

The Influence of Peer Counsellors' Activities on Student Discipline in Public Secondary Schools in Kisumu Municipality

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Abstract

Management of student discipline is one of the major challenges to teachers in learning institutions. Incidents of student indiscipline are on the increase in Kenya resulting into among others; property damage, students' deaths, arson, increased student drop out, poor performance and rape in some secondary schools. Secondary schools in Kisumu Municipality have had increased cases of student absenteeism, truancy, drug abuse and unacceptable sexual conduct over the years leading to increased school drop outs. This study examines the role that peer counsellors play in enhancing management of student discipline in public secondary schools in Kisumu Municipality. The paper examines how peer counselling activities influence student discipline in public secondary schools. Cross-sectional survey design was used in the study. The study population comprised 28 head teachers, 28 heads of guidance and counselling department, 532 peer counsellors and 3,250 students in 28 public secondary schools. Stratified random sampling was used to select 10 head teachers, 10 Heads of Department of Guidance and Counselling, 110 peer counsellors and 300 form two and three students. Questionnaire and interview guide were used to collect data. Questionnaires were administered to heads of guidance and counselling and students while head teachers were interviewed, face to face. Descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the quantitative data generated by questionnaires while qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and organized into themes, categories and subcategories as they emerged during the study. The main findings of the study were that peer counsellors engaged in activities of counselling and referrals, setting of their programme of activities as well as inducting new members. Peer counsellors also encouraged peer support activities in health, drama and music to influence the students' behaviour hence improve discipline and were most competent in dealing with issues of absenteeism, truancy and drug abuse. The study recommended that peer counsellors improve on variety of activities carried out in schools and involve more students in those activities.

Key Words: Influence, Peer Counsellors, Activities, Student Discipline, Public Secondary Schools, Kisumu Municipality

INTRODUCTION

Counselling is a helping process through which a counselee and counsellor develop a common understanding about issues that challenge the counselee and need to be resolved. Republic of Kenya (2004) defines counselling as an interactive process co-joining the counselee who is trained and educated to give this assistance, to help the counselee learn to deal more effectively with himself and his environment. Peer

counselling is one form through which counselling is done. It is a process where two individuals of the same age, points of interest and background share the same needs involved in the helping process. Peer counsellors tend to have a lot of influence on their counsees. This is because peers inspire trust, confidence, and are approachable (Lutomia & Sikolia, 2006). Counselling is an integral part of the education process that supplements and complements education process. Therefore, counselling is a process through which an individual improves his capacity to deal with everyday challenges of life.

Influence of peer Counsellors' Activities on Student Discipline in Public Secondary Schools

In modern societies, the influence of peers and their impact on adolescents is notable. Peers spend most of their time together and have increasingly come to play vital roles in the socialization and development of fellow teenagers (Steinberg, 1993). Balmer (1994) and Baron and Byrne (2004) observe that at this point in life peers have the greatest impact on one's behaviour.

A study by Besercker and Aug (1985) on effectiveness of peer counsellors' programmes in Indiana High School in Cincinnati, Ohio State reports a finding on peer counsellors, activities. They gathered data by administering questionnaires to teachers in the school to assess their views on the effectiveness of peer counsellors programmes. They concluded that peer counsellors were most effective if they were good role models and were important peer tutors for behavioural change.

Middeton, Zollinger and Keene (1996) carried out an experimental study on the impact of peer counsellors as facilitators of change on the socially neglected child in school. They administered questionnaires to the respondents where 95 neglected children were identified and randomly assigned to either control or experimental group. Peer facilitators were used to influence the participants through individual discussions and sessions and meetings at scheduled times. During such sessions, the participants shared their expectations, challenges and hopes with the peer facilitators in a formal setting. The findings indicated increased peer acceptance in the experimental group leading to improved self esteem and positive involvement in school activities.

A longitudinal study by Haralambos, Holborn and Rubin (2000), on factors affecting success in education, indicates that there is a significant link between tutoring by peer counsellors and educational performance. The above study indicates that peer counsellors engage in activities like being role models, discussions, meetings, tutoring and mentoring to influencing fellow students hence improve discipline. Republic of Kenya (2004) further notes that these activities should be well programmed and have per support programmes like school health clubs and theatre groups. Apparently, no study has been carried out to establish the role of peer counsellors on student discipline in public secondary schools in Kisumu Municipality, hence the need for this study.

A survey carried out in Central Province, Kenya, in 2000 indicates that peer counsellors greatly influence adolescent students when their dependence on parents wane and a sense of own identity emerges. The aim of the survey was to establish causes of and possible

ways of arresting cases of student unrest (Republic of Kenya, 2000). Data was collected through written reports and oral presentation made by randomly sampled head teachers and education officers. The report agrees with recommendations of the Report of the Task Force on Student Discipline and Unrest in Secondary Schools (Republic of Kenya, 2004) that functional guidance and counselling departments with independent peer counsellors' units should be set up in schools. Such units would give peer counsellors an opportunity to address issues that affect students leading to indiscipline. It stressed that peer counsellors should be actively involved as role models to other students. This recommendation supports the assumption of the present study that peer counsellors play a vital role in enhancing student discipline.

However, the reports do not spell out how the peer counsellors work to attain this goal. While the report appreciates the role of peer counsellors in improving discipline, its purpose was to find out the factors for student unrest in public secondary schools and recommend solutions. The report was based on the responses of head teachers and education officers only.

Sunguti (2002) has carried out a study on the role of peer counsellors on student unrest in Nakuru District. He looked at types of peer counselling programmes, peer counsellors' approach, and time peer counsellors spent with fellow students in counselling which were also considered during the present study. During the survey he administered questionnaires to 400 students from 15 secondary schools in the district. The schools were selected through stratified sampling as was done in the present study. His findings were that peer counsellors played an important role in reducing cases of unrest through individual and group counselling. However, Sunguti's study examined cases of student unrest and recommended peer counsellors to be involved in the process this paper examines how peer counsellors help to reduce other types of indiscipline experienced in public secondary schools apart from student unrest. He did not include teachers as respondents unlike in the present study. Apart from questionnaires the present study also conducted interviews.

Statement of the Problem

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

necessary to investigate the role of peer counsellors in enhancing management of student discipline in public secondary schools in Kisumu Municipality.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

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

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

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

RESULTS

Data gathered from the study showed that peer counsellors are involved in various activities in their schools. Most of such activities helped to enhance student perception, self-concept as well as boost their self-esteem to enhance discipline. Through peer support activities, students learnt to actualize their talents, channel their energy positively and improve their participation in school activities. The peer counsellors also shared their knowledge and experiences with the students. The activities participated in were as discussed below.

Peer Addressed Students at Class and Weekly Meetings

Responses from the head teachers showed that in 80% of the schools. Peer counsellors addressed students in school meetings that were locally referred to as "*Kamkunji*" or "*Baraza*". In 90% of the schools, peer counsellors addressed class meetings. It emerged that during weekly student meetings, students talked about topical issues of general concern to them as a community including drugs and substance abuse and HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, class meetings were used to address issues that affected individual classes. Issues raised during such meetings could influence or compromise student discipline in schools. Therefore, peer counsellors used such opportunities to give information and guidance on areas of general concern and help students to identify

appropriate ways of dealing with issues of concern to them. This intervention helped to improve students' perception of their situation, hence improve student discipline.

Peer Counsellors Carried Out Counselling Sessions with Students

The study also found out that peer counsellors carry out counselling using two main approaches; individual counselling and group counselling. However individual counselling was more frequently used. This was confirmed by responses received from peer counsellors which were as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Peer counselling approaches as reported by peer counsellors (n=100)

Approaches used	Frequency (%)	Percentage (%)
Individual counselling	78	78
Group counselling	20	20
Total	100	100

From Table 1, it is observed that 78% of peer counselors used individual counselling approach. That was an important indication that the students viewed the peer counsellors as considerably competent to handle their issues. The responses also confirmed that peer counsellors were able to build confidentiality and gain trust of students. This finding agrees with that of a study carried out by Mutembei (2006) that clients will access individual counselling process when they trust the counsellor and believe that they can freely and confidentially share their experiences with the counsellor. The peer counsellors mainly used individual counselling to reach out their clients who had gone through unique situations. This was a good way of holding counselling sessions as students could easily confide in peer counsellors on such sensitive issues like drug abuse which could lead to serious disciplinary action if shared in group counselling. Individual counselling allowed the students to freely share their unique personal experiences that could be frowned at by other students such as sexual molestation.

Group counselling was used by 22% of the peer counsellors. Given the high peer counsellor student ratio in secondary schools, group counselling though not recommended served as a stop gap measure. The study observed that it was better than not having any counselling at all. It also helped students to open up especially when there was the sharing of experiences, issues and challenges among the students. It made them to realize that their situations were not unique but that others like them went through similar issues, challenges and experiences and were coping or had managed to cope positively.

Peer Counsellors Carried Referrals of Unresolved Cases

Due to the fact that not all peer counsellors were competent in all the issues that emerged in the counselling process and because certain issues needed professional attention, peer counsellors also carried out referrals to various offices of the school. This was done to help students link up with other sources of help or support for example, for medical attention to assist in drug dependence or find sponsors to avoid absenteeism and truancy. Offices where referrals were done are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Where Peer counsellors referred unresolved cases as reported by peer counsellors (n=100)

Reporting authority	Peer counsellors	
	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
HOD&C	74	74
Prefects	11	11
Teacher on Duty (To D)	10	10
Any other	5	5
Total	100	100

Table 2 indicates that 74% of peer counsellors reported unresolved issues to the head of department, 10% reported to teacher on duty, 11% reported to prefects while 5% reported to other authorities. The high number of peer counsellors who indicated that they reported unresolved cases to head of department implied that they trusted the head of department more with their secrets and perhaps they also expected them to follow up the cases with further counselling. Cases that were reported to teachers on duty, prefects and other school authorities were aimed at resolution by punishment, monitoring or parental follow-up.

It was noted in the study that occasionally it was important to draw attention and involve parents of the affected students. Cases of drug use, absenteeism and truancy needed support of the parents to ensure that the students were adequately guided and monitored both in school and at home. Such partial disclosure when sought with the consent of the students was seen to yield positive results. However, such partial disclosure when conducted without the knowledge of the students bred mistrust and suspicion between peer counsellors and students.

Peer Counsellors organized or linked up with other Groups within the School Develop Peer Support Programmes

The study revealed that peer counsellors were involved in activities other than counselling which helped to improve student relations in schools. Responses from peer counsellors indicated that the major activities were music, drama and health club talks as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Peer support activities as reported by peer counsellors (n=100)

Activity	Frequency (1)	Percentage (%)
Music	11	11
Drama	11	11
Health Club programmes	78	78
Total	100	100

Findings shown in Table 3 show that health activities dominated the peer counselling programmes as indicated by 78% of peer respondents. On the other hand music and drama activities were also organized as indicated by 11% of peer respondents in each

case. The reasons given by head teachers why health issues appeared to dominate peer counselling activities were varied. However, 90% of the head teachers interviewed observed that schools had many students who were affected or infected by HIV/AIDS hence the need to give them close attention. They also noted that it was done to educate the rest of the students who were in adolescent age about their sexuality and the need to abstain from pre-marital sex which if not handled well by students would lead to absenteeism and truancy and school drop out for girls.

Participation in support activities was also important in helping students to belong and identify with each other; an important aspect of adolescent's process of self identity and identity formation. Support activities also helped students to channel their energy towards what is acceptable hence avoid destructive behaviour as was noted by one interviewee that;

these students are quite active in this stage of growth with a lot of energy if that energy is not channelled in the right way, they become idle and destructive. The activities in school help us to do just that (Head teacher, Bar-Union Secondary school).

Peer Counsellors Recruited and Inducted New Members

Findings from the study showed that different schools used various methods of selecting peer counsellors. In some schools, peer counsellors were used to select peer counsellors, especially the senior ones as they approached the time of terminating their studies. In cases where other members of the school community were used, then it was left to the other members of the club to induct the new members of the club. In this process, the older members of the club gave new members the expectations of the club members, the activities and areas of concern that needed attention if students were to be helped. This improved the capacity of the new members of the club to handle such issues hence improve discipline.

Peer Counsellors Organized and Drew Plans for their Activities

When asked to state how they organized their activities, the responses were as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. How peer counsellors organized their activities as reported by peer counsellors (n =100)

Methods of organizing activities	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Through peer counsellors' meeting	52	52
Briefings from HOD G & C	15	15
Time table drawn by the school	24	24
Individual counsellor's initiative	5	5
Others;	4	4
Request from teacher on duty & class teachers' initiative		
TOTAL	100	100

Table 4 shows that peer counsellors mainly organized their activities through meetings as indicated by 52% of peer counsellor respondents. Other ways were through briefings from heads of department as indicated by 15% of peer counsellors, timetable drawn by the school accounted for 24% of peer counsellors. The other ways of organizing peer activities were initiated by the peers themselves; the teachers could also make requests for peers to engage in certain activities. However, it could not be ignored that over 39 per cent of peer counsellors in the schools still relied on the school or teachers to draw up a plan of activities for them. While such involvement of the teachers in peer counsellors' activities showed unity of purpose, it had its own disadvantage. It could deter peer counsellors to act on time and work on interventions together with their clients as they still waited for the teachers to prompt them. It was noted that in such cases the staff in the guidance and counselling department needed to give direction to peer counsellors to enable them to fully understand how they were to carry out their specific roles and hence act on their own effectively.

The study was also interested in establishing how often the peer counsellors met; the responses were as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency of peer counsellors' meetings as reported by peer counsellors (n =100)

Frequency of meetings	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Twice a week	15	15
Once a week	64	64
After every two weeks	11	11
Once a month	6	5
Any other	4	4
TOTAL	100	100

As indicated in table 7 , 64% of peer counsellors met once a week, 15% met twice a week, 11 % met once in two weeks, 6% met once a month while 4% met at other times. The responses indicated that most peer counsellors met every week. It was noted that the weekly or fortnightly meetings of peer counsellors fell on the regular routine of schools club days' meetings. The frequency of meetings was good for reviewing progress of activities carried out. The meetings served as a forum for peer counsellors to share and learn from one another how to face challenges, set strategies and then chart the way forward for their programmes. It is from such meetings that frequent or common indiscipline challenges could be identified and reports made for appropriate measures to be taken. In this way, peer counsellors could also review their performance, and strengths regarding issues that needed attention from them. The peer counsellors were also able.

Improve each other's capacity and skills to perform better and handle students' issues more competently. With improved capacity to perform, peer counsellors helped students cope well in their situations thus improved discipline.

DISCUSSIONS

Following the responses from the respondents, it is clear that peer counsellors had frequent interaction with the students. This explains the pivotal role they played in the lives of students at school. This would then translate into positive influence on the improved character of students and reduced cases of indiscipline. The degree of involvement which head teachers indicated in the peer counsellors is also a reflection of the teachers' faith in the role played by peer counsellors.

The responses showed that more than half of peer counsellors organized their activities independently and effectively run their activities in schools. In most of the schools, peer counsellors drew their own programme of activities on weekly or fortnight basis. This was a positive sign as it showed that peer counsellors were in charge of their activities even without the prompting of teachers. It showed a level of commitment which the peer counsellors had in carrying out their duty. It also indicated that peer counsellors had a clear plan of action with well spelt activity plans. During the study, it emerged that peer counsellors carried various activities among students both in counselling and other support activities like drama, health talks and music concerts.

They also inducted the new members of the club. They linked the activities with those of the heads of department to whom they reported most of unresolved issues with their student clients. Therefore, it is apparent that the initial gap between the teachers and students who needed counselling had been effectively filled by the peer counsellors' referrals to the guidance and counselling department through the head of the department.

It certain instances students felt that they had short counselling sessions and required that they be given longer sessions especially in group counselling. This could be understood from the point of view that the counsellors' activities must be made to fit within the school routine and had to be allocated time within that framework, hence allocated a shorter time. However, it is important that the school administration understands the complexities of the counselling process in order for the peer counsellors to be supported to attain the expected goals through the counselling process. It was also noted that certain issues that peer counsellors handled with the student clients during counselling were sensitive and needed to be brought to the attention of the school administration. It became apparent that in such cases the peer counsellors had an uphill task in performing their duty and confidentiality of their clients had to be breached. This became difficult for them to handle since the concerned students felt that their trust was betrayed. The peer support activities such as drama and health activities were quite instrumental in tackling issues related to sexuality and drug abuse which were otherwise hard for peer counsellors to handle directly with the students as compared to other issues like truancy and absenteeism.

Despite all the gaps noted by the students during the study, they still appreciated the vital role played by the peer counsellors and agreed that they continue serving them. Among teachers and school administration in general, peer activities remained useful in tackling issues related to absenteeism, truancy and drug abuse. Constant training remains a challenge for peer activities in schools as the school system is dynamic. Some peer counsellors changed schools or completed their course and went away.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Peer counsellor activities include; inducting and training new members, carrying out counselling sessions, linking students with the guidance and counselling department, and sometimes participate in suggesting names in the process of selecting members. These activities made it easier for the peer counsellors to reach more students who were needed their help to handle their problems and avoid student indiscipline.

Peer counsellors also engaged students in peer support activities related to health, drama and music to reach their clients. The support activities involved students in acceptable practices in school, improved their understanding and dangers of undesirable behaviour. Such activities also helped them to expand their energies on fulfilling activities hence enhance discipline.

The Ministry of Education should organize workshops to help teachers understand their role on as guides to peer counselors and also on importance of referring students to peer counselors to improve student discipline in their schools.

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BIO-DATA

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