

Re-Examining Student Leadership: The Role of School Culture in Shaping Student Council Effectiveness in Public Boys' Secondary Schools in Siaya County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Student councils' effectiveness remains a persistent governance concern in secondary schools globally, with notable variation across institutions. This study examined the influence of school culture on the effectiveness of student councils in public boys' secondary schools in Siaya County, Kenya. Anchored in Ludwig von Bertalanffy's Social Systems Theory, the study targeted 16 deputy principals, the Siaya County Director of Education, 320 student council leaders, and 9,684 ordinary students. A sample comprising 14 deputy principals, 178 student council leaders, 370 ordinary students, and the County Director of Education was drawn using purposive, proportionate, stratified, and simple random sampling techniques. Employing a mixed methods approach within a convergent parallel design, the study collected data through questionnaires and interview schedules. Piloting was conducted in two schools. Instrument validity was established through expert judgment, while reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha produced an average coefficient of 0.75. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 22.0 through descriptive and inferential statistics, with results presented in tables. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed and presented narratively with verbatim excerpts. Findings revealed that school culture significantly influenced student council effectiveness, particularly through relationships between student council members and teachers, student involvement in decision making, adherence to school rules and routines, and understanding of the school's mission, vision, and core values. The study concluded that although school culture influences student council effectiveness, the influence is weak. It recommends strengthening of relations with SC members and teachers, student involvement in decision making, respect for school rules and routine and knowledge of the school mission vision and core values as measures of enhancing the effectiveness of student councils in schools.

Keywords: Student Council; School Culture; Student Council Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

School culture is widely acknowledged as a central determinant of a school's internal functioning and effectiveness. Scholars generally agree that culture encompasses the shared beliefs, norms, values, traditions, and behavioral patterns that guide how members of a school community think, feel, and act (Owens, 2011; Schein, 2011; Darling & De-Paoli, 2020). This culture forms the structural foundation that shapes school climate and subsequently influences the functioning of all organizational units, including student councils (Day et al., 2020).

A positive school culture enhances members' sense of identity, reinforces organizational values, strengthens commitment, and guides behavior (Schein, 2014). Conversely, inhospitable cultures undermine student achievement and overall school effectiveness (Hoffman, 2012). A wholesome culture also provides clarity on institutional direction and shared beliefs (Abdullah, 2019). Evidence from Chicago Elementary Schools highlighted the role of cultural elements—particularly relational trust and the quality of staff–student interactions—in shaping school effectiveness (Lee & Louis, 2019).

Schein's (2014) model identifies three cultural levels: artifacts (symbols, routines, ceremonies), values (beliefs guiding behavior), and basic assumptions (deep-seated norms shaping actions). These interact to create an

environment that supports or hinders school improvement. Effective schools often exhibit safe, orderly environments, shared norms, strong values, and a collective orientation toward common goals (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Darling & De-Paoli, 2020; Ndaiti, 2007).

Leadership literature emphasizes that strong, positive cultures cultivate collaboration, communication, commitment, and productivity (Darling & De-Paoli, 2020). In secondary schools, culture is reflected not only in formal structures such as codes of conduct, timetables, and mission statements, but also in informal practices, traditions, and expectations that guide daily routines (Day et al., 2020; Weissberg et al., 2002; Njoroge, 2008). Rituals and traditions—ranging from ceremonies to group-oriented activities—strengthen community bonds and reinforce shared values (Hoffman, 2012; Darling & De-Paoli, 2020). However, negative behaviors such as bullying, drug abuse, and violence may also become embedded in school culture when left unchecked (Jepkemboi et al., 2019).

Norms play a critical role in shaping behavior, fostering discipline, and promoting school effectiveness (Day et al., 2020; Ndaiti, 2007). Relational trust, built gradually through consistent interactions, remains essential for sustaining a healthy culture (Lee & Louis, 2019). At the same time, disagreements among teachers regarding core responsibilities can impede collaboration and improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Student leadership is similarly shaped by cultural dynamics. Collaborative cultures that involve students in decision-making enhance ownership, belonging, and the effectiveness of student councils (Njogu, 2012). Administrators play a pivotal role in cultivating such cultures and aligning leadership practices with organizational values (Lindahl, 2011). Since organizational culture influences all dimensions of schooling (Sahin, 2011), understanding its relationship with student leadership is essential for improving school governance and student development.

Against this backdrop, the present study examined how specific aspects of school culture (interactions, routines, traditions, ceremonies, and underlying values) shape the effectiveness of student councils in public boys' boarding secondary schools in Siaya County.

Research Hypothesis

H₀₁: School culture has no statistically significant influence on student councils' effectiveness.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach using the convergent parallel design. As Creswell (2014) explains, this design involves collecting quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously and then merging them to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. It was selected because one type of data alone would not adequately address the study objectives, and integrating both forms of data enhances clarity and depth (Creswell, 2012). The design was therefore suitable for examining how institutional determinants influence student council effectiveness.

Quantitative data were collected from ordinary students and student council leaders using questionnaires based on a 5-point Likert scale to assess capacity development in the schools. Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 14 Deputy Principals who oversee student council affairs and the County Director of Education. The interviews provided detailed insights into student leaders' capacity development and suggestions for improving student council effectiveness in public boys' boarding secondary schools in Siaya County.

The two datasets were integrated during interpretation to identify areas where findings converged or differed. The qualitative data helped explain and support the quantitative results, offering a clearer understanding of how institutional determinants affected student councils (Creswell, 2014). This design also enabled validation of information from multiple sources, including the reviewed literature (Creswell, 2012). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically and presented narratively with verbatim quotations.

DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine the influence of school culture on student councils' effectiveness among public boys' boarding secondary schools in Siaya County, Kenya. The concept of school culture has been explained differently by different people in different places at different times. Much of the literature on school culture has presented school culture as that which encompasses all the attitudes, expected behaviors and values that impact how the school operates.

In this study, school culture was conceptualized as encompassing aspects such as participation of students in decision making, nature of relationships between teachers and students, relationship between ordinary students and SC members, adherence to school rules and all the other routine practices, general discipline of students in the school, and knowledge about the school's vision, mission and core values

Ordinary students and SC members were requested to respond to items related to aspects of culture in their school on a 5 point Likert scale as follows: 1-Strongly Disagree (SD); 2-Disagree (D); 3-Neutral (N); 4-Agree (A) and 5-Strongly Agree (SA). The means of the responses to different categories of questionnaire items on school culture were interpreted based on the 5 point Likert scale range for each of the statements. A summary of the responses of the ordinary students on different items regarding school culture are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Students' Responses on School Culture (n=525)

Statement	SD		D		N		A		SA		Mean per item	Std. Dev. per item
	n	%	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
There is a good relationship between students and teachers in the school	61	11.6	175	33.3	11	2.1	207	39.4	71	13.5	3.10	1.31
There are good relations between the SC leaders and the ordinary students	198	37.7	160	30.5	3	0.6	112	21.3	52	9.9	2.35	1.42
Students adhere to the clearly spelt out rules and regulations that guide student behavior	105	20.0	198	37.7	20	3.8	140	26.7	62	11.8	2.73	1.36
Students always follow the outlined school routine	136	25.9	176	33.5	14	2.7	151	28.8	48	9.1	2.62	1.37
Students in the school are disciplined	168	32.0	220	41.9	17	3.2	93	17.7	27	5.1	2.22	1.22
I know our vision, mission and core values	125	23.8	234	44.6	14	2.7	120	22.9	32	6.1	2.43	1.24
Students in the school feel welcomed, valued and have a high sense of belonging to the school	183	34.9	179	34.1	14	2.7	119	22.7	30	5.7	2.30	1.31

Our school has forums where students meet to discuss issues affecting them	60	11.4	176	33.5	5	1.0	191	36.4	93	17.7	3.15	1.36
Students participate in making decisions	188	35.8	196	37.3	2	0.4	109	20.8	30	5.7	2.23	1.29
Our school is a drug free zone	173	33.0	203	38.7	2	0.4	123	23.4	24	4.6	2.28	1.27
Mean percentage per rating		26.6		36.5		2.0		26.0		8.9		
Overall mean and Standard deviation											2.54	0.41

From the results in Table 4.20, majority of the students (36.5% and 26.6%) disagreed with the statements on aspects of school culture in relation to the working of the SCs in their schools, 2.0% were neutral, and 34.9% (26.0% and 8.9%) agreed with the statements. The overall mean was 2.54 implying that the students had a low agreement with the statements on aspects of school culture. The responses had an overall standard deviation of 0.41 indicating a relatively low variation from the mean. This indicates that the respondents had relatively consistent responses about the aspects of school culture in relation to the effectiveness of the SCs in their schools.

The qualitative findings of the interviews with deputy principals and the CDE are in tandem with the descriptive findings on school culture. The deputy principals of the sampled schools and the CDE were also asked to give their opinions regarding different aspects of school culture. Just like the student respondents, interviews with the deputy principals and the CDE revealed existence of a good relationship between students and teachers such as the one in the following excerpts:

I: How would you describe the relationship between the teachers and students in the school?

R₁: Not really bad - schools have to perform, hence sometimes students feel they are pushed so much by teachers but it's good generally; it's cordial with some isolated cases of teachers who are harsh to students and unpopular because of being strict and hard on them but not really extreme (Deputy Principal, Siaya County).

R₂: Nowadays, teachers are very positive about students; they support the learners compared even to the real parents; the teachers are surrogate parents to the learners and they have accepted it as a their responsibility; some of the parents are hostile to their own children, they are too busy at work and would only send money to their children at school; the teachers follow up the students up to college level and would even support in terms of paying fees for the needy ones (CDE, Siaya County)

It is therefore evident from these sentiments that despite the relationship between teachers and students being cordial, there are instances where teachers act harshly towards students to the extent that this interferes with the supposed good relationship between the two groups; no wonder a significant number, 236 (45%) of students reported that the relationship between teachers and students was not good. This therefore made the students hate their school because they felt not valued by the school and as indicated earlier, this was one of the reasons why the students did not hesitate to burn and destroy school property. This may have been worsened by the fact that students were not involved in the decision-making process as earlier noted from the responses given by the deputy principals and the CDE.

These findings are congruent with findings by Shier (2016) that when student councils are not involved in school governance it is more likely that students will engage themselves in indiscipline activities but where they are involved, they engage actively in school ownership, promote problem-solving skills and eventually improve school discipline. Furthermore, Matthews and Dollinger (2023) also argue that institutions where students were not part of the decision-making process had students resort to violence as a way of venting their frustrations.

On the issue of the relationship between the students and the SC members, the deputy principals agreed that indeed there was a lot of hatred towards the SC members by the students; the same viewpoint observed from the descriptive findings from the student respondents as seen in the following excerpt:

I: How would you describe the relationship between the ordinary students and the SC members in your school?

R₁: Not good; the students are against the members of the SC.... they are seen as spies of the teachers and the administration especially the ones that are directly appointed by the teachers; ours is a blended system.... we have had a situation where one of the leaders was locked up in the toilets at night until morning because the students dislike him. Another one had at one time been roughed up by students when there was a blackout in the school because he was too strict and punished the students most of the time.... I would generally say they don't like SC leaders except for the ones who are popular among the students (Deputy Principal, Siaya County).

Abwere (2009) also underscores the importance of the relationship and communication between the student body and the student council as a way of enhancing students' experience. The hatred towards the SC members is indicative of the difficulty with which the SC members have to discharge their roles.

The researcher also observed that majority of the deputy principals accepted that the students were aware of the school rules and regulations and the school routine which they were required to adhere to all the time. According to the deputy principals, the vision, mission and core values were strategically located mostly at the entrance to the school administration block for students to see and internalize. These findings concur with the findings of Tjivikua (2006) who argues that the vision and mission of the school are among the things one is able to see once he/she enters a school and they indicate the direction and stand of the school regarding several aspects; lack of knowledge about the two by the students is an indicator that they did not fully understand the culture of their school.

A shared vision as Raolina et al. (2021) state reflects a unity of purpose in the school. Furthermore, the teachers kept on emphasizing the core values especially but as indicated by the students, very few were aware of this information about their school. Additionally, there were still instances where students behaved contrary to the rules and regulations and did not follow the established routine. One of the deputy principals said:

They are aware.... they are given acceptance letters which they read and sign...they have copies of rules and regulations which they are given during admission but do not adhere to all of them.... they are also pinned in the classes and sometimes they are reminded about them (rules)...one that is violated mostly is read and contraventions re-emphasized. Copies of the school routine outlining daily activities from morning to evening are also availed to the students and pinned in each of the classes. The teacher on duty for every week would still remind the students of what is expected of them on each day at a specific time (Deputy Principal, Siaya County).

Despite the existence of school rules and regulations and their enforcement by the teachers and the SC members, students were reportedly not always acting in accordance with the school rules and regulations thus there still existed cases of indiscipline among students in schools; the students were not disciplined. The student councils were introduced as one of the ways to eliminate or rather reduce these cases of violence and drug abuse in schools; with the reality that schools including those in Siaya County still experience is a pointer to the weaknesses in the SCs operating in these schools. Indiscipline cases in a school are an indicator of weaker school leadership according to Kagendo (2018); student leaders are part of the school leadership. While responding to the question of whether cases of student indiscipline existed in the school, one of the deputy principals had this to say:

Yes, there is rampant theft among students and drug abuse cases keep on growing by the day students are a target market ...it's a real issue as many students are doing drugs...there is also sneaking out of school ...go for drugs, food. Merchandizing in school is another crime that is cropping up (which has become rampant in schools-students have become hustlers in schools, they carry unauthorized materials -phones, clothes, to sell to their friends in school (School Deputy Principal, Siaya County).

Other cases mentioned by the deputy principals included defiance/stubbornness, violence, fighting among students, sneaking out of school especially those who came from around the school, and noise making. Burning down of schools by the students is also a sign of indiscipline as reported by the County Director of Education. Descriptive findings from the student respondents also indicated existence of cases of violence, bullying, and drug abuse in the school, occurrences that point to existence of indiscipline cases among students in schools and some inadequacy on the part of the student leaders and the administration.

Eight (57.1%) of the deputy principals and the CDE in separate interviews agreed that there were student forums in schools organized by the student leaders or sometimes by the principals to listen to the issues affecting the students. However, in the remaining schools 6 (42.9%), such forums did not exist. The CDE in response said:

.....they (student leaders) normally have sessions during the school barazas where they preach reconciliation and peace to their fellow students...this is also a time for them to listen to the demands of the students; most of which are not realistic and therefore cannot be accepted by the school administration. However, this may not be the case in all the schools (CDE, Siaya County).

The researcher concludes that the views expressed by the deputy principals and the CDE are in tandem with the descriptive findings from the ordinary students and student leaders indicating efforts by the school administration towards creating a strong positive culture in the schools especially with the emphasis on strong positive relations between teachers and students and giving students opportunities to discuss issues affecting them through the student forums (student barazas). These findings concur with the findings by Lee and Louis (2019) that a strong culture can only be built in a school where students and staff understand the need of working together and always strive towards achieving relational trust in their daily interactions. Similarly, Ndaiti (2007) opines that the school management should always ensure that there is a strong culture in the school to facilitate achievement of its goals and objectives. The next stage of data analysis involves testing of the null hypothesis stated.

Research Hypothesis

H₀₁: School culture has no statistically significant influence on the effectiveness of student councils among public boys' boarding secondary schools in Siaya County, Kenya.

Multiple regression analysis was used to test the null hypothesis stated. Aspects of school culture which was the predictor variable were uploaded in the model at the same time to determine the coefficient of relationship (R) and coefficient of determination (R-Square). As indicated earlier, effectiveness of SCs was deduced from the composite score (see Table 2). A model summary was generated to determine the fitness of the model in explaining the relationship between school culture and SCs' effectiveness as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Model Summary for School Culture and Effectiveness of Student Councils

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.366 ^a	.134	.	132.52134
a. Predictors: (Constant), School Culture				

The regression model used for the analysis was $Y = b_0 + b_2X_2 + e$. As shown in the model summary, the value of R was 0.366 and R square 0.134. The value of R therefore led to the conclusion that there was a weak positive relationship between school culture and effectiveness of SCs as per Creswell (2014), whereas the R square value showed that 13.4% of the variance in effectiveness of SCs could be explained by school culture within the model. This also implies that 87.6% of variance in effectiveness of student councils could be explained by other factors.

Furthermore, and as a way of determining the significance of the correlation between school culture and SC effectiveness, an analysis of the coefficients was carried out and results summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients for School Culture and Effectiveness of SCs

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.546	.121		12.732	.000
	School Culture	.443	.049	.366	8.986	.000

Dependent Variable: Effectiveness

It is indicated from the results that at zero consideration of aspects of school culture, the effectiveness of the SCs would be at 1.546 units. Similarly, with an improvement in aspects of school culture by one unit there will be an improvement in SCs' effectiveness by 0.443 units. Therefore, these coefficients generated the model as $Y = 1.546 + 0.443X_2$, where,

Y =Effectiveness of SCs

X_2 =School culture

Based on the second objective of this study, the second null hypothesis (H_{01}) sought to establish whether school culture had a statistically significant influence on effectiveness of student councils in public boys boarding secondary schools in Siaya County stated as:

H_{01} : School culture has no statistically significant influence on student councils' effectiveness among public boys' boarding secondary schools in Siaya County, Kenya.

From the test, the p-value was 0.000 ($p=0.000<0.05$), revealing a high level of significance in the relationship between school culture and effectiveness of SCs. This led to the rejection of the null hypothesis and hence the conclusion that school culture had a statistically significant influence on effectiveness of student councils in secondary schools. Studies conducted by Day et al. (2020) and Njogu (2012) also recognized correlation between school culture and performance of student leaders.

These findings also concur with the findings of Darling and De-Paoli (2020) who opine that the culture of an organization is a major determinant of the organization's performance and therefore a strong and positive culture promotes productivity and collaboration among stakeholders in the school. As such, in a school with a positive and strong culture, student leaders will get the support of the other key stakeholders leading to effective performance of their roles. These findings also agree with the descriptive findings from the students and the key informants interviewed i.e. the deputy principals and the CDE.

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that although school culture had a statistically significant influence on the effectiveness of student councils, the strength of this relationship was weak, with the model explaining only 13.4% of the variance. This weak association can be understood by examining the internal inconsistencies reported within the school environments. Students' perceptions of school culture were divided almost evenly between agreement and disagreement, reflecting a fragmented cultural experience across schools. Such inconsistency reduces the coherence of school culture as a predictor, making it less likely to produce a strong statistical relationship with student leadership effectiveness.

The qualitative findings further illustrate this fragmentation. While many deputy principals and the County Director of Education described generally cordial relationships between teachers and students, they

simultaneously acknowledged pockets of harshness and tension. These contradictory relational experiences weaken the ability of school culture to uniformly support student leadership. In some contexts, aspects of the culture may enhance the functioning of student councils, while in others, negative experiences undermine it.

Another key factor is the strained relationship between students and student council members. Despite efforts by school administrations to build positive cultures, the strong resentment toward council members (often viewed as extensions of the administration) undermines the mediating role that school culture might otherwise play. Even in schools with apparent cultural strengths, this mistrust limits the effectiveness of student councils, thereby weakening the measured relationship.

Additionally, although school rules, routines, and values were widely disseminated and displayed, adherence was inconsistent. Students often ignored or contravened these expectations, highlighting a gap between the official culture and the lived culture within schools. This disconnect further constrains how much school culture can shape student leadership, as cultural norms lose practical influence when they are not consistently enacted.

Persistent indiscipline challenges also overshadow any cultural strengths that might support student leadership. Widespread issues such as drug abuse, theft, violence, and general defiance indicate that student leaders operate in environments where fundamental behavioral issues persist. Such conditions limit the extent to which culture (however positive in principle) can translate into improved council effectiveness.

Overall, the regression findings suggest that while school culture does matter, most of the variation in student council effectiveness (approximately 87.6%) stems from other factors not captured in this model. Elements such as leadership training, administrative support, peer dynamics, availability of resources, or school contextual characteristics likely exert much stronger influence. Therefore, the weak statistical relationship is consistent with the complex and uneven cultural realities observed in the schools studied.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing findings enabled the researcher to draw conclusions relevant to the study objective and hypothesis. Although school culture was found to have a statistically significant influence on the effectiveness of student councils in public boys' boarding secondary schools in Siaya County, the weak strength of this relationship reflected deeper systemic issues within the school environment.

The evidence showed that school culture remained fragile, marked by inconsistent adherence to rules, limited student involvement in decision-making, and persistent indiscipline; all of which constrained the ability of student leaders to perform their duties effectively. The study therefore concluded that the culture of the school significantly influenced effectiveness of SCs in public boys boarding secondary schools in Siaya County.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings suggest that strengthening school culture is not only a school-level responsibility but also a broader policy and governance concern within Kenya's education sector.

The conclusions point to the need for clearer Ministry of Education guidelines on student participation, stronger enforcement of the Basic Education Regulations on discipline and student leadership, and more deliberate capacity-building for teachers and school leaders on participatory governance. In the same breath, schools should implement structured culture-building programmes that promote uniform application of values, expectations, and teacher-student interactions. Strengthening coherence in school culture will provide a more supportive and predictable environment for effective student leadership.

In addition, adopting participatory leadership practices such as transparent consultations, student-led forums, and open communication channels can help reduce mistrust between students and student council members. These approaches would reposition council members as legitimate representatives of their peers rather than extensions of the administration.

To address persistent indiscipline, schools should also involve student councils in structured behaviour-management initiatives such as peer mentorship, restorative dialogue, and anti-indiscipline campaigns. This level of involvement will not only strengthen discipline but also enhance the effectiveness and credibility of student leaders.

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