

Group Polarization in Decision Making: A Study of Selected Secondary School Disciplinary Panels in Rongo District of Kenya

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Abstract

Behaviour problems have been on the rise in Kenyan schools for some time now. Various maladaptive behaviours found among school children include bullying, vandalism, stealing, alcohol and drug abuse, truancy, not completing homework assignments and other forms of problem behaviours. These problem behaviours impact negatively on the teaching and learning enterprises of schools as well as on the safety and security of the school environment. As consequence, schools have to develop student behaviour management practices aimed at addressing student problem behaviours. Corporal punishment was a major means by which schools dealt with students' problem behaviours. However, because of the human rights abuses associated with corporal punishment, the Kenyan Ministry of Education had to abolish corporal punishment in 2001 and instructed schools to evolve more effective student behaviour management practices with strong emphasis on positive student behaviour development. Schools' student behaviour management practices including policies on student behaviour expectations, school rules and regulations as well as counselling services are all to be coordinated by each School Disciplinary Panel. A School Disciplinary Panel is to be composed of small group of teachers as a way of emphasizing the latter's roles in student behaviour development and not just student academic or educational development. The central concern of this study was to investigate the Kenyan schools' behaviour management practices as being implemented by School Disciplinary Panels especially in the latter's responses to students' problem behaviours. The study investigated processes of decision making by Kenyan secondary school disciplinary panels for the management of student behaviours and the contribution of this to student behaviour development. Mixed methods research design was adopted for the study. The adoption of both quantitative and qualitative approaches was to ensure the collection of comprehensive information for better understanding of the behaviour management practices of Kenyan schools. The population for the study comprised all Kenyan schools with behaviour management practices and School Disciplinary Panels. Rongo District, one of the largest education districts in Kenya was chosen for the study. Ten of the schools in this district were actually involved in the study. The selection of the schools took into consideration the three different types of schools in Kenya (Girls' Only, Boys' Only and Co-educational schools) as well as other variables of particular interest to the study. Seventy-eight (78) disciplinary panel members from the ten selected schools were the participants of the study. Data collection was by use of questionnaire method (the Modified Choice Dilemma Questionnaire, MCDQ) and interview protocol. The findings of the study revealed the existence of the phenomenon of group polarization in decision making processes of disciplinary hearings conducted by the School Disciplinary Panels. Study findings also revealed that the nature of information shared during disciplinary hearings, group members' motivation for approval of others and their concern for their status in the group as well as the personality characteristics of the members of the disciplinary panels (including gender, age, teaching experiences and school affiliation) were the major influences responsible for the existence of group polarization in the disciplinary processes of the Kenyan secondary school disciplinary panels. Since group polarization is about consensus decisions with characteristics of being collective decisions as well as greater support and acceptance for the decisions the conclusion of the study is that good quality decisions of Kenyan secondary school disciplinary panels have great potentials for effective management of student behaviours and for positive behavioural development of students as an important objective of education and or the schools.

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