Perceived Effectiveness of Choosing Prefects Using Interviews: A Case of a Private High School in Harare, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT	Published Online: January 29, 2025

The study assessed the effectiveness of choosing student leaders based on interviews as a shift from the traditional mode whereby school administrators appoint student leaders in secondary schools. The study is underpinned by the Rational Choice Theory by Adam Smith which posits that individuals make choices based on weighing the costs and benefits. This study adopted a qualitative case study design. The sample comprised purposively sampled aspiring students who applied to be interviewed for the student leadership positions. Ethical protocols were observed before the data was collected. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect the data. Data was transcribed and coded accordingly. Inductive thematic data analysis was used.

Findings indicate that there are pros and cons of using interviews in selecting student leaders. However, the majority of the respondents indicated that despite the setbacks of using interviews in the selection of prefects it is the right direction to go; schools should move with the times and adopt contemporary electoral modes that are used in their societal contexts whereby leaders are selected as opposed to being appointed by the school administration. The study recommends that secondary schools develop user-friendly instruments (such as interviews, voting etc) that are free and fair to select prefects democratically from the students' body.

KEYWORDS: student leader; election; interview; appointment

1. INTRODUCTION

Student Leadership has been evolving with the times. Traditionally, students were appointed by school administration based on specific criteria. Over the past decades, most schools have been gradually shifting from traditional approaches to choosing student leaders to modern approaches so as to remain relevant to their students needs and expectations (Dugan & Komives, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2001). This increasing attention to developing leaders is consistent with current public concerns about leadership in different countries globally. Schools are like the miniature society. Considering the trends in election of national leadership one wonders how long schools can survive maintaining the traditional approaches to election of student leaders by appointments made by the school administration.

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Of course, change is always resisted. Studies by Astin & Astin, (2000), indicate that many students continue to espouse outdated beliefs about leadership. However other studies seem to contradict this. Research has shown that there is a mismatch between societal ways of choosing leaders and methods implemented by most schools in the selection of student leaders. The demands of modern leadership means that student leaders selection modes must not only support students expectations but If the student leadership selection free and fair to avoid any disruption of academic work due to students feeling shortchanged. The majority of strikes in public secondary schools are due to poor leadership by the prefect's body. in skill development, but help them understand the broader need for those skills (Njue, 2015; Otieno, 2001; Tsikati and Magagula, 2019). Given this disconnect, educators feel that the development of effective leadership election program is one of the most important issues facing education (Astin & Astin, 2000; Pearce & Conger, 2003). It is crucial to develop and adopt leadership election instruments that help administrators to lead confidentiality without feelings of dictatorship; while the student body may not feel that the school elected prefects are not imposed on them. In addition, engaging the aspiring

student leaders in an interview ensures their commitment to serve and function as interface between the school and the student body. Further, adopting modern electoral methods aligned to the currently used methods in their contemporary society prepares them for real time leadership as they acquire the skills they will need as leaders in contemporary society (Kurancie & Affum, 2021).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW
The literature reviewed includes studies from the global perspective of student leadership selection.

2.1 Background of Study
Contemporary leadership theories have shifted from the traditional focus on hierarchy, control to modern approaches that emphasizes relationships, networks, trust, ethics, and participation (Kezar, 2006). Similarly, schools need to shift and adopt student leaders election models more appropriate to their contexts (Fincher & Shalka, 2009).

Using an effective model of choosing student leaders ensures that students have a formal communication channel of expressing their grievances. This helps to control student unrest as well as reduce indiscipline among students and maintain (Denton, 2003; Onyango, 2003; Njue, 2015). The way the student leaders are chosen also contributes to helping the student body to have confidence in the student leadership team. A carefully chosen, trusted team of prefects that is properly inducted on its work, if highly motivated to carry out its duty, it would obviously curb student unrest or manage planned student indiscipline (Njue, 2015).

In developed countries, most schools follow well developed criteria to nominate student leaders or prefects. Tsakati & Magagula (2019). According to the traditional approach , the selection of student leaders was a prerogative of the school administrators in consultation with the teachers and staff members of staff. Of course the school head usually has the final decision on students who get appointed (Kikuvi, 2004). The challenge with this approach is the prefects are appointed by the head teacher, they become out-rightly unpopular with the students. The selection procedures for each school vary; some are democratic; where prefects are nominated by fellow pupils; while in some schools the selection of prefects heavily depends on recommendations from older prefects about prospective prefects (Otieno, 2001; Morapedi & Jotia, 2011).). There are high chances of bias and prejudices associated with this approach. The head of the school, in consultation with the staff members has the final decision on students who get appointed (Kikuvi, 2004). Generally if the prefects are appointed by the head teacher, they become out-rightly unpopular with the students. In cases where the prefects are elected by students, they tend to serve the electorate and not the school administration. Hence, whether the prefects are appointed or elected; there must be a sense of

direction and checks and balances to enable them to execute their duties effectively (Kyungu, 1999, Njue, 2015).

Student leadership is considered an essential means of preparing students for the macro society (Kurancie & Affum, 2021; Chifamba, et. al., 2024). Since involving students in school governance prepares them for real societal practices, the way they are elected to office should follow suit. This study seeks to find assess the effectiveness of choosing student leaders using the apply-and-attend an interview method as opposed to the traditional method whereby the student leaders are appointed by the school administration. By opening up for any students to apply gives opportunity to aspiring leaders. However, sometimes it may attract unworthy individuals who want the post for personal power and other benefits. Hence, in addition to applying, the school administrators shortlisted those whom they called to attend the interview. This becomes a second filter before the final selection. This study is of significance to school administrators, teachers, students and policymakers as it provides insight to those involved in developing educational policies, and school administration policies on criteria used for the selection of student leaders. This will also improve student attitudes and discipline in secondary schools.

2.2 Theoretical Framework
This study's underpinned on the Rational choice theory (Adam Smith, 1776) which states that people make rational choices that align to their own self-interest based on how they weigh the cost and benefits of each decision. According to the Rational Choice Theory, before a person makes a decision they tend to compare the cost versus the benefit of making one decision over another, The key elements of all rational choice explanations are individual preferences, beliefs, and constraints. Preferences denote the positive or negative evaluations individuals attach to possible outcomes of their actions (Witek, 2013). Because humans are rational beings, aspiring student leaders make rational decisions on the cost and benefits associated with their roles as prefects. Hence, they freely commit themselves and apply for the position.

2.3 Research Objectives
The objectives of this study were to;
1. Explore the advantages of selection of student leaders using interviews.
2. Establish the disadvantages of selection of student leaders using interviews
3. Suggest strategies to improve selection of choosing student leadership

2.4 Research Questions
1. What do you think are the advantages of selecting prefects (student leaders) from those who have applied and have been interviewed?

2. What are the disadvantages of selecting prefects (student leaders) from those who have applied and have been interviewed?

3. How do you think student the process of choosing student leadership may be improved?

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study was used to collect the data from 16 purposively selected from the 19 aspiring students who applied for the different positions. The 16 participants comprised of 8 boys and 8 girls from Form 3 to Form 6. This ensured equal representation and gender balance. A case study involves describing, analyzing a specific case, and interpreting data in detail (Creswell, 2012). According to Yin (2014) the case study design has five basic components; research question(s), its propositions, its unit(s) of analysis, a determination of how the data are linked to the propositions and criteria to interpret the findings. Face to face in depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions were used to explore participants responses to the issue of using interviews for the selection of student leaders. Data was collected until saturation point. Ethical protocols were observed to ensure that participants had informed consent, participation voluntary and anonymity was observed. Triangulation was done using individualized face to face in depth interviews with thick descriptions and Focus Group discussions comprising 8 participants per group. Member checking was also done to allow participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations.

3.1 Findings From FGDs

The findings of the study are presented as reported verbatim from the participants.

Of the 19 Students who applied 16 of these turned up for interviews. Students who applied to be prefects were divided 2 Focus groups (FGD) each comprising of 8 members

Research Question 1 and 2 were responded to by participants in Focus Group discussions.

Research Question One: *What do you think the advantages of selecting prefects (student leaders) based on their applications and interview performance?*

The participants indicated that there are several advantages associated with selecting student leaders based on interviews. These advantages include that " it gives everyone a fair chance to apply" (FGD 2) and "avoids biases since those who interview us do not know us (FGD4). The other advantages are that this approach "shows that administrators take student leadership seriously (FGD 1) and assumes that " The student who shows interest is genuine (FGD 3).The experience of applying and attending an interview is a confidence booster. It motivates those who applied (FGD 5).

It prepares us to take up greater challenges later in life and It pushes us to try harder (FGD 6). As aspiring student leaders encourage each other while waiting to be interviewed they already learnt to cooperate than to compete as expressed by this participant, "It helps us to work as a team, calming each other down as we await" (FGD15).

Disadvantages of using interviews to select student leaders

While there are several advantages associated with using interviews to select student leaders, on the other hand, there were disadvantages pointed out as reported by the participants. Some of the disadvantages pointed out by participants are that "Some apply without full commitment (FGD 10) and others apply for personal benefits. Some apply for wrong motive/reasons. (FGD 8) Others are dishonest in what they say in their applications (FGD 9). Unfortunately, one of the major disadvantages of depending on choosing from those who apply is that "Some may not feel comfortable to apply for leadership yet they possess the needed leadership skills " (FGD 1 1).

If the use of interviews in selecting student leaders is properly done, it will prove effective, however, "There are chances of bias based on the applicant's writing skills, (FGD 3) or. "If you are not a good writer you are disadvantaged (FGD 1) or One can ask a friend to write application for them (FGD 9). In some can use propaganda in their applications (FGD 12). Because of these and other disadvantages, "Administrators may not trust some of the people who score highly in the interview" (FGD 14).

A major disadvantage of using interviews pointed out by the participants is that "It is time-consuming hence it diverts students attention from their studies (FGD 10). Interestingly, as those who apply awaited to be interviewed, most of them experienced anxiety and nervousness "it's difficult to describe my feelings, I have mixed feelings, I feel anxious, and can't wait for my turn. (FGD, 15) and I feel nervous, I have never attended a formal interview, this is my first one (FGD 7), and I have feelings of fear and uncertainty. apprehensive about an outcome (FGD 5). Others gained confidence in waiting together for their turn to be interviewed, "i am glad we are waiting together, I gain courage from others (FGD 10, FGD 16). Then others expressed hope, " I am hopeful. FGD 6; FGD, 14) I think I will be chosen (FGD 2, FGD5, FGD 13).

3.2 Findings from Individual face-to-face interviews
Research Question Three: How do you think student leadership selection may be improved?

The participants made several contributions on how they think student leadership selection may be improved. Some of them are reported verbatim herewith. Student leadership may be improved in the following ways; By avoiding bias and prejudice when choosing them and showing them trust and support from school Administrators (S1) "by exposing them to real leadership roles eg club leaders. teamwork, conflict

resolution "(S4) as well as creating opportunities for practicing leadership in developing school projects and nurturing them as they develop leadership skills. This point was emphasized by several participants as such skills add value for consideration for key leadership positions. In addition, student leadership selection may be improved as school administrators do not depend on interviews only but also observe practical demonstration of teamwork in different activities such as team building activities, conflict resolution, clubs and modeling expected behavior for other students and rewarding good behavior (FGD 11, FGD 15).

3.3 Discussion
There are advantages and disadvantages in using interviews in the selection of school prefects. Findings indicate that there are pros and cons of using interviews in selecting student leaders. Most of the respondents indicated that engaging students in school governance prepares them for the practical life in the society where they will live. This concurs with other studies on the significance of student leadership (Lau, 2004; Njue, 2015; Otieno, 2001; Chifamba et al, 2024). Hence, the idea of using electoral methods such as interviews in the selection of prefects is the right direction to go. This concurs with observations made in earlier studies in Pakistan, Botswana, Swaziland, and Kenya (Kuranjie & Affum, 2021; Njue, 2015; Otieno, 2001; Tsikati and Magagula, 2019, Morapedi & Jotia, 2011). However, several suggestions were raised by the participants interviewed on how to improve the student leadership selection.

4.0 CONCLUSION
The involvement of students in school governance has been adopted in most educational institutions as a way of preparing them for real-life roles in society. However, some concerns arise questioning the way they have been appointed to these positions. Trends have been shifting from the traditional autocratic methods of appointing student leaders to more democratic methods such as using interviews and student votes. This study sought to find out the effectiveness of using the apply and attend interview method as practiced at the educational institution in the study. Participants indicated that they appreciated the move from the traditional mode of appointing to the apply and attend interview method. However, the disadvantages associated with this method are that not everyone who applies may have the needed leadership traits since some may apply for personal benefits.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Schools should move with the times and adopt contemporary electoral modes that are used in their societal contexts whereby leaders are selected as opposed to being appointed by the school administration. The study recommends that secondary schools develop user-friendly instruments (such as

interviews, voting etc) that are free and fair to select prefects democratically from the students' body.

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