



Application of School Rules and Regulations and Students' Involvement in Arson in Public Boarding Secondary Schools in Migori County, Kenya

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Abstract

School unrest characterized by arson remains one of the most persistent disciplinary challenges facing secondary schools in Kenya despite numerous policy interventions aimed at promoting learner discipline. The recurrence of school fires has resulted in the destruction of educational infrastructure, disruption of learning, psychological trauma, and significant financial losses. This study examined the influence of the application of school rules and regulations on students' involvement in arson in public boarding secondary schools in Migori County, Kenya. Specifically, the study assessed the effects of the enforcement of school rules, application of examination regulations, and students' participation in the formulation of school rules on involvement in arson. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design involving 380 Form Three and Form Four students drawn from 28 public boarding secondary schools that had experienced arson incidents between 2017 and 2020. Twenty-eight principals participated as key informants, while focus group discussions were conducted with selected students. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation, whereas qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that a majority of respondents perceived unfair enforcement of school rules, rigid examination regulations, and limited student participation in rule formulation as major contributors to school unrest. Correlation analysis established a statistically significant positive relationship between the application of school rules and regulations and students' involvement in arson ($r = .447, p < .05$). Qualitative findings further indicated that students perceived disciplinary procedures as inconsistent, punitive, and inadequately communicated, thereby increasing resentment toward school administration. The study concludes that fair, transparent, and participatory implementation of school rules is essential in reducing student unrest and arson. It recommends that the Ministry of Education develop standardized guidelines for formulating and implementing school rules while promoting meaningful student participation in school governance to enhance ownership of disciplinary policies.

Keywords: arson, school discipline, rules and regulations, student participation, secondary schools

Introduction

School discipline is widely recognized as a prerequisite for effective teaching, learning, and institutional management (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2019). Educational institutions establish rules and regulations to promote order, safeguard learners, and create an environment conducive to academic achievement. When fairly implemented, disciplinary policies encourage responsible behaviour, respect for authority, and peaceful coexistence among students. Conversely, disciplinary systems perceived as unfair or excessively punitive may generate resentment, resistance, and collective acts of defiance, including violent protests and arson (Bear, 2020; Gregory, Clawson, Davis & Gerewitz, 2016).

Over the past two decades, school unrest characterized by violence and arson has become a significant concern across many countries. In the United States, school fires continue to cause extensive destruction of property and disruption of educational activities despite advanced fire prevention systems (National Fire Protection Association [NFPA], 2021). Reports by the National Fire Protection Association indicate that school fires account for substantial economic losses each year, with many incidents linked to deliberate acts of vandalism and arson (NFPA, 2021). Similar patterns have been reported in the United Kingdom and several European countries, although the frequency of such incidents remains relatively low due to well-established disciplinary structures, effective student engagement mechanisms, and comprehensive school safety policies (Department for Education [DfE], 2022; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

In developing countries, however, school unrest has increasingly manifested through strikes, demonstrations, and destruction of school property. Several African countries have experienced recurrent cases of student violence associated with dissatisfaction over school management, academic pressure, and disciplinary practices. In South Africa, incidents of school



vandalism and arson have periodically accompanied community protests and institutional conflicts (Mncube & Harber, 2013; Department of Basic Education, South Africa, 2020). Comparable occurrences have also been documented in Uganda and Tanzania, where student protests have resulted in the destruction of dormitories, classrooms, and other educational facilities (UNESCO, 2021; MoEVT Tanzania, 2020). These experiences suggest that disciplinary practices, communication gaps, and institutional governance remain important determinants of school stability (UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

Kenya has witnessed repeated waves of student unrest since the early twentieth century, with a noticeable escalation in the late 1990s and the last decade. High-profile tragedies, including the Bombolulu Girls Secondary School fire and subsequent nationwide waves of school arson, highlighted the devastating consequences of student unrest. Government reports indicate that hundreds of secondary schools have experienced arson attacks over the past decade, resulting in extensive destruction of infrastructure, disruption of academic programmes, and significant public expenditure on reconstruction (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2022; Republic of Kenya, 2021). Following the reopening of schools after the COVID-19 pandemic, the country experienced another surge in school fires during 2021, prompting renewed concern among education stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of existing disciplinary approaches (MoE, 2022).

Migori County has consistently ranked among the counties reporting the highest number of school arson incidents in Kenya (Ministry of Education, 2022; Teachers Service Commission, 2021). Government records indicate that a substantial proportion of affected institutions are public boarding secondary schools. The county's diverse socio-cultural composition, comprising Luo, Kuria, Kisii, Suba, and other communities, provides an important context for examining how institutional practices interact with broader social values and behavioural norms. Despite policy efforts aimed at strengthening school discipline through legislation, ministerial guidelines, and recommendations from various education commissions, cases of arson continue to occur (Republic of Kenya, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022).

This study sought to address this gap by examining the relationship between the application of school rules and regulations and students' involvement in arson in public boarding secondary schools in Migori County. Specifically, the study investigated the influence of fairness in the enforcement of school rules, application of examination regulations, and students' participation in the formulation of disciplinary policies. Understanding these relationships is important for developing evidence-based interventions that promote effective school governance, enhance student participation, and reduce violent forms of student unrest (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2019; Bear, 2020).

The findings contribute to educational policy and practice by demonstrating that disciplinary systems should not only emphasize compliance but also fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness. Research suggests that disciplinary approaches perceived as fair, consistent, and participatory foster trust between students and school administrators, improve school climate, and reduce the likelihood of conflict and disruptive behaviour (Gregory et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2021). By strengthening participatory governance and ensuring equitable implementation of school regulations, schools can foster positive student-administration relationships, reduce grievances, and create safer and more conducive learning environments (OECD, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2022).

Migori County provides an appropriate context for examining the relationship between school disciplinary practices and student involvement in arson due to its recurrent cases of unrest in public boarding secondary schools. Despite policy interventions, incidents of arson persist, with disciplinary disputes, perceived unfairness, and administrative conflicts frequently cited as contributing factors (MoE, 2022). The county's multicultural composition also offers an opportunity to examine how perceptions of fairness and participation in school governance influence student behaviour and inform context-specific interventions.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design using a mixed-methods approach. The design enabled the collection of quantitative and qualitative data at a single point in time to examine the relationship between the application of school rules and regulations and students' involvement in arson in public boarding secondary schools. Quantitative data provided measurable evidence of the relationship between the study variables, while qualitative data enriched the findings by capturing participants' experiences and perceptions regarding school disciplinary practices.



Study Area

The study was conducted in Migori County, located in southwestern Kenya. The county borders Homa Bay County to the north, Kisii County to the northeast, Narok County to the east, the United Republic of Tanzania to the south, and Lake Victoria to the west. Migori County comprises a culturally diverse population, predominantly the Luo, Kuria, Suba, Kisii, Luhya, Somali, and Kikuyu communities. The county has experienced recurrent cases of school unrest and arson, particularly in public boarding secondary schools, making it an appropriate setting for investigating institutional factors associated with student involvement in arson.

Target Population

The target population comprised 10,191 Form Three and Form Four students enrolled in 28 public boarding secondary schools that had experienced or attempted arson incidents between 2017 and 2020. The study also included 28 principals from the selected schools as key informants because of their responsibility for school administration and implementation of disciplinary policies.

Sample Size Determination

The sample size for students was determined using **Israel's (1992)** sample size determination formula for finite populations:

$$[n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}]$$

Where:

n = required sample size

N = target population (10,191 students)

e = level of precision (0.05)

The calculation yielded a sample of approximately 385 respondents. To enhance representativeness and account for possible non-response, 390 questionnaires were administered, of which 380 were successfully completed and returned, representing a response rate of 97.4%.

All 28 principals from the participating schools were purposively selected for key informant interviews.

Additionally, 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) comprising 144 students were conducted to obtain in-depth qualitative information on students' perceptions of school rules and disciplinary practices.

Sampling Procedures

A combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques was employed.

First, purposive sampling was used to identify the 28 public boarding secondary schools that had experienced arson incidents during the study period.

Within each school, stratified sampling was used to categorize students into Form Three and Form Four strata. Proportionate sampling ensured that each class contributed respondents according to its population size. Finally, simple random sampling was used to select individual student respondents from each stratum.

The school principals were selected through purposive sampling owing to their administrative responsibilities and experience in managing school discipline. Participants for the focus group discussions were also purposively selected to ensure diversity in gender, school category, geographical location, and student leadership experience.



Data Collection Instruments

Structured Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was administered to student respondents. It contained closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (5)*. The questionnaire collected information on perceptions of school rules, enforcement practices, examination regulations, student participation in rule formulation, and involvement in school unrest.

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Focus group discussions were conducted with selected students to obtain detailed insights into their experiences regarding school disciplinary practices, fairness in rule enforcement, and factors contributing to arson.

Key Informant Interview Schedule

Semi-structured interview schedules were administered to school principals to gather information on disciplinary policies, implementation of school rules, student participation in governance, and institutional responses to arson incidents.

Validity and Reliability

The research instruments were subjected to expert review by specialists in sociology and educational research to establish content and face validity. Their recommendations were incorporated to improve clarity, relevance, and adequacy of the research items.

A pilot study was conducted in selected public boarding secondary schools outside the study sample but with similar characteristics. The pilot findings were used to refine the instruments before the main data collection.

Reliability of the questionnaire was established using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient, with a reliability coefficient exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency of the instrument.

Data Collection Procedures

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant government authorities, including the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), the County Director of Education, and school principals. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Questionnaires were administered personally by the researchers with the assistance of trained research assistants. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were conducted in designated venues within the schools and audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy during transcription.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26 for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize respondents' views. Inferential analysis was performed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation to determine the relationship between the application of school rules and regulations and students' involvement in arson. Statistical significance was tested at the 0.05 level.

Qualitative data obtained from focus group discussions and key informant interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically. Emerging themes were organized according to the study objectives and integrated with quantitative findings to provide comprehensive interpretation.



Ethical Considerations

The study complied with established ethical standards for social science research. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee, while a research permit was secured from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Permission to conduct the study was granted by the County Director of Education and the principals of the selected schools. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by excluding personal identifiers, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage without penalty. All collected data were used strictly for academic purposes. The study then examined how the application of school rules and regulations influenced students' involvement in arson.

Results and Discussion/Findings

Application of rules and regulations

Table 1

Student's responses on application of Rules and Regulations

	THEMES	SD(1)	D(2)	U(3)	A(4)	SA(5)	M	SD
1	Application of School Rules and Regulations and Arson	15 (4%)	43 (11%)	42 (11%)	139 (37%)	141 (37%)	3.92	1.13
2	Application Examination rules	28 (7%)	43 (11)	42 (11%)	154 (41%)	113 (30%)	3.74	1.21
3	Involvement of students in formulation of school rules and regulation	35 (9%)	42 (11%)	39 (10%)	151 (40%)	113 (30%)	3.82	1.17

Theme 1: Application of School Rules and Regulations and Arson

The findings in Table 1.1 indicate that 74% of the respondents either agreed (37%) or strongly agreed (37%) that unjust enforcement of school rules and regulations contributes to students' involvement in arson. The mean score of 3.92 and standard deviation of 1.13 demonstrate a moderate level of agreement and consistency in participants' responses. These findings suggest that students who perceive school rules as unfairly enforced are more likely to express their dissatisfaction through strikes, unrest, riots, and, in extreme cases, arson.

The findings support Silvia (2020), who argues that fairness is essential because students respond differently to disciplinary measures depending on their personal circumstances. Similarly, Kampen (2021) emphasizes that school rules should be applied consistently without favoritism and that disciplinary consequences should be clearly communicated to students. Blad (2017) further notes that perceptions of injustice reduce students' trust in schools and encourage defiant behaviour. Likewise, Thornberg (2017) found that unclear or inconsistently applied school rules create misunderstandings between teachers and students, resulting in conflict and resistance.

Although previous studies emphasized fairness in rule enforcement, few examined how unfair application contributes specifically to school arson. This study therefore extends existing literature by demonstrating that perceived injustice in disciplinary practices can escalate into destructive behaviour.

Evidence from the qualitative findings reinforced the quantitative results. Most FGD participants (98 of 144 students) and 21 of the 28 principals agreed that unfair enforcement of school rules contributes to unrest and arson. Participants also emphasized that school rules should be clearly documented, regularly communicated, and accessible to students. Several students argued that punishments were sometimes excessive or unrelated to the offences committed, creating resentment towards school administration. Others maintained that punishment is necessary to maintain discipline provided it is fairly administered.

Overall, the findings indicate that inconsistent and biased implementation of school rules creates frustration among students, who may perceive school authorities as oppressive. Such perceptions encourage resistance and increase the likelihood of



destructive protests, including arson. The findings further suggest that students' responses may also be influenced by wider societal experiences where conflicts are frequently resolved through demonstrations, violence, and destruction of property.

Theme 2: Application of Examination Rules and Arson

The study also examined the influence of examination rules on students' involvement in arson. Results show that 71% of the respondents (41% agreed and 30% strongly agreed) believed that strict application of examination rules contributes to student unrest and arson. The mean score of 3.74 and standard deviation of 1.17 indicate moderate agreement among respondents.

These findings imply that stringent examination regulations, particularly during internal examinations, increase anxiety among students who may perceive such rules as limiting their chances of academic success. Consequently, some students may react through disruptive behaviours, including strikes and arson.

The findings are consistent with Chemutai et al. (2020), who identified strict examination policies, cancellation of examination results, and disciplinary actions against teachers as factors contributing to student unrest. Similarly, the National Assembly Report (2019) associated school unrest with examination pressure, strict invigilation, and fear of failure. Francisca (2019) emphasized the importance of maintaining examination integrity despite student resistance, while Ouko (2018) linked school unrest to examination phobia and inadequate preparation.

Qualitative findings similarly revealed that many students considered examination rules unclear because they were often communicated verbally. Participants felt that some teachers enforced examination regulations too strictly, creating fear and psychological pressure. Others argued that strict examination rules are necessary to prevent cheating and maintain academic standards. Principals also acknowledged that excessive pressure during examinations may negatively affect students' performance and emotional wellbeing.

The findings therefore suggest that while examination regulations are essential for maintaining academic integrity, their implementation should balance discipline with student welfare. Excessive pressure and fear associated with examinations may unintentionally contribute to unrest among learners.

Theme 3: Student Participation in Formulation of School Rules and Arson

The study established that 70% of respondents (40% agreed and 30% strongly agreed) believed that failure to involve students in the formulation and review of school rules contributes to arson. A mean score of 3.82 and a standard deviation of 1.17 indicate moderate agreement among respondents. These findings suggest that students perceive rules developed without their participation as imposed, reducing their sense of ownership and increasing resistance to school administration, which may contribute to unrest and arson.

The findings are consistent with Maria (2013), who found that students were minimally involved in developing school rules despite participating in their implementation. Similarly, Magadla (2017), Simatwa (2012), Akoko (2017), Huddleston (2017), and Njozela (2018) argue that meaningful student participation in school governance enhances acceptance of school policies, promotes accountability, and reduces conflict. In contrast, Jeruto and Kiprop (2017) contend that students can still support school rules without participating in their formulation, while Agung and Saud (2018) recommend limiting student involvement in policy formulation. Nevertheless, the present study indicates that limited participation increases dissatisfaction and the likelihood of unrest.

Qualitative findings reinforced these results. Students reported that many school rules had remained unchanged for years and that they were rarely consulted during reviews. Both students and principals acknowledged that involving student representatives in reviewing school regulations would promote ownership, transparency, and compliance, although some participants feared that excessive involvement could undermine school authority. Overall, the findings suggest that periodic review of school rules through structured student participation strengthens legitimacy, improves compliance, and minimizes grievances that may escalate into student unrest and arson.

Relationship between Application of School Rules and Arson

Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis established a moderately strong positive and statistically significant relationship between the application of school rules and regulations and students' involvement in arson ($r = .447$, $p < .05$). This finding indicates that students' perceptions regarding the application of school rules significantly influence the likelihood of engaging in arson.

The results imply that where school rules are perceived as unfairly enforced, poorly communicated, or formulated without student participation, the likelihood of unrest and arson increases. Conversely, transparent, fair, and participatory implementation of school rules can strengthen discipline and reduce destructive student behaviour in public boarding secondary schools in Migori County.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Rules and Regulation and Arson

		Utilization of Rules	Arson
Application of Rules	Pearson Correlation	1	.447*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	380	380
Arson	Pearson Correlation	.447*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	380	380

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results presented in Table 4.1 indicate a moderately strong positive and statistically significant relationship between the application of school rules and regulations and students' involvement in arson ($r = .447$, $p < .05$). This suggests that the manner in which school rules are applied significantly influences students' behaviour in public boarding secondary schools. Specifically, students perceived school rules as being imposed by the administration without adequate consultation or involvement in their formulation and review, leading to feelings of exclusion and resentment. Such perceptions contributed to poor adherence to school regulations and increased the likelihood of deviant behaviours, including strikes, unrest, and arson. The findings further revealed that many schools lacked written and accessible rules, with regulations often communicated verbally by teachers and prefects. Consequently, unclear and inconsistently communicated rules were susceptible to misinterpretation, reducing students' understanding, acceptance, and compliance, thereby increasing the potential for conflict and destructive behaviour.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The study concludes that when school rules are applied to the students in a manner that is perceived as unjust the students end up revolting against the rules and resort to other means of expression including arson. The study further concludes that in most schools students' involvement in formulation and review of school rules and regulations was minimal therefore students ended up rebelling against the rules in the pretense that unpopular rules are imposed unto them. It was also realized that the rules and regulations used in most of schools are not available for student's access for purposes of references and there is no standard ways of implementing the school rules and regulation.

Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education should develop standardized guidelines to ensure fair and consistent formulation and implementation of school rules and regulations.
2. School administrations should actively involve students in the formulation and periodic review of school rules to promote ownership and compliance.
3. Schools should strengthen guidance and counselling services and establish effective communication channels to address student grievances and prevent unrest.



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