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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF DISCIPLINE AND AUTHORITY. A CASE OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN  
TAITA-TAVETA COUNTY, KENYA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Educators all over the world are concerned about the decline in discipline by students as it is critical to the attainment of positive school outcomes. It is in view of this concern that a study to investigate the impact of discipline and authority on student's perception in Taita Taveta County was envisioned. A descriptive survey design was adopted in the study. The study samples were drawn from randomly selected secondary schools. The sample size comprised of 200 Form Three students, 40 teachers, 5 deputy head teachers. Questionnaires and interview schedules were developed, pilot tested for validity and questionnaires distributed to teachers and students for data collection. The deputy head teachers were interviewed to elicit information on their use of discipline and authority. The value of correlation  $r$  was found to be  $-0.948$ , which was less than the critical value of  $0.6319$ ; an indication that the students in Taita-Taveta County had a negative attitude towards discipline and authority. It was concluded that the perception of students towards discipline and authority was a function of the various ways in which discipline and authority was dispensed plus lack of proper guidance and rationale. It was recommended that teachers' should be fair while disciplining, avoid name calling or labeling, show unconditional acceptance after punishment, be good models and evaluate students from both home and school backgrounds.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Kenya's education has had phenomenal growth at all levels since 1963. At the secondary level for instance, enrolment rose from 30,000 in 1963 to 632,000 in 1995 representing a 2000% increase in about three decades (Republic of Kenya, 1997). By 2006, total enrolment in this sub sector had increased to 1,003,080 (Republic of Kenya, 2007). Expansion of secondary education is premised on the belief that it is at this point where learners are prepared to make a positive contribution to the development of the society (Republic of Kenya, 1976). This has the implication that secondary school curriculum should be effectively implemented so that learners may reach their full potential. However, it is instructive to note that a school's learning outcomes is dependent on the quality of students' discipline (Reynolds, 1976). This is because; discipline provides a sense of direction among learners besides increasing teachers' job satisfaction, which is a critical correlate of commitment to school goals (Imber and Neidt, 1990). Discipline has always been integral in educating pupils to become responsible, resilient and resourceful individuals. But discipline in schools today remains largely unchanged because of an innate urge among educators to control students

rather than elicit their respect for authority. Schools are pressured to meet key performance indicators. Sometimes in this pursuit, educators lose touch with the essence of their vocation, which is to impart knowledge and values (Koh, 2009). Despite the strictness in regulations and practice at schools, the offences have increased. The common offences are stealing, dishonesty, sex offences, disobedience, truancy, assault and insult, drug offences, wickedness, suicide, strikes, or demonstrations (Otunga and Ochieng, 2006). Indiscipline behavior at home and school concerns many parents and teachers all over the world. Although these problems of discipline have been with us from the beginning of formal instruction, solutions have been elusive. Each school of thought so to speak recommends a single procedure almost regardless of the age of the student or the situation. For example, it is common to find a particular dictum or discipline law promoted as the answer. There is a view that strongly suggests that a teacher can never permit any departure from a policy of strict obedience. Even the most minor breach of peace is to be met with instant punishment. With authoritarian approach to discipline, there is no room for variation or negotiation regardless of the circumstances. The dictum states "lay down the rules". In other words, permit no deviation, or chaos and anarchy will reign. Such a single-variable solution to interactions as complex as teaching inevitably fails, either

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the teacher gets so caught up with enforcement that there is little time for teaching, or the pupils get so caught up with the game that their energy is spent in constantly testing the limits (Sprinthall *et al.*, 1990). In Kenya, the presidential commission on student's unrest and indiscipline was set up to investigate the cause of unrest and indiscipline in Kenyan schools, between 2000-2001. This report stated that, "cases of indiscipline have increased so much in schools and as a result one teacher has gone to court seeking to have the caning reintroduced in schools" (Republic of Kenya, 2001). Eshiwani quotes the late former Starehe director Griffins for having urged the government to rethink the ban on caning in schools (Eshiwani, 2006). Indiscipline in Kenyan institutions right from primary school through university poses a big challenge to educators in the country. Taking secondary schools alone, according to the report, in the years 2001/2002, 3234 cases of students' unrest were reported, with Nyanza having 680 schools, with 1% of schools going on strike, central having 630 schools with 13.5% of schools going on strike, eastern having 626 schools, with 12.4% of schools going on strike, rift valley having 625 schools, with 8% of schools going on strike, western having 408 schools, with 13.5% of schools going on strike coast having 151 schools, with 2.6% of schools going on strike, Nairobi having 93 schools with 0.02% of schools going on strike and north eastern having 21 schools with 33.3% of schools going on strike (Republic of Kenya, 2001). The gravity of violence ranged from boycott of classes through destruction of school property to loss of life.

Why do some students speak fondly of some teachers and enjoy their subjects? Koh (2009) notes that; one, they know their teachers genuinely care for them, and not just their deadlines. Two, these teachers are excellent communicators, not only of their subject content, but also, more importantly, in how they bring out the best in their students. When teachers keep these goals in sight, time and patience they will get the better of even the most incorrigible student. And any discipline along the way becomes more of a life lesson than a mere deterrent. Mouly (1973) noted that educators are becoming increasingly aware of the crucial role of attitudes in the overall educational enterprise. They recognize for example that attitudes that develop as by-products of the academic program are often of much greater significance than academic content *per se* from the stand point not only of the learner's continued academic progress but also his long-term welfare and that of the society; it is for this reason that the study was quite significant.

It is clear that poor students' behavior impedes learning and students achievement, and sets the stage for an ineffective educational environment and community (Yariv, 2009). While most studies have tried to identify the problem's characteristics and the effectiveness of specific practices and programs, studies have focused less often on the psychological dynamics among teachers and their pupils and the role of discipline on attitudes formation. Rarely have researchers explored how children perceived these relations. It concerned all educators in Taita-Taveta County that discipline did not yield the right results. This study was therefore carried out to fill this gap and help teachers develop better disciplinary techniques that elicit least amount of emotions and attitudes among students.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Sampling

The sample size comprised of 200 Form Three students selected from a population of five government schools in Taita-Taveta county out of 14; taking a third of those schools and one stream each, out of a total population of 607 students specifically around Wundanyi, because of the concentration of day and boarding secondary schools. The Form Three students from five secondary schools were purposively selected through stratified random sampling to ensure that students in day and boarding schools of different sub-groups were represented in the sample (e.g., boy, girl and mixed schools). The rationale behind the selection of form three students was that they were more cognizant of matters related to discipline and authority through experience from forms one; hence the assumption that they had a well developed attitude structure.

### Research Instruments

The use of mixed research approaches appeared to be best suited to investigate the aspects pertinent to this study, as interrelationships involving emotional reaction and cognitive processes cannot be categorized into small and simple definitions (Cohen & Manion, 1994). It was decided to use the form of semi-structured interview (Powney & Watts, 1987), followed by probing questions, which enabled the clarification of the respondents' answers. Interview, as a research tool, may suffer certain validity and reliability shortcomings (Cohen & Manion, 1994), especially when the respondents are students'. However, the sincere responses and the careful and systematic data collection seemed to overcome these obstacles, and provided rich and relevant data that could not have been gained by quantitative tools alone. Both questionnaire and interview schedule are popularly used methods of collecting data in research surveys (Kothari, 2003). The validation of instruments was done through pilot study conducted at Dr. Aggrey high school and Senior Chief Mwangeka Secondary School, involving Form Four students. The results obtained from the analysis of the results showed the true picture of the phenomenon under study. However, the researcher after assessing the instruments modified some items, which were not clear to represent the concept under study. In this way the instruments were validated.

### Procedure and ethical considerations

After obtaining informed consent to carry on the study from the Ministry of Education, science and Technology (MoEST) and the school administration of the various schools, the researcher met with the students, first explaining the nature of the meeting and the protection of anonymity and confidentiality (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Then, as a warm-up stage the researcher talked with the respondents about his former high school (Kituro high) in rift valley as way of establishing rapport, which was followed by the interview itself. The interviews took about 40 minutes and the content was recorded in writing at the time. At a different session the researcher personally distributed questionnaires to form three students in the respective schools. Every questionnaire was accompanied by a covering letter which had adequate brief information about the study and assurance of confidentiality. The questionnaires were collected after approximately one hour.

### **Methods of data analysis**

The data collected was categorized into information that answered the researcher's questions and objectives. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies and percentages) and inferential statistics (product moment correlation coefficient at the .05 level of significance of testing) to obtain the comparison between the attitudes of students who are disciplined and those who are not, thus showing or portraying the relationship between the variables. Data obtained therefore, was used to summarize and report the results using tables, figures and frequencies.

### **RESULTS**

The findings are presented under the following sub-titles; attitude formation, situations that call for obedience, situations that call for disobedience, authority figure, types of punishment and product of discipline, with the aim of identifying the relationship that exists among the various variables.

#### **Attitude formation**

At the start, students were asked, "What would make them dislike a teacher?". The respondents unequivocally mentioned a teacher who cannot solve a discipline case alone, instead delegates discipline to another teacher who does not know the magnitude of the mistake committed by the student and it's equivalent or commensurate discipline (87%). They also mentioned a teacher who is always pointing an accusing finger at one student as an offender and one who is generally unfair, unjust and biased (81%). In the second section, respondents were asked, "What would make them like a teacher?" The respondents liked a disciplinarian who made them understand their mistakes through rationale guidance before being disciplined, gives the students room to explain themselves even if they were cheating and he/she lets them understand that they are cheating (76 %), and one who does not judge a mistake committed today by those committed previously. In the third section, respondents were asked, "What would make them fear/respect a teacher?" The respondents unequivocally mentioned their head-teachers, deputy head teachers and class teachers as being feared rather than respected. This perception forced some students to go into reaction formation-disguise as disciplined to avoid punishment. They therefore, respected those teachers who were not disciplinarians as they feared those in the line of discipline. Fazio (1989) suggested that one of the main functions of attitudes is to facilitate evaluation of objects. If a student's has an attitude towards discipline like in this case, it will enable them to come up with an instant appraisal of someone who is undergoing a disciplinary process without the necessity of all the facts of the case. They justified compliance as a sign of respect for an adult; due to the teachers' good intentions and the future benefit for their personal development. On the negative side, many students justified their obedience as a means of avoiding being punished. Similar findings were reported by Mouly (1973). In the fourth section, respondents were asked whether they were compelled to obey their teachers' instructions. Majority of the respondents said Yes – an indication of unequivocal acceptance of teacher's authority (e.g. Yes, because they are our teachers/adults/parents/guardians and must be respected; if

we don't obey them we will not be well taught). Some respondents mention yes, but in certain cases no – A general sentiment in favour of obedience except specific cases of disagreement. Others said No, but in certain cases yes – A general sentiment against obedience except specific cases of agreement with teachers' orders. Others mentioned No – unequivocal rejection of teacher's authority (e.g. 'No, since they don't listen to me why should I listen to them')

In the fifth section respondents were asked whether there are situations in which students have no choice other than obey their teachers. Some respondents said No –an indication of unequivocal acceptance of teacher's authority (e.g. 'No, we have to obey their directions all the time') others said, *Yes*. An indication of Partial acceptance of teacher's authority. In section six respondents were asked 'Do students have options, other than agree with their teachers' commands?' The responses were grouped by content analysis as follows: ignoring the teacher's directions; protesting and revolting; discussing the matter with the teacher; discussing with parents; discussing with the head teacher; helplessly obeying the teacher. In section seven respondents were asked, "Who should be involved in disciplining offenders in your school?" The respondents unequivocally mentioned the deputy head-teacher, class teacher and the prefects. In section eight the respondents were asked if they agreed with the types of discipline, subjected to offenders in their your school?, majority of the respondents said No – an indication of unequivocal rejection of all forms of punishments used (e.g. caning, slashing, cutting firewood, suspension, manual work among others 'No, because students have rights as human beings'); some mention No, but in certain cases yes-A general sentiment against punishment except specific cases (e.g. 'In general no, but if the student [previously] insulted the teacher then yes'), others said Yes, but in certain cases *no* – A general sentiment in favour of punishment intervention except specific cases (e.g. 'Yes, punishment should be given but not for small cases). And Yes – unequivocal acceptance of punishment (e.g. 'Yes, punishment will make offenders to obey the school rules and regulations').

#### **Situations that call for obedience**

Few respondents (28 percent) acknowledged that obedience was vital but not in all circumstances, while 18 percent held the more radical view that in principle students should not obey their teachers except in certain cases. The decision to comply with the teachers' demands may be influenced by several factors, not only by the type of command and the attributes of the authority figure (Laupa, 1991; Laupa & Tse, 2005), but also by other moral, practical and interpersonal aspects. Finally, complying is not necessarily unpleasant. Some students explained that the teachers' rationale and guidance helped them understand what to do, which made them happy.

#### **Situations that call for disobedience**

In addition to the general attitude about the importance of obedience, about half (55 percent) of the respondents thought that students should obey under all situations, even if they did not agree with the teacher's commands. For them, the staff authority overrode any student's personal needs. Meanwhile,

the remaining respondents (45 percent) identified cases that justified disobedience: For example, when the teachers gave students unclear assignments and did not want to re-explain, while blaming students for not being attentive in class. These students considered more critically their teachers' commands, and it is likely that unruly students came from these ranks.

### *The figure of authority*

Most of the respondents (86 percent), mentioned the head teacher, deputy head teacher and class teachers as the people who should be responsible to discipline offenders compared to a paltry (14 percent) who favoured prefects (or other students). This could be attributed to the fact that, the relationships between an adult and a child tends to be hierarchical, where the adult has power over the child and is considered to be in a position of authority. Assessing young children's perceptions of authority has raised growing interest (Tisak, 1986) due to its significance with regard to understanding their mutual relationships.

### *Types of punishments*

When asked of the forms of punishment they would prefer for offenders in their schools, the respondents overwhelmingly (76 percent) favoured suspensions and manual work compared to the few (4 percent); who preferred caning or other forms of punishments which inflict direct pain on the offender. The rest (20 percent) mentioned that it should be at the discretion of the teacher to use whichever form of punishment they deem best depending on the offence or on the magnitude of the offence.

### *The product of discipline*

The inferential statistic analysis was done to answer some questions and also to test whether there was any significant differences in the various variables tested in the hypotheses. The product moment correlation coefficient was computed to analyze the different hypotheses stated above. For all the analysis, the probability level was set at .05 and the degree of freedom was obtained by the formula  $Df = n - 2$ .

The first analysis looked at the null hypothesis:

- $H_{01}$ : There's no significant relationship between the perception developed by students towards discipline and authority, and the different types of disciplinary measures employed by teachers.

The results indicated that  $r = -0.946$ . The obtained  $r$  value was less than the critical value of 0.3809. This showed that there is a very strong negative correlation between the perceptions of students in various schools in Taita-Taveta County and, discipline and authority. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between the perceptions of secondary school students and discipline. Similar findings were reported by Laupa and Tse (2005).

$H_{02}$ : There is no significant relationship between students' perception towards discipline and authority and how it is executed in various schools in Taita-Taveta County. It was found that the calculated  $r$  value of  $-0.9475$  was less than the critical value of 0.6342. It therefore showed that there was

strong negative correlation between the discipline and student's perception. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and adopt the alternative hypothesis, "there is a significant relationship between students' perception towards discipline and authority and how it is executed in various schools in Taita-Taveta County. This is consistent with Tisak, et al., (2000).

## **DISCUSSION**

This research explores how students perceive discipline and in their schools. This umbrella concept covers several issues – how students develop attitudes, situations that call for obedience and disobedience, the authority figure, types of punishment, the product of discipline and authority and the role of leadership styles on attitudes as discussed below. The overall impression gained was that perception of students is a function of the various disciplinary procedures dispensed judiciously by disciplinarians.

### *Attitude formation*

The respondents unequivocally dislike a teacher who cannot solve a discipline case alone, instead delegates punishment to another teacher who does not know the strength or magnitude of the mistake committed by the student and its equivalent or commensurate level of punishment (87%). They also mentioned a teacher who is always pointing an accusing finger at one student as an offender for he/she would always be building a bad attitude structure towards himself/herself and the school administration, and a teacher who is generally unfair, unjust and biased (at 75 percent of the respondents). The respondents like a disciplinarian who made them understand their mistakes through rationale guidance, gave them room to explain themselves even if they were lying and he/she lets them understand that they were lying, and one who does not judge a mistake committed today by those committed by the same student previously. This is an indication that teacher student interaction anywhere, any time at school has a big role in influencing attitude formation. Similar findings were reported by Brewer (1997) and Raina (2009).

### *Situations that call for obedience*

Students clearly understand that the school is a hierarchical organization where the teachers are the source of authority and students must comply with their rules. They appreciated that a good administrative structures usually ensures that learning goes on smoothly without any interferences. The majority of the respondents (59.4 percent) had a positive attitude towards the school rules and regulations and felt that they are very important. Few of the respondents (28 percent) said that obedience was vital but not in all situations, while 18 percent held the more radical view that in principle students should not obey their teachers except in certain cases and that rules should be used as basic guidelines. They justified obedience on four grounds: avoiding punishment, disguising, going into reaction formation, minimizing disturbance to the lesson or showing respect to the teachers as adults. Similar findings were reported by Laupa, (1991); Laupa and Tse, (2005).

### *Situations that call for disobedience*

About half of the respondents (45 percent) identified cases that justified disobedience: For example, when the teachers gave students unclear assignments and did not want to re-explain,

while blaming students for not being attentive in class. These students considered more critically their teachers' commands, and it is likely that unruly students came from these ranks. It is therefore worth noting that an effective teacher/leader must learn to spot what the group of students need at a specific time and situation and be flexible enough so as to provide diverse types of behaviours that are required under different conditions. Similar findings were reported by Smith (1962).

### ***The figure of authority***

Majority of the respondents (86 percent), mentioned the head teacher, deputy head teacher and class teachers as the people who should be responsible to discipline offenders compared to a paltry (14 percent) who favoured prefects (or other students). Similar findings were reported by MacDonald (1962).

### ***Types of punishments***

When asked of the forms of punishment they would prefer for offenders in their schools, the respondents overwhelmingly (76 percent) favored suspensions and manual work compared to the few (4 percent) that preferred caning or other forms of punishments which inflict direct pain on the offender. The rest (20 percent) mentioned that it should be at the discretion of the teacher to use whichever form of punishment they deem best depending on the offence or on the magnitude of the offence. It is worth noting that corrective discipline is aimed at discouraging further infringement of a rule. Jensen and Kingston, (1986), Kagiri (2005) and Doyle, 1986 reported similar findings.

### ***The product of discipline***

It can be observed from the finding that punishment leads to a buildup of emotions. 56.52% of the respondents mentioned that after punishment they had strong emotional feelings towards the teacher, himself, school or lessons. This is very dangerous for any administrative structure. Therefore teachers and administrators should work extremely hard to change this attitude. 85.1% of the respondents felt angry with the teacher after a punishment, 71.93% felt angry with themselves after a punishment and 88% of the respondents felt ashamed after a punishment. This therefore is an indication of a built up of a negative attitude structure. This trend needs to be changed, to be positive. The correlation  $r = -0.9475$  &  $-0.946$  indicates that students in Taita-Taveta District have a very strong negative attitude towards discipline and authority. This negative attitude towards disciplinarians needs to be changed for the secondary schools to achieve their overall goals and objectives.

### **CONCLUSION**

These findings therefore, indicate that students do have attitudes that mediate all the activities undertaken at school hence influencing student behavior. It can also be concluded also that the perception of students towards discipline and authority is a function of the various disciplinary approaches adopted by the educational managers, especially the head-teacher, deputies, teachers and prefects in relation to discipline plus lack of accompanying rationale, guidance and counseling.

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