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Examining various forms of punishments in girls secondary schools in Kenya and their implications on learning

Everlyne Kwamboka Mose

Department of Educational Psychology, Early Childhood Education, and Special Needs Education, Kisii University, Kenya

Email: evemose@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7090-6057>

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the forms of punishment used in schools and their potential impact on learning among girls secondary schools in Kisii County of Kenya. The research questions of the study were: What are the common mistakes girl students fall into in schools? What are the forms of punishment administered on students? What are the potential effects of these forms of punishment on learning? The findings indicate that petty theft; failure to report to school on time; failure to complete class assignments; petty fights; and rudeness are some of the common forms of misbehavior among girls in the schools studied. The penalties against student misbehavior include: Being asked to buy stolen items; being asked to go back home and be accompanied by parents/guardians; being asked to sit outside class and complete an assignment; being asked to mop a classroom or weed school flowers; and being asked to apologize. All these forms of punishment have the potential to negatively affect student attitudes, learning, and academic progress. We recommend that schools establish mechanisms of dealing with student indiscipline which do not affect learning, academic progress, and in breach of the constitution.

Keywords: School rules, student misconduct, punishment, academic progress, learning, girls

Public Interest Statement

Punishment are forms of responses by parents, teachers, caretakers, guardians, etc to children or other subordinates used to address perceived or actual misbehavior patterns, bad conduct, or mistakes of others. On the basis of these realities, this study set out to establish the forms of punishment meted on students in girls' secondary schools in Kisii County of Kenya and the potential they bear on student learning and progress in their education.

Introduction

Secondary schools, also referred to as high schools, generally host students between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, attending studies from form one up to form four or to form six depending on the country they are taking their studies. Since these learners come from diverse families, backgrounds, and socio-economic set-ups, the possibility is that how they respond to school rules and regulations would, generally be varied. Irrespective of this fact, studies show that in majority of cases, adherence to school rules and regulations is not difficult, since most of the rules and regulations cover a reasonable scope of mistakes and wrongdoing.

Girls of the ages of 14 to 18 are characterized by various behavior patterns including rapid growth both physically and mentally, sexual attraction, cognitive development, interests in new hobbies and self-discovery, and attach importance to acceptance by peer groups. Further to that, they are focused on themselves, going back and forth between confidence and self-doubt. They can be self-conscious because they feel like the center of attention. Hormonal changes, struggles with self-image, acceptance by friends, and greater distance from parents can all play a part in determining how they respond to various physical, aural, or oral stimuli (Denham, 1998). These characteristics should affect the choice of punishment that teachers administer on the adolescents, if at all. Studies indicate that for adolescent girls, the question of punishment must not be divorced from who they are and that unless care is taken, some forms of punishment will be counterproductive (Maree, 2000). On the basis of these realities, this study set out to establish the forms of punishment meted on students in girls' secondary schools in Kisii County of Kenya and the potential they bear on student learning and progress in their education.

In Kenya, secondary schools fall into various categories. There are day schools, boarding schools, and both boarding and day schools; there are girls schools, boys schools, and mixed schools; there are national schools, extra-county schools, county schools, and sub-county schools, but all these categories study a common curriculum controlled by the Ministry of Education (MoE). Each of these classifications of schools has set rules and regulations that assist school administrators and teachers to control student conduct.

The subject of this research was motivated by the aims of Kenya's Vision 2030 socio-economic blue-print plus the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, Weinberger et al, 2015) guidelines especially on the aspect of education. Goal number 4 of global SDGs is Quality Education in which the aim is to offer education of a quality that will enable populations attain sustainable skills for survival. It is the view of this research that such an education includes the daily decisions made for and on behalf of students. The study is further motivated by the fact that girls are at a more risk of dropping out of school as compared to boys (Chege & Sifuna, 2006). Apart from school-based reasons for girls dropping out of school in Kenya, there are a host other reasons behind them leaving school prematurely. These include social, economic, and cultural factors including early marriages and lack of basic necessities including sanitary towels (ActionAid International Kenya, 2015; Atieno, Role & Ndiku, 2013; Chege and Sifuna, 2006). Unless interventions are put in place, girl children from marginalized communities like nomadic ethnic communities are almost unable to complete school. School dropouts, oftentimes, leave school with little or merely unsustainable literacies (Uwezo, Kenya). Dropping out of school comes

with significant long-term socio-economic and family ramifications, implying that preventing students from dropping out of school is less costly than allowing the trend to persist.

Punishment in schools

Punishment of various kinds is synonymous with schools since in every school, there are a set of rules and regulations which govern the conduct of students. Across the world, rules and regulations are drafted by teachers only, students only, or a combination of students and teachers as a way of inclusivity and as a participatory approach which enhances the observance of the rules and regulations (Alston, 2008). In spite of this inclusive rule-making approaches, cases of rule breaking are still rampant, and each of the cases attracts some form of punishment. Studies show that punishments deter bad behavior, but other studies further indicate that punishment could be a cause of student unrest (Canter, 2000). Schools, therefore, need to be sensitive with regard to the forms of punishment administered to students and reflect on the possible outcomes of those punishments. The question school authorities need to ask themselves is whether it is necessary to administer punishment every time a school rule has been broken, especially in high school (Lukowiak & Bridges, n.d.). Research evidence indicates that punishment often times results in unintended outcomes including students developing aversive feelings towards school, students not changing their behavior, that punishment cannot be generalized for all settings, and punishment does not teach appropriate behavior (Smith & Rivera 1995; Bos & Vaughn, 2006).

Theoretical framework

A number of theories on punishment exist. These include the utilitarian theory of punishment, retributive theory of punishment, and the restorative theory of punishment. For analysis of data in this research, the first theory-the utilitarian theory of punishment-was used. The theory has been expounded by various writers among them Hart (1983), Gewirth (1982), Morris (1971), and Raz (1986), among others. The theory indicates that the morally right action is that which produces the greatest amount of utility. The utilitarian theory is merely an application of the general utilitarian theory of morality to the specific issue of punishment.

The utilitarian starting point regarding punishment is to consider the most direct and immediate effect of punishment, and from this perspective it is a bad thing because it causes unhappiness to the offender. It is only justified because of the wider contingent benefits it produces, which it is felt outweigh the bad consequences. The good consequences of punishment which are thought to outbalance the suffering inflicted on the offender, include discouraging the offender from re-offending and potential offenders from committing crimes in the first place, and once the offender is apprehended by rehabilitating him or her and where necessary incapacitating the offender. If there are several forms of punishment which produce the same good consequences, we must chose the one which imposes the least unpleasantness to the offender. The utilitarian theory of punishment is forward looking: the commission of a criminal act does not justify punishment; rather punishment is only warranted if some good can flow from it.

Research questions

The research questions were:

- a. What are the common mistakes girl students fall into in schools?
- b. What are the forms of punishment administered on students?
- c. What are the potential effects of these forms of punishment on learning?

Study design

This study adopted a qualitative research design in which data were collected by two approaches, i.e. teacher interviews and document analyses. Its main advantage is that it provided an opportunity to

interview subjects in detail and that the researcher was able to seek for clarification face to face. In addition, the documents analyzed were intact forms of information that were unalterable at the time of the study. In this way, the outcome of the study could be a basis for further research on a similar or related subject.

Site

The study was conducted in girls secondary schools in Kisii County of Kenya. The county is one of the western Kenya counties neighboured by Nyamira, Bomet, Narok, and Homa Bay Counties.

Population

The population was five girls' secondary schools in Kisii County of Kenya. Their student populations were: School 1: 351; School 2: 1407; School 3: 409; School 4: 669; School 5: 317.

Sampling design and sample

Since this was a qualitative study that sought rich in-depth data, it required a small sample and so a non-random sample would be ideal (Young & Casey, 2018). The actual subjects were deputy principals of each of the schools since they are generally in charge of discipline in schools. For documents, incident books from each school were analyzed.

Data collection instruments

Two data collection instruments were used in the study, i.e. teacher interviews and document analyses. Teachers were considered to be information-rich because they deal with students on a daily basis. Further to that, deputy principals were considered the most ideal since they are usually the ones who handle student indiscipline matters. On documents, incident books were analyzed. These are considered unalterable forms of data which would, most likely, be genuine records since those who kept the records might not have imagined that they could be used by third parties.

Data analysis procedures

Since data were in the form of researcher notes and interview transcripts, the analysis used two approaches, i.e. content analysis for the incident book records and thematic analysis for the interviews. Both sources provided a basis for the findings presented here.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the research questions.

a. Common misconduct among students

From the interviews and analysis of incident books, the following are the common forms of misconduct.

- i. Petty theft: The teachers revealed that theft of biros, cash, and other personal items are reported from time to time. The deputy principal at school two responded as follows during the interview with her.

These kids are fond of stealing small small items and sometimes you wonder why. For example, yesterday I dealt with a case where a form three student stole a form one student's sweets. You see they reported back last Sunday and so these are some of the things they carry from home. Sweets are small things and anyone can afford...

Petty theft was also noted in incident books in schools three and five. A study conducted in the Netherlands indicated prevalence of this form of misbehavior-theft-among school students

(Weerman, Harland, & van der Laan, 2007).

- ii. Failure to report to school on time: This happens often after school holidays and mid-term breaks. Teachers indicated that some students cannot avoid this sometimes because some come from difficult socio-economic situations. All the five teachers interviewed said they encounter this problem. On her part, the deputy principal at school four said:

It is an always problem, this one. We have a problem of eliminating it because now some say the parent had no money for transport and so it is hard. You see like last time, some kids came back after two weeks of opening school and you wonder if you know what you do with them...

Ng'ang'a (2021) indicates that various reasons prevent students from reporting back to school after breaks.

- iii. Failure to complete class assignments: It was found out that some students do not complete their class assignments due to mischief, laziness, or for lack of the relevant textbooks, or due to power failures. However, this form of misconduct was not as rampant as the others. Cases of students not completing class assignments have been reported in other countries (Treadwell, 2007).
- iv. Fights: Teachers reported prevalence of fighting among students for small reasons. According to them, students fight with fists, scratch one another, throw items at another, or splash water on others. Prevalence of fighting among students has been reported by other studies (Sailor, 2010; Wakoli & Bundotich, 2020).
- v. Rudeness: Teachers reported that students exhibited rudeness at various times and to various school staff members. These included security staff, matrons, and also teachers. They indicated that oftentimes, it was not predictable when this could occur. The deputy principal at school two reported that:

Yes, they can be so rude. They can rudely react to instruction by their matron, for example, she tells them to spread their bed and they shout at her and she reports to us. Then even to teachers, sometimes you ask them to tuck their blouses properly and they look at you rudely and you wonder what to do.

b. Common forms of punishment on students

The following are the various forms of punishment given to students.

- i. Being asked to buy stolen items: Except in school 4, in all the others, a student who stole another student's item was asked to buy it. This is done through the student's pocket money, usually kept by boarding teachers and, in other cases, by the school bursar. In school 4, the cost of the stolen item is added to the school fees balance of the one who has stolen but the school replaces it at the time. Teachers as well as the incident books confirmed this.
- ii. Being asked to go back home and be accompanied by parents/guardians: This is what is in the school rules but only implemented in school three and school five. The researcher's observation of this trend in the schools is perhaps due to fear that should something happen to these students, schools might be held accountable. For the first term of 2024, only three students and two students were recorded as having been sent back home in schools three and five respectively. The deputy principal in school one said:

Yea, the rule is there, lakini (Swahili for but) we fear a student may get a problem then the parent comes here to ask us about it. So we don't really seriously follow up at all times. May be once once hivi (Swahili for like this).
- iii. Being asked to sit outside class and complete an assignment: This is perhaps a more common

approach in a majority of the schools. Teachers were unanimous that if a student had not finished their homework, they had to complete it before joining the next lesson. If there is no vacant classroom, students are asked to sit out of the classroom and complete it. Data indicate that to sit out is meant to put pressure on the learner as one teacher put it:

Out there, we expose her to be seen as a rule breaker and discourage her from repeating the behavior next time. The principal will pass by and see her or pinch her kidogo (Swahili for a little) and it works.

- iv. Being asked to mop a classroom or weed school flowers: This form of punishment depended on the teacher dealing with the students. Even as the deputy principal is the overall discipline teacher, subject teachers or teachers on duty deal with issues of punishment. In our view, it looks an extreme form of punishment but data show that it is administered.
- v. Being asked to apologize: For mistakes like verbally abusing others, unintentionally hurting another student, or other unpremeditated offences, students are made to apologize to the offended. Considered, perhaps, as minor offenses, mistakes warranting apologies are not captured in the incident books.

c. Potential effects of these forms of punishment on girl students

From the interviews and from the literature, the following were the actual and potential effects of the various forms of punishment.

- i. Anxiety: Students feel anxious when it is apparent that they are going to face some form of punishment. This is more so in cases like being asked to mop a classroom alone or to sit out and complete as assignment. Erzen (2017) indicates that student anxiety will interfere with student learning. This is corroborated by what one of the teachers said.

Whenever they have been caught in a mistake and know they are going to face the music, the girls are kind of restless and you teach them and you see that they are not attentive. Like you shout at them to be attentive in some cases.

Put another way, the teacher indicates that contemplating some form of punishment affects learning.

- ii. Withdrawal: Data indicate that the prospect of punishment makes some students to be withdrawn. According to the teacher at school four, her observation is that especially the prospect of being sent back home makes students to look withdrawn. The researcher's interpretation of this reaction is that some students are orphans and to contemplate that they will go home makes them unsettled since there might be no one there. According to Halu-Halu (2013), contemplating punishment may make students be withdrawn.
- iii. Repeated misbehavior: This is, mainly, on rudeness. Teachers indicated that when provoked, their students can be rude. According to the teacher at school five, if their students are pushed into an activity they may not want, they easily get rude.

For example if they come back from games and they want to bathe and you push them to go and serve their meal, they are likely to be rude to you...Perhaps coz after dinner they must rush to class, it is like they feel under pressure.

In our view, these students are sensitive to their grooming and might not want to draw attention due to body odour. Pushing them to this possibility might provoke them into misbehavior.

- iv. Loss of lesson time: In cases where students are asked to mop a classroom or weed flowers, time to do classwork is lost. In other cases, the students may get late in doing their laundry, eating their dinner, or submitting their classwork for marking. In many cases, the time lost might not be found since teachers have little time to follow-up on those lagging behind.

Discussion

Studies suggest that all forms of punishment given to adolescents need to be well thought-out in order to avoid the often unpredictable responses from students especially if the students are girls (Docking, 1986). Other research studies indicate that punishments must not be given because the teacher is angry but because the teacher has carefully considered the pros and cons of that particular form of punishment (Lukowiak & Bridges, n.d.). In this study, there is evidence that these forms of punishment bear undesirable consequences which work against the interest of the students, i.e. their learning and progress in knowledge acquisition. For instance, asking the student to go back home automatically denies them the opportunity to sit in class hence losing several hours of teaching in the various subjects. Sending the students back home, further, exposes the child to other risks including the temptation to involve themselves in further undesirable behavior including engaging in drug and substance abuse. Studies show that drug and substance abuse are prevalent student engagements (Kamenderi, et al, n.d.; Miller, et al, 2007). There could be a possibility that some students could intentionally report to school late in order that they are sent away in order that they may have good time to engage in other risky behavior and misconduct.

Since all the students at this time are technology-conversant, they have had wide exposure to risky indulgences through social media. This is why asking them to go back home could be working against the interest of the students. Turkle (2010) observes that exposure to computers and ICTs in general has a potential of influencing student undesirable behavior. These findings present a challenge to the whole aspect of student control and discipline in schools in the era of technology. Many students have formed personal identities through media, some have a lot of attention about their welfare, and some are against strict regulations or control. The findings seem to call for a wide-ranging conversation about school rules and regulations against 21st Century learners who see the world differently. In Kenya, in most schools, rules and regulations have not changed with the times. It is not possible that the rules that worked in the 1980s will perfectly work 44 years later. As part of affirmative action, efforts are being put to ensure all girls are enrolled in schools, they transition, and they complete school, and take careers. This vision needs to be pursued at all levels and that all stakeholders need to put this in mind whenever they deal with girl students. Putting in place student-friendly rules and regulations is part of the wide range of approaches in ensuring girls access quality education and complete studies and transit to the next level.

Part of these include involving student councils, enacting rules according to bill of rights, involving parents constructively in discipline issues, decongesting academic programmes, and introducing suggestion boxes. School communities need to be cognizant of the fast changing times and try to be more responsive, more inclusive, and to listen more to the voice of students. Schools need to try as much as possible to prevent any possibility of a student dropping out of school because of punishment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, we conclude as follows. Firstly, that student misconduct is common. Secondly, that most of the approaches in student discipline are not in the interest of the students. Thirdly, most of the approaches used have negative implications on learning and academic progress.

Recommendations

We make the following recommendations. Let effective guidance and counseling departments be established in schools and let the guidance and counseling teachers be capacity-built in order to effectively assist in dealing with student misconduct. Secondly, let schools involve parents in decision-making with regard to students. This should be so since parents/guardians know the history of the children and therefore can assist schools make proper decisions in cases of indiscipline. It is the researcher's considered opinion that these recommendations are urgent.

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