

Improving the Quality of Basic Education Through the Use of Gender-Sensitive Student Councils: Experience of Six Selected Districts in Tanzania

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Abstract: This paper analyses whether the gender-sensitive and democratically elected student councils helped in strengthening school leadership and providing a platform for increased awareness and advocacy for male and female students to address their needs and rights in primary and secondary schools in Tanzania. The data was collected through qualitative methodology using in-depth interviews with purposively selected 29 school heads, 35 mentor teachers, 24 champions and 54 student leaders. Other data were obtained from focus-group discussions with 590 student leaders. The findings show that the student council plays a major role in strengthening school leadership and increasing the ability of students, particularly girls, to voice their needs and concerns. Some students' needs and concerns were sexual harassment, the right to quality education and health services and the elimination of corporal punishment. The use of student councils helps to improve the delivery of quality education in schools.

Keywords: Quality Education, Gender-sensitive Student Council, School leadership and Governance.

Introduction

In a bid to improve the quality of education and health services in primary and secondary schools and provide girls and boys with leadership skills to address their needs and concerns, the government of Tanzania in collaboration with other stakeholders has taken various initiatives. One of these was the introduction and strengthening of student councils as a statutory requirement to empower students, in particular to increase girls' and boys' confidence to advocate for and demand their rights to education and health. The use of students' councils in schools provides a platform for students, particularly girls, to advocate in other areas of their lives (Parker & Leithwood 2000; Veugelers & Kat, 2003). An example of the student empowerment model through the use of the student council was "My Right My Voice" that was championed by Oxfam-International and served more than 80 primary and secondary schools in Tanzania, involving children and youths aged 7 to 18 (Oxfam, 2014). This age group represents nearly half of the nation's population of 49 million (United Republic of Tanzania, 2013; World Bank, 2015).

The aim of establishing students' councils was to support the social and academic achievement of girls and boys in schools that is brought about primarily through such councils (known locally as *barazas*) (Hannam, 2001; Emily, 2014). In addition, via student councils (*barazas*), girls and boys



develop leadership skills, facilitating their participation in shaping educational policies, practices and beliefs while simultaneously ensuring school management accountability in delivering quality education. Self-advocacy and accountability were enhanced via the advent of student councils, which are designed to influence policies and practices that affect the quality of educational services in Tanzania. The barazas represent an excellent example of operationalizing democratic, socially responsible and citizenship skills—and not in the abstract—but in real life with deep and direct meaning for the individual students as stipulated in the national strategy for civic education (United Republic of Tanzania, 2011).

Given the importance of gender-sensitive and democratically elected student councils as opposed to the traditional approach of school leaders and heads of schools appointing student leaders who are predominately male, this approach provided a platform for girls to participate equally with boys in leadership and other social settings. This study sought to explore the integral roles that gender-sensitive and democratically elected student councils play in improving the quality of education, while engaging duty bearers in issues affecting their social and academic lives, in the six selected districts of Shinyanga municipality, Shinyanga rural, Kahama, Kishapu, Chamwino and Ngorongoro in mainland Tanzania.

Approach

The study utilised the qualitative approach by triangulating the sources of the data that were collected. The use of triangulation ensured the validity of the findings as well as shaping conclusions while providing a clearer picture of the subject under investigation. The study used purposive and random sampling methods to select 628 female and 614 male participants.

The study benefited from reviewing the mid-year and quarterly journals regarding the design and implementation of student councils in Tanzanian schools. The researcher conducted in-depth, open-ended, individual interviews with 26 male and three female school heads, 26 female and nine male mentor teachers, 22 female and two male champions and 33 female and 21 male student leaders that were purposively selected. Other data were obtained from the use of focus group discussions with a non-random sample of 292 female and 289 male student leaders. This is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Data Analysis

The study was conducted in a safe and ethical qualitative research environment, in that emphasis was placed on the participants' informed consent. Qualitative data from purposely and randomly selected members were analysed thematically to clarify and triangulate the meaning from their experience. First, the interview data were transcribed, read through and informal notes were made regarding the themes that emerged. The researcher then honed the categories of the themes. Finally, the researcher analysed divergent findings, through deliberating on opposing ideas and agreeing on the meaning of the findings.

Inductive analysis was used to get the meaning from the participants and provide descriptive details on the research undertaken. The findings in the following sections are reported in aggregate form.

Table 1: Approaches and respondents reached

No	Respondents	Mode of Approach	Number of Respondents					
			Male	(Row percent)	Female	(Row percent)	Total	
1	Head Teachers	In-depth Individual Interviews	26	(89.6)	3	(10.4)	29	100%
2	Mentors	In-depth Individual Interviews	9	(25.7)	26	(74.3)	35	100%
3	Students Leaders	Focus Group Discussions	289	(49.7)	292	(50.2)	581	100%
		In-depth individual interviews	21	(38.9)	33	(61.1)	54	100%
4	Champions	In-depth Individual Interviews	2	(8.3)	22	(91.7)	24	100%
5	Local/Community leaders	In-depth Individual Interviews	26	(96.3)	1	(3.7)	27	100%
6	District Educational Officers (DEOs)	In-depth Individual Interviews	2	(28.6)	5	(71.4)	7	100%
	TOTAL across methods by gender (N)		375		382		757	100%
	TOTAL across methods by gender (%)		49.5%		50.5%		100%	100%

Findings

The study mainly focused on school management and students who understood the process of organising and operating gender-sensitive and democratically elected student councils. School officials and students in the selected schools conducted nearly all student elections democratically, meaning that students running for the position of prefects take forms and apply for the desired post, the students vote for the one they like and the winners are announced as leaders. It was noted that all leadership positions included both female and male candidates. The female head of the secondary school in Shinyanga municipality also noted that the need to facilitate more democratic, gender-sensitive student councils is recognised by her school. It helps to prepare active and responsible future citizens. Evidence was also drawn from a female student leader who said, “we chose female and male champions based on their familiarity with Masaaï society and their closeness to students”. She added that “students now feel free to discuss and ask the champions anything about their needs and concerns.”

A male student leader reported, “Most of the positive student progress was generated in the student council as a formal platform for students to discuss their concerns and challenges with the school management and community in general.” The students reported that they enjoy the student councils and are happy with their leaders that they democratically elect. In addition, a male student leader said, “since they were democratically elected by their fellows, it is easy to lead them with less resistance from female and male students.”

In general, the implementation of student councils and their constituent activities in schools has successfully empowered girls and boys. Both adult and youthful informants (approximately 90%) agreed that the democratically elected gender-sensitive student council positively contributed to students’ positive outcomes, such as students’ enhanced awareness of their rights and needs. For example, a female student leader from Shinyanga rural district noted, “I was constantly restricted by

my parents (father) from going to school, as I had to perform some household chores, but after the students' council made me aware of the importance of school, I was able to explain my concern to my parents about the need to attend school and get an education, which resulted in reduced domestic work and more support for my education." Therefore, any gains made can be attributed to increased leadership skills through which young female and male students have learnt to creatively identify their needs and to advocate accordingly. The following sections present the experiences and perceptions of the respondents that participated in the study.

Increased Female and Male Students' Leadership Skills

During the interviews, all heads of schools and student leaders acknowledged that the use of democratically elected student councils was a very good approach to supporting leadership development in their schools. There was a general consensus in line with other authors that gender-sensitive school councils increased the self-confidence and self-esteem of students, particularly female students (Parker & Leithwood, 2000).

The female head of the secondary school in Shinyanga rural district reported:

Student leaders in the school council are democratically elected by their fellows with equal representation of both female and male candidates. At first I thought this gender approach would take more than 3 years for female students to be trained and empowered to believe in their leadership ability, but it happened in less than a year when I witnessed the first female head prefect.

Improved School Management and Increased Teachers' Accountabilities

As explained by all heads of schools, students were responsible for electing their own representatives. The male head of a school in Chamwino district made the following observation: "At first I did not know how this student council election would work and I was skeptical" After the election, he added, "I noticed something powerful that students are listening more readily to the leaders they democratically elected, hence giving more time for the teachers and management team to focus on improving student teaching and learning."

Furthermore, the male head of the secondary school in Ngorongoro district reported, "the use of the student council has perfectly matched our school needs. It is now very easy to manage and lead the school when you have first-hand knowledge of students' felt needs so that we can address their concerns." In addition, the male head of a school in Kishapu stated, "we continue to have an acute shortage of qualified teachers, and so the use of a democratically elected student council in this school has managed to model positive student behavior and action, which means that we can now focus on teaching and helping students succeed."

The male head of a school reported, "My teachers are now more responsible and accountable in their teaching." He added, "Students constantly support me by reporting when teachers are dodging their classes." In general, the heads of schools and champions noted that teachers are now more responsible and accountable in their teaching.

Another female student leader noted, "the gender sensitive and democratically elected student council has improved the relationship between teachers and students as a result of the on-going dialogues and discussion on students' needs." Some heads of school attribute the school

management's increased accountability and responsibility to the student's council. Evidence of this was seen in that all heads of schools acknowledged the usefulness of the democratically elected student councils and the important role they play in promoting student accountability, discipline and abiding by school rules, hence enabling the school management to focus on other matters including academic excellence. For example, the male head of a school noted that "student leaders are chosen by their fellows, and so they are more likely to listen to them, hence promoting obedience and reducing unnecessary resistance." In addition, the male head of a primary school in Kahama district reported, "Students can now assist my management team in leading by ensuring that teachers are acting responsibly and fully attend the teaching sessions as planned." Examples of this include the courageous step taken by students in some schools to report on their teachers who arrived in class drunk and those who dodged their teaching sessions. We found increased student participation in school governance and in their ability to advocate for needed change.

Increased Students' Attendances and Reduction in Girls' Pregnancies

Heads of schools and champions further noted that school attendance at the various schools had improved greatly as a result of the gender-sensitive and democratically elected student councils. For example, the female head of a primary school in Ngorongoro district indicated that in 2014 her school experienced a decline in school absences by 5% compared with 2013.

In addition, the informants reported that fewer girls dropped out of school, including cases of pregnant girls, more of who would probably have dropped out in the past. For example, the male secondary school head in Shinyanga rural district reported that, "...there has been a decline by 5% including zero reported cases of girls who get pregnant, when the school witnessed 3 cases and 1 case of girls' pregnancies in 2012 and 2013, respectively." Although guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Vocational Training (MoEVT) currently known as the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) on enabling and allowing pregnant schoolgirls to continue with their studies were developed and approved by the Ministry in 2011, most of the pregnant girls were denied their right to continue and complete their education cycle, contrary to the government circular that allows them to continue with school after the birth of the baby (United Republic of Tanzania, 2010).

Important factors discovered that impacted students' attendance included severe corporal punishment, household chores, lack of school fees and harassment (particularly of female students). These aspects of home and school life, in particular the use of corporal punishment in schools hindered boys' and girls' academic performance, rendering them more likely to drop out or fail academically (Newell, 2011). In one case, a local government official (ward executive office) in Ngorongoro district attended to the particular difficulties experienced by girls and young women. Specifically, in some remote rural settings, girls are more likely to drop out of school and/or suffer the depredation represented by gender-based violence, forced early marriage and pregnancy. It seemed that both adult and student informants saw a reduction in these problems.

Another influence of the gender sensitive and democratically elected student councils can be seen in the district of Kishapu where the District Council has instructed all primary schools to adopt a gender-sensitive and democratically elected student council. It is worth noting that gender-sensitive and democratically elected councils have been adopted in all the surveyed schools, and they have been able to conduct democratic and gender-sensitive elections.

Generally, all the respondents were able to say that there had been a discernable improvement in terms of establishing a gender-sensitive and democratically elected student council, the improved performance of female and male students, more females in leadership positions and improved school attendance. Meanwhile, there has been a reduction in early forced marriage and girls' pregnancies and an increased ability of students, particularly girls, to speak out about their rights and concerns. The school visits found evidence of these facts.

Specific gendered outcomes were cited by heads of schools, teacher mentors and student leaders, concerning how students, particularly female students, became effective leaders to ensure the following outcomes were achieved in their schools:

- Girls' increased awareness of and ability to resist the sexual advances and harassment of men as this affects their retention and achievement in school.
- The construction of friendly infrastructure, including toilets and special rooms for girls to accommodate their needs, particularly during menstruation.
- The retention of girls promoted through the construction of more female hostels and dormitories.

Increased Advocacy Skills among Students

Increasingly, participating students employed appropriate political and social strategies for seeking redress for the perceived violation of their rights, often through invoking the mechanism of re-energized student councils. One female student leader argued, "We decided to report to the head master a female parent who abused her daughter, who is a student in this school. The student was tied up and severely beaten. We knew this is a violation of her right to be protected, and so the school management was able to rescue the girl from abuse."

Conclusion

Gender-sensitive and democratically elected student councils in schools have contributed greatly to raising awareness and developing the leadership skills of female and male students. It has also enabled both female and male students to participate in improving and shaping the education process, while taking ownership for enhancing and promoting good governance and accountability in delivering education services. Students' participation in democratic education and in the process of delivering educational services is the key to good school governance and management (Veugelers & Kat, 2003). Through the gender-sensitive and democratically elected student council, female and male students have been able to voice their concerns and needs, and be civically engaged, while taking an active role in the school and community, with a particular focus on expanded roles for female students in this regard.

Similar to other countries where gender-sensitive and democratically elected student councils are being enforced and implemented (Oxfam, 2014), their use provides ownership and sustainable positive outcomes pertaining to the need of young girls and boys to be heard and provided with quality education and health services in schools. A social studies curricula expert (Jacoby, 2014) recommends that civic and social responsibility preparation be constructed around knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, skills. The barazas represent an excellent example of operationalizing

democratic skills—and not in the abstract—but in real life, with direct meaning for the individual students, as stipulated in the national strategy for civic education in Tanzania.

There is much agreement amongst the stakeholders that the gender-sensitive and democratically elected student council has resulted in a high level of gender equality. There is also evidence that there has been a shift in gender stereotyping in relation to the beliefs and practices of the leadership in the implementing primary and secondary schools. Female students have proved they are capable of initiating changes that have positively affected their social and academic lives, including an outstanding increase in female students' roles in school leadership affairs, academic excellence and females' ability to discuss and manage their own affairs. This is contrary to the traditional practice and beliefs that previously prevented girls from full participation, acquiring school leadership positions, and standing up for their academic and social rights (UNESCO, 2015). The evidence from school field visits also revealed untapped opportunities for a large number of female teachers (55%), particularly in primary schools, who can continue to act as female role models to inspire and motivate girls to set their ambitions higher, study harder and develop their leadership and life skills. These changes have implications for sustainability, as female and male students now expect to move their schools forward (in terms of, for example, gender equity), which is also a priority the government of Tanzania is committed to achieving. This is akin to priming a water pump — once the water flows, there is no way to stop it.

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