

From table 2, majority 55.6% of the principals said that they opened the suggestion on weekly basis, 27.7% of the principals said that they opened the suggestion boxes twice per week, 11.1 % of the principals said that they opened the suggestion boxes after a fortnight whereas only 5.6% of the principals said that they were opened daily. These findings agree with those of the teachers with majority 50% agreeing that suggestion boxes were opened weekly by the principal, 37% of the teachers said that were opened twice per week by the principal, 9.3% of the teachers said that they were opened per fortnight by the principal while 4.3% of the teachers said that they were opened daily by the principal.

These results concur with Mulwa (2014), who observed that schools had a wide range of methods that could be used to dialogue with students and with the provision of suggestion boxes students would write and drop their grievances. This is because anonymous suggestions or queries could be raised by the students and school fraternity in general concerning pertinent school issues some of which are critical to be addressed. This form of communication does not discriminate or pass penalties to the person passing on the information.

4.Conclusions
Based on the findings, the study concluded that the use of suggestion boxes was a good communication strategy that enabled students to air their grievances to the school administration. Most respondents too agreed that the suggestion boxes were placed in good locations and were mainly opened on weekly basis. Of major students' concern in a few schools was that some of the administration took some time to open them and some urgent issues were neither addressed through participatory discussions nor casually.

5. Recommendations

The study recommended that suggestion boxes should be opened regularly and issues of concern by the students addressed immediately during the Covid-19 era. This is because use of suggestion boxes can be another effective communication strategy.

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