

Influence of teachers' and students' perceptions on student leadership in Kisarawe District secondary schools, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study explored teachers' perceptions of student leadership in Kisarawe District secondary schools. It examined teachers' views on the competence and effectiveness of student leaders, how students and student leaders themselves experience leadership roles. The study was guided by McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y, which helped analyse the balance between strict teacher control and greater student empowerment. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the target population included 120 participants across six secondary schools (three public and three private) through semi-structured interviews and review of school records. Purposive sampling was used to select head teachers and discipline masters while stratified random sampling was applied to select student leaders and ordinary students yielding a final sample of 92 respondents. Data was analysed through thematic content analysis. Data findings revealed that teachers generally recognised that student leaders could handle routine administrative tasks such as supervising classes and organising activities. However, they expressed serious concerns about the leaders' ability to enforce discipline, mainly because of strong peer pressure and fear of losing popularity among fellow students. From the students' side, many viewed the election process as reasonably democratic, but felt that student leaders had very limited real influence in important school decisions. There was also a widespread feeling that their efforts were not properly recognised or rewarded. The study concludes that meaningful student leadership requires more than just appointing leaders; it needs systematic support. It recommends that schools and the District education office introduce structured leadership training programmes, establish formal mentorship relationships between teachers and student leaders, create regular student administration forums for collaborative decision-making, and develop clear recognition and reward systems. These measures, the study argues, would improve discipline, enhance student engagement, and contribute to better academic performance across Kisarawe secondary schools.

Keywords: Discipline Enforcement, Leadership, Perception, Students Leadership, School Governance, Tanzania

I. INTRODUCTION

Berti et al. (2023) asserts that school governance has increasingly become effective by encouraging students to participate in leadership, decision making and peer mentoring. These activities make students active, democratic and collaborative in becoming more independent in dealing with their school affairs without supervision. Such environments make students healthier and obedient to school rules and as a result the gain life skills that shape them to be more better in the future. On the contrary, schools that rely on strict teacher centred control shape students to feel voiceless which can reduce motivation and limit the development of important life skills such as problem-solving, negotiation, and responsibility.

In Africa, Wright et al. (2023) noted that student leadership structures like prefect systems and student councils have traditionally helped bridge the gap between students and school administration by addressing complex issues through prefects and solving them with harmony to students. This has made students feel comfortable to express their concerns to their leaders and get a constructive feedback that shape them to be better in the future. Despite the progress, studies from East and Southern Africa repeatedly highlight challenges such as limited training, teacher dominance, and cultural barriers that discourage students from expressing their views openly.

In Tanzania, the Education and Training Policy of 2014 and the School Management Guidelines of 2017 officially promote student participation in school affairs. Despite these policies, many schools still struggle with inconsistent practices. Tanzanian schools are still adjusting to match these policies. It is through some cultural and long resisting traditions that make some schools neglect such practices. Some appoint leaders mainly based on academic results and discipline records, while others use semi-democratic elections. These differences often create varying levels of student morale and trust in the leadership system (Swai & Moses, 2021).

Kisarawe District is typical in this regard. Although most schools operate the traditional prefect system, anecdotal evidence and reports from education stakeholders point to mixed perceptions. Mallei (2024) asserts that teachers sometimes question the competence and commitment of student leaders, while students feel their leaders lack real power and support. Issues such as role conflict, inadequate preparation, and poor communication appear to undermine the potential benefits of student leadership. This study therefore set out to systematically investigate these perceptions in Kisarawe District secondary schools with the aim of suggesting realistic ways forward.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Student leadership in Kisarawe District secondary schools shows noticeable variations in practice and effectiveness (Swai & Moses, 2021). While previous studies in Tanzania have examined aspects of student leadership particularly its link to academic performance and discipline most were conducted in other regions or focused on only one stakeholder group. Teachers do not have faith in students who are running for leadership positions if they do not perform well in class, thus leading them to interfere with the decision-making process of recommending those who are supposed to get those positions. As a result, we still know relatively little about how both teachers and students in the same setting perceive the current system, especially regarding fairness of selection, actual influence of leaders, and day-to-day challenges (Mallei, 2024).

These knowledge gaps make it difficult for school administrators and district officials to design targeted interventions because of lack of a single focus. Without a clear understanding of existing perceptions and obstacles, attempts to strengthen student leadership risk being ineffective. This study addresses this gap by examining the views of both teachers and students in Kisarawe District and proposing practical, context-specific strategies for improvement (Byamugisha et al., 2024).

1.2 Research objective

The study aims to examine influence of teachers and students perceptions on student leadership in Kisarawe District Secondary Schools, Tanzania.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Theory X and Theory Y Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y of 1960 provide a useful lens for understanding different approaches to student leadership. Theory X assumes that students are generally unmotivated and require strict supervision and external control. This perspective often leads to autocratic leadership styles. In contrast, Theory Y believes that students are naturally motivated and can take responsibility when given trust, autonomy, and meaningful opportunities. This aligns with democratic and participatory leadership approaches. The study also considered elements of laissez-faire leadership, where students are given high autonomy with minimal supervision. Each style has its strengths and weaknesses depending on the school context (Pizzolitto et al., 2023).

Theory X and Theory Y helped explain the tension between control and empowerment observed in Kisarawe schools. They provided a framework for analysing how different leadership styles affect student engagement, discipline, and overall school performance. These theories have been criticised for being based on western cultural context of which they do not apply in African settings always because of demographic, cultural, behavioural and social context. Moreover, it is known to oversimplify human behavior of which is not true and does not apply to Tanzanian schools as issues such as cultural values, resource limitations and institutional realities require a more flexible approach to match stakeholder. So for these theories to work collaboratively, they need to be tailored, combined with necessary structure and guidance that match empowerment and trust of Kisarawe secondary school (Tikoko, 2021).

2.2 Empirical Review

Tikoko (2021) found that students engage in different types of leadership. Some schools exercise autocratic leadership which has strict control and limited student input which hinders motivation, innovation and can make students have poor discipline. Also some schools practice democratic leadership that encourages collaboration and participation of which makes students active, happy, responsible and engage in whole school affairs effectively. Other schools practice laissez-faire leadership, which grants students high autonomy but may be confusing as yes students become creative and independent but may lead to confusion role ambiguity, and ineffective school governance if not properly guided.

Moreover, Crawford (2024) in Morogoro identified that unclear selection criteria and inadequate training limits leaders to be effective in leading others. Additionally, Swai and Moses (2021) observed that when teachers select students for leadership, they consider academic performance and discipline while elements such as teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence are overlooked. Teachers do not have faith in students who are running for leadership positions if they do not perform well in class, thus leading them to interfere with the decision-making process of

recommending those who are supposed to get those positions This demonstrates that student leadership style and the selection process play a crucial role in shaping students' engagement, motivation, and school outcomes.

In Kenya, for example, Simiyu (2023) found that student councils can significantly strengthen school governance especially when student leaders receive proper training and gets a chance to participate in decision making processes. On the contrary, deeply rooted cultural norms and prevailing teacher- centred approach limit active student participation and weakens the overall effectiveness of student leadership structures (Tikoko, 2021).

Beyond Africa, studies from Asia also offer valuable insights. Research conducted in Malaysia and Pakistan revealed that when leadership in educational settings leans toward democratic and participatory approaches, students tend to feel more driven, take greater ownership of their learning, and work more effectively with their peers. On the other hand, authoritarian methods have been found to suppress independent thinking and dampen students' readiness to act on their own initiative (Shaharuddin & Harun, 2022).

As for laissez-faire models, where learners are granted a high degree of autonomy, the outcomes are largely dependent on the readiness of the student leaders themselves. Such approaches can be productive when those in leadership roles are already capable and self-driven; however, in the absence of adequate guidance and structure, they tend to breed confusion, undermine coordination, and weaken the sense of accountability among students (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021).

Studies from Europe and North America echo many of these findings. When students are given a genuine voice in leadership, research points to noticeable improvements in the overall school environment, stronger academic performance, and a greater willingness among peers to work together. Conversely, leadership that leans heavily toward control and authority tends to push students away from active participation and leaves little room for creative thinking (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Hands-off leadership, while it can nurture independence and spark creativity, rarely succeeds without some degree of clear direction and well-defined boundaries without these, disorder and a lack of responsibility often follow. Looking across these varied geographical and cultural settings, a recurring theme becomes evident: leadership approaches that are democratic and inclusive consistently yield more favourable results for students. In contrast, rigidly authoritarian styles and laissez-faire models that are poorly thought through tend to introduce more problems than they resolve (Shaharuddin & Harun, 2022).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Kisarawe District, focusing on selected secondary schools. Kisarawe was chosen due to limited existing research on how both teachers and students perceive student leadership, highlighting a knowledge gap. The findings reflected what perceptions exist, why they are held, and how they affect student participation, leadership effectiveness, and school performance, while providing evidence applicable to other Tanzanian secondary schools.

3.2 Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted for this study. This approach was chosen because it is particularly well-suited for exploring and presenting a clear, detailed picture of how teachers and students currently perceive student leadership in Kisarawe District secondary schools. Rather than attempting to manipulate or control variables, descriptive research focuses on understanding situations as they naturally exist in their real-life context.

Through this design, the study was able to capture not only what perceptions teachers and students hold about student leadership, but also why these perceptions matter and how they influence day-to-day school life. For instance, it helped reveal how these views shape leadership effectiveness, affect the maintenance of discipline, impact academic performance, and influence overall school governance. As Bryman (2021) notes, descriptive designs are valuable when the goal is to provide rich insights into complex social phenomena without interfering with the natural setting.

By drawing data from a relatively broad and diverse sample of participants across different schools, the study generated both qualitative depth and some basic quantitative descriptions. This combination allowed for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the current state of student leadership in the district. Ultimately, the descriptive approach provided a strong foundation for developing practical and context-relevant recommendations aimed at improving student leadership practices in Kisarawe secondary schools.

3.3 Target Population

The target population for this study consisted of individuals who are directly involved in or significantly affected by student leadership activities within secondary schools in Kisarawe District. This included head teachers, discipline masters, ordinary classroom teachers, student leaders (such as prefects and other officials), and ordinary students. These groups were deliberately chosen because they possess first-hand experience and rich insights into how student leadership operates on a daily basis.

A total of 120 participants were drawn from six purposefully selected secondary schools three public and three private to ensure a balanced representation of different school environments. The final sample comprised 52 students (26 student leaders and 26 ordinary students) and 40 teachers. Among the teachers, there were 6 head teachers, 6 discipline masters, and 28 ordinary teachers.

These participants were selected because of their strategic positions in the student leadership system. Teachers offered professional perspectives on leadership skills, discipline management, student engagement strategies, and overall school governance. On the other hand, student leaders and ordinary students provided valuable lived experiences regarding peer influence, motivation, challenges, and the practical realities of being part of or affected by student leadership structures. Including both public and private schools helped capture a wider range of contexts and practices within the district.

3.4 Sample Size

The sample size for this study was determined using the formula proposed by Yamane (1967), which is widely used in social science research when the target population is known.

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$$

Where:

n = required sample size

N = total population (120)

e = margin of error (0.05)

Calculation:

$$n = 120 / [1 + 120(0.05)^2]$$

$$n = 120 / [1 + 120(0.0025)]$$

$$n = 120 / [1 + 0.30]$$

$$n = 120 / 1.30$$

$$n = 92.31$$

$$n \approx 92$$

Thus, the required sample size for the study was 92 respondents, representing the minimum number of participants needed to achieve a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. This sample included 31 student leaders, 31 ordinary students, 5 head teachers, 5 discipline masters, and 20 ordinary teachers. This sample size was considered adequate because it provided sufficient depth and diversity of perspectives for a qualitative study while remaining realistic and manageable within the limited time and resources available. The carefully selected participants were well-positioned to offer meaningful insights into prevailing perceptions of student leadership, the challenges faced by student leaders, and potential strategies for improvement.

Table 1

Sample size distribution

Respondents	Population	Sample	Sample (%)
Student leaders	40	31	33.7
Ordinary students	40	31	33.7
Head teachers	6	5	5.4
Discipline teachers	6	5	5.4
Ordinary teachers	28	20	21.7
Total	120	92	100

Source: Field Data, Kisarawe District (2026)

3.5 Sampling Techniques

To ensure the study captured rich and diverse perspectives, a combination of purposive sampling and stratified random sampling techniques was employed. Purposive sampling was used to deliberately select key informants who possessed in-depth knowledge and direct experience with student leadership. This included head teachers and discipline masters, as they play central roles in overseeing student leaders and managing school discipline. Their expert insights were considered essential for understanding the administrative and supervisory dimensions of student leadership.

Stratified random sampling, on the other hand, was applied when selecting student leaders and ordinary students. The sample was first divided into relevant strata such as public versus private schools, student leaders versus ordinary students, and different academic levels to ensure balanced representation. Within each stratum, participants were then randomly selected. This approach helped reduce bias and allowed the study to reflect the wide range of experiences and opinions present across different types of schools in Kisarawe District (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

This mixed sampling strategy was necessary because student leadership involves multiple stakeholders with different roles and perspectives. By combining purposive and stratified random sampling, the study was able to include both individuals with specialized knowledge and a broader cross-section of students, thereby producing more comprehensive and representative findings on perceptions of student leadership.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were gathered from both primary and secondary sources to achieve a well-rounded understanding of the research problem. The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility while ensuring that all key topics were covered. These interviews were conducted with head teachers, discipline masters, ordinary teachers, student leaders, and ordinary students. The semi-structured format encouraged participants to share their honest opinions and personal experiences in their own words.

Secondary data were obtained from various school documents, including student council records, leadership election reports, discipline logs, academic performance summaries, and minutes of meetings where student leadership issues were discussed. Using both primary and secondary sources helped triangulate the information, meaning the findings from interviews could be cross-checked against official records. This combination strengthened the reliability and validity of the results and provided a deeper, more comprehensive picture of students' and teachers' perceptions of student leadership, the challenges involved, and potential strategies for improvement (Creswell, 2018).

3.7 Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analysed using thematic content analysis. This involved a systematic process of organising and interpreting the information to identify recurring patterns and meaningful insights. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content. Similar ideas and responses were grouped into initial codes, which were later refined and organised into broader themes and sub-themes that directly addressed the research objectives.

For example, themes such as "leadership competence," "discipline enforcement challenges," "role conflict," "lack of recognition," and "suggested improvement strategies" emerged naturally from the data. Direct quotations from participants were used extensively to support the themes and bring authenticity to the findings. This analytical approach allowed for a detailed and nuanced understanding of how teachers and students perceive student leadership and the factors influencing its effectiveness (Patton, 2015).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were given high priority throughout the research process. Formal ethical approval was first obtained from Mzumbe University. In addition, permission to conduct the study was sought from the Kisarawe District Education Authorities. Before participating, all respondents were provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained from each individual. Participants were assured that their involvement was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

To protect confidentiality, codes were used instead of real names, and all collected data were stored securely on password-protected devices. No information that could identify individual participants will be disclosed in the final report. These ethical measures were essential not only to protect the rights and dignity of the participants but also to build trust and maintain the integrity of the entire research process (Saunders et al., 2023).

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Response Rate

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with 92 respondents, comprising 5 head teachers, 5 discipline teachers, 20 ordinary teachers, 31 student leaders, and 31 ordinary students drawn from six secondary schools three public and three private within Kisarawe District. Interview responses were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic content analysis. Participants are identified using coded labels to protect their anonymity, for example, Teacher 1 (T1), Student Leader 1 (SL1), and Ordinary Student 1 (OS1). Findings are organised thematically and supported by direct interview quotations to enrich interpretation and substantiate conclusions. The independent variable in this study is student leadership practice (encompassing leadership style, selection process and institutional support) while the dependent variables include school governance, discipline enforcement, academic performance and student engagement. Findings are discussed in relation to the empirical literature reviewed in section II particularly studies by Tikoko (2021); Abdullahi (2022); Ally and Libent-Mabagala (2022) are interpreted through the lens of McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y.

Table 2*Response Rate by Respondent Category*

Category	Number	Code label	School type
Head teachers	5	T1 – T5	Public & private
Discipline teachers	5	DT1 – DT5	Public & private
Ordinary teachers	20	T1 – T20	Public & private
Student leaders	31	SL1 – SL31	Public & private
Ordinary students	31	OS1 – OS31	Public & private
Total	92	—	6 schools

Source: Field data, Kisarawe District (2026). N = 92; drawn from 3 public and 3 private secondary schools.

Note: Participant codes are assigned sequentially within each category to protect anonymity.

4.2 Teachers' Perceptions of Student Leadership in Kisarawe Secondary Schools

Interview data from teachers revealed four thematic areas: leadership competence, discipline enforcement, academic balancing, and selection fairness.

4.2.1 Leadership Competence

One of the key areas the study sought to understand was the extent to which student leaders in Kisarawe District secondary schools could perform their roles effectively without constant supervision from teachers. Teachers, being the ones who work most closely with student leaders, were asked to share their honest observations about the general ability of these students to manage their peers and carry out assigned responsibilities independently.

The findings revealed mixed but largely positive perceptions regarding student leadership competence. Many teachers acknowledged that student leaders are gradually developing the necessary skills to handle their duties, particularly when given consistent guidance and support from teachers. While they are not yet fully independent in all situations, there is clear evidence of growth in their capabilities over time. For instance, one teacher expressed considerable confidence in the ability of student leaders to work on their own:

“In this school, student leaders can and are able to manage their peers in doing work without constant teacher supervision. You will find them arranged in different areas for cleanliness even without a teacher being present.” (Interview, T3, Kisarawe Secondary School, 12th March, 2026)

Another teacher highlighted the importance of ongoing support in building student capacity:

“Because of constant support and directions provided by their teachers, student leaders are gradually developing skills and knowledge to manage their peers and handle their responsibilities ably.” (Interview, T1, Kisarawe Secondary School 12th March, 2026)

A third teacher offered a more balanced view, appreciating the strengths while pointing out areas that still need improvement:

“Most student leaders demonstrate responsibility, commitment and the ability to guide their peers effectively. They are capable of organising activities, maintaining discipline among fellow students, and also resolving minor conflicts independently. However, in some cases a few may still rely on teachers for major decisions. Therefore leadership skills may need further training and mentorship.” (Interview, T5, Kisarawe Secondary School, 13th March 2026)

These responses suggest that while student leaders in Kisarawe District show promising potential, their competence is still developing and benefits greatly from teacher guidance. They tend to perform better in routine and structured tasks such as coordinating morning assemblies, supervising cleanliness exercises, and managing minor peer conflicts but often seek teacher input when faced with more complex or sensitive issues.

The findings are consistent with Wright et al. (2023), who observed that student leaders in Tanzanian secondary schools often demonstrate appreciable competence in routine supervision and peer coordination tasks, though they still require support for higher-level decision-making. Furthermore, these results align well with McGregor's Theory Y (1960), which argues that when individuals are trusted and given meaningful responsibilities, they tend to develop initiative and self-direction. In the context of Kisarawe secondary schools, student leaders appear to be following this path showing increasing confidence and capability in everyday leadership tasks when provided with the right environment and support.

4.2.2 Discipline Enforcement

Teachers were asked to evaluate how effectively student leaders contribute to maintaining school order and enforcing discipline, especially when compared to direct teacher interventions. The findings indicated that while student leaders do play a meaningful supporting role in discipline management, their overall effectiveness remains limited and often depends heavily on teacher backing. Many teachers pointed out those student leaders face significant structural and social constraints when trying to enforce rules. One teacher explained the practical challenges:

“Without teachers’ intervention the school order and discipline will not work effectively for most of the students because student leaders feel uncomfortable, shy and do not feel care about their fellow students’ indiscipline because of fearing to lose some of their friends’ support and cooperation.” (Interview, T2, Kisarawe Secondary School 13th March, 2026)

Despite these limitations, some teachers recognised the valuable complementary role that student leaders can play. Another participant noted:

“School leaders are the key rule in contributing to maintain school order by talking to their fellow students’ time and again, reporting indiscipline activity before worsen so necessary measures can be taken early and they also do peer counselling each other on bad behaviour.” (Interview, T4, Kisarawe Secondary School 13th March, 2026)

A third teacher emphasised the need for greater empowerment:

“Student leaders attempt to assist in maintaining school order, but their impact is limited because most of the discipline issues still require teacher intervention. This shows that further training and empowerment of student leaders are needed.” (Interview, T1, Kisarawe Secondary School 13th March, 2026)

Overall, these responses highlight a common reality: student leaders are useful in minor issues and early intervention, but serious disciplinary cases still demand direct teacher involvement. This pattern reflects a persistent challenge documented in Tanzanian educational research. Byamugisha et al. (2024) found that student leaders often struggle to enforce discipline independently due to role ambiguity and the strong social pressures that come with peer relationships. The fear of social isolation expressed by teachers in this study aligns closely with what Swai and Moses (2021) described as the “double loyalty dilemma” the difficult position student leaders find themselves in, torn between maintaining solidarity with their peers and fulfilling institutional expectations. From the perspective of McGregor’s Theory X, these findings suggest that student leaders may require clearer mandates, stronger institutional backing, and more explicit authority if they are to enforce discipline more effectively.

4.2.3 Academic Balancing

Teachers were also asked to share their views on how holding a leadership position affects students’ academic focus and overall classroom performance. The findings showed that leadership roles generally have a positive influence on students’ academic orientation, although this benefit is not automatic and often requires adequate support to maintain a healthy balance. One teacher highlighted the motivational power of leadership positions:

“Students who hold position at school influence them to study hard. This is a weapon for their leadership. For a good leader to have authority before fellow he/she must possess good performance. So many leaders at our school are striving for good performance and maintaining the position.” (Interview, T4, Kisarawe Secondary School 16th March, 2026)

Another teacher offered a more balanced observation:

“Yes, holding leadership roles helps students become more responsible and focused in class which can positively influence their academic performance, although some students may require support to balance leadership duties and academic work.” (Interview, T1, Kisarawe Secondary School 16th March, 2026)

A third teacher emphasised the sense of responsibility that comes with being selected:

“A student will learn that as long as he/she has been trusted in a position of a certain leadership role, it is his/her duty to work very hard to be an example to his/her fellow students and to fulfil teachers’ hope and belief that has been built upon his/her selection.” (Interview, T2, Kisarawe Secondary School 16th March, 2026)

These accounts suggest that leadership positions can serve as a strong motivational factor, encouraging students to work harder so they can maintain both their academic standing and their leadership status. The findings align with Swai and Mosses (2021) who reported that student leadership positions in Tanzanian schools often act as motivational catalysts for better academic achievement because students feel heightened expectations from both teachers and peers. Similarly, Byamugisha et al. (2024) noted that while leadership duties can sometimes become burdensome, proper mentoring and clear role boundaries can help ensure that leadership enhances rather than undermines academic performance. This finding also supports the conceptual framework of the current study, which suggests that leadership positions can positively influence academic engagement when students receive sufficient institutional support and guidance.

4.2.4 Selection Fairness

Teachers were asked for their opinions on the current criteria used to select student leaders and how these criteria affect the leaders’ authority and acceptance among both staff and students. The findings revealed that teachers largely favour selection processes based on academic merit, but they also recognise that relying solely on popularity or academic performance can create problems. One teacher captured the tension between different selection approaches:

“Selecting student leaders based on academics or popularity can limit their effectiveness. Leaders who combine strong academic performance with good interpersonal and leadership skills tend to earn great respect from both staff and fellow students.” (Interview, T1, Kisarawe Secondary School 16th March, 2026)

Another teacher expressed a clear preference for academic criteria while acknowledging its limitations:

“To me, I prefer more academic criteria because a well-graded student need few trainings to be made a good leader and he/she does well.” (Interview, T2, Kisarawe Secondary School 16th March, 2026)

A third teacher pointed out how the current system sometimes creates authority gaps:

“Some students are average and not popular but they are good leaders with virtue, but they lack confidence before the staff, because majority are chosen depend on their level of performance and how they are popular to fellows. So some lack authority and acceptance because they lack themselves.” (Interview, T4, Kisarawe Secondary School 16th March, 2026)

These views suggest that while academic performance remains an important consideration, over-reliance on it (or on popularity) can undermine the overall effectiveness and legitimacy of student leaders. The findings resonate with Wright et al. (2023), who established that when student leaders are selected primarily on academic merit without sufficient attention to interpersonal skills or democratic legitimacy, their authority is often contested by peers. Similarly, Shaharuddin and Harun (2022) found that a balanced approach combining merit based criteria with some form of democratic input tends to produce student leaders who enjoy higher acceptance and credibility from both peers and teachers. For Kisarawe District, these findings point to the need for developing more holistic and transparent selection frameworks that consider not only academic performance but also leadership potential, character, and some level of student voice.

4.3 Students’ and Student Leaders’ Perceptions of Student Leadership

Analysis of the interview data revealed four major thematic areas: participation fairness, recognition of efforts, leadership influence, and peer relations. These themes provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of students who are directly affected by or involved in leadership roles.

4.3.1 Participation Fairness

Ordinary students were asked to evaluate how democratic and representative the process of selecting student leaders actually is. Overall, the findings showed that many students view the election process positively, seeing it as a broadly democratic exercise, even though some concerns about genuine representation and transparency remain.

One student expressed strong belief in the value of elections:

“School election is very important to choosing your leaders in democracy and represents true choice because it maintains the self-unit from one student to another.” (Interview, OS1, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

Another student offered a more cautious but still supportive view:

“Yes, it is good because when the student chooses the student to be a leader, this it can cause students to be free and it is well.” (Interview, OS2, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

“A third student emphasised the cultural and personal significance of having a voice in the process, stating in Swahili: It is a democratic act that give rights to every one of us to choose the leader they want at heart.” (Interview, OS3, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

These responses suggest that students generally appreciate the opportunity to participate in choosing their leaders. The findings are consistent with Mallei (2024), who found in Kenya that when students perceive the electoral process as fair, they are more likely to accept and cooperate with the chosen leaders. However, as Sousa and Ferreira (2024) cautioned, formal elections alone do not always guarantee genuine democratic participation, especially when cultural norms and teacher influence still play a strong behind-the-scenes role. The situation in Kisarawe appears to reflect this tension while elections are valued, there is room to improve transparency and inclusivity.

4.3.2 Recognition of Efforts

Student leaders were asked whether their work is sufficiently valued and recognised by both the school administration and their fellow students. The responses were generally positive, although the quality and consistency of recognition varied across schools. One student leader felt adequately appreciated:

“Yes, because we are chosen to be a leader and a leader is behind of teacher so other students sufficiently value and recognise my work which I do.” (Interview, SL1, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

Another student leader offered a more reflective and personal account of what recognition meant to them:

“For me, receiving recognition wasn’t about the public validation; it served as a tangible marker of my evolution as a leader. Early in my term, I struggled with decisiveness and often felt the ‘imposter syndrome’ that many student leaders face. When our leadership was recognized for its achievement in solving students’ problems, it forced me to look back at the hurdles we cleared. That recognition helped me

internalize my resilience building and confidence calibration.” (Interview, SL2, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

These accounts show that recognition plays an important motivational role. When student leaders feel valued, it boosts their confidence and commitment. This aligns with Bass and Riggio (2006), who found that acknowledged student leaders tend to show higher performance, greater dedication, and more positive engagement with their peers. However, the findings also suggest that recognition in Kisarawe schools is often informal and inconsistent. Formalising recognition mechanisms such as certificates, public appreciation events, or small rewards could help sustain motivation across all schools in the district.

4.3.3 Leadership Influence

Both ordinary students and student leaders were asked how much real influence they believe student leaders have in shaping decisions that affect daily school life and rules. The findings revealed moderate levels of perceived influence, with noticeable variation depending on the school and the nature of the decision. One student leader described their role as follows:

“We have the ability to bring ideas for certain things, but there are some things in school we are able to bring more of how to implement something for things to go well and better.” (Interview, SL1, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

Another student leader spoke passionately about the deeper purpose of leadership:

“Indeed, leadership is deeply personal because every one of us is driven by a unique goal or a specific legacy we wish to leave behind. In the context of a school, this bond is even stronger; a student’s success is inseparable from the health of their institution. I believe that every leader who steps forward is fueled by a genuine vision to see their school flourish. It isn’t just about holding a position; it’s about the collective ambition to transform our environment into a place where every student can thrive.” (Interview, SL3, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

A teacher also commented on the bridging role of student leaders:

“Student leaders serve as the essential link between the student body and the faculty. Because we are on the ground every day, we are the first to identify the evolving needs and challenges of our peers. By effectively communicating these needs to our teachers and administration, we act as advocates for progress. Our goal is to influence positive institutional change, ensuring that our school doesn’t just function, but excels and maintains a trajectory of continuous improvement and excellence.” (Interview, T5, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

These findings reflect a common tension in the literature Abdullahi (2022) observed that student leaders in schools often have considerable influence over peer-related matters but very limited say in formal administrative decisions. Similarly, Byamugisha et al. (2024) noted that even when democratic structures exist, institutional hierarchies frequently restrict students’ actual decision-making power. In Kisarawe, students appear aware of these limitations but still value the informal influence they can exert among their peers.

4.3.4 Peer Relations

Both students and student leaders were asked how assuming leadership roles had affected their social relationships with friends and classmates. The findings suggest that leadership often transforms peer dynamics sometimes strengthening them, but at other times creating social distance or tension. One student leader described the positive cultural shift they helped create:

“A true leader doesn’t just give orders; they model the transformation they wish to see. By consistently upholding high standards of discipline and academic focus, I have been able to influence a shift in our school’s culture. My peers have begun to abandon unproductive habits and ‘old-school’ mindsets that hindered our progress. Instead, they are embracing a new, more constructive path that prioritizes excellence, mutual respect, and a commitment to our shared future.” (Interview, SL2, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

Another leader reflected on the challenges of balancing growth and relationships:

“Leadership is a double-edged sword when it comes to personal growth. On one hand, it is a powerful catalyst for positive transformation, pulling an individual out of unproductive habits and into a position of responsibility and maturity. However, this evolution often creates a ‘gap’ between the leader and their peers. If a leader becomes overly rigid, harsh, or appears to ‘look down’ on their old friends, the very growth that should be celebrated can instead lead to resentment and broken relationships. The challenge lies in growing upward without looking down on those you are meant to serve.” (Interview, SL3, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

An ordinary student offered an interesting perspective on how leadership changes friendship:

“Since taking on this leadership role, my dynamic with my peers has undergone a significant shift. My focus has moved away from simple social interaction and toward a deeper commitment to our school's collective progress. I have realized that being a true friend now means advocating for their long-term interests such as a better learning environment and higher standards even when those decisions aren't the most popular in the moment. My loyalty has evolved from 'going along with the crowd' to 'leading the crowd toward excellence.’” (Interview, OS3, Kisarawe Secondary School 17th March, 2026)

These accounts show that leadership roles can enrich peer relationships by promoting positive change, but they can also create distance when leaders must enforce rules or make unpopular decisions. This social dimension is often overlooked. Lockyer et al. (2024) found that leaders who maintain strong, positive peer relationships tend to be more effective at encouraging voluntary compliance. At the same time, Swai and Moses (2021) highlighted the friction that can arise when leaders must shift from being “one of the groups” to exercising authority. Both dynamics are clearly visible in the Kisarawe context.

4.4 Discussion

4.4.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Student Leadership in Kisarawe District Secondary Schools

Teachers' views on student leadership emerged as thoughtful but cautious. While they recognised the efforts and potential of student leaders, they also highlighted several important limitations. Their perspectives provide valuable insight into the day-to-day realities of student governance in the district.

Perceptions of Student Leadership Competence: The interview data revealed that teachers in Kisarawe District secondary schools hold mixed but predominantly cautious opinions about the overall competence of student leaders. Many teachers acknowledged that student leaders are often willing and enthusiastic. However, they frequently expressed concern that these students lack the practical skills needed to manage their peers, mediate conflicts, or carry out responsibilities independently without regular adult guidance. Several teachers described student leaders as honest and well-meaning, yet easily overwhelmed by the demands of their positions. These observations are consistent with Byamugisha et al. (2024), who noted that limited leadership training in many African secondary schools leaves student leaders enthusiastic but operationally underprepared.

From a theoretical perspective, these views reflect elements of McGregor's Theory X (1960), which assumes that individuals need close supervision because they are not naturally self-directed. Teachers who doubted student leaders' competence tended to intervene often in student matters, which may unintentionally limit opportunities for students to grow and develop independence. This pattern supports the findings of Byamugisha et al. (2024), who showed that overly teacher-dominated environments tend to restrict student initiative and slow the development of important leadership competencies. On a more positive note, some teachers described certain student leaders especially those who had served longer as responsible and quite effective. This variation in opinions suggests that student leadership effectiveness is highly context-dependent. As Tikoko (2021) found that leadership performance can differ significantly from one school to another depending on the level of institutional support and guidance provided.

Discipline Enforcement and School Order: Discipline enforcement stood out as one of the most contested aspects of student leadership according to teachers. While most teachers saw student leaders as helpful in minor matters, they generally viewed them as insufficient when it came to maintaining overall school order. A recurring theme was the reluctance of student leaders to report serious misconduct, especially when it involved their friends. This tension between peer loyalty and official responsibility was strongly evident in the data. One teacher captured the challenge clearly when discussing how social pressures affect student leaders. This situation reflects what Mallei (2024) describe as “role conflict” the internal struggle student leaders face when trying to balance being part of the student community while also acting as enforcers of school rules.

Simiyu (2023) argues that such role conflict becomes particularly difficult when schools do not provide adequate training in conflict resolution and boundary setting. The preference shown by Kisarawe teachers for direct teacher intervention over student-led discipline points to a deeper systemic issue: limited trust in student authority. As Mallei (2024) observed in Kenya, when teachers fail to delegate real power to student leaders, it weakens the legitimacy of the entire leadership system and makes discipline enforcement even harder.

Impact of Leadership on Academic Performance: A substantial number of teachers felt that holding leadership positions often had a negative effect on students' academic performance, particularly for those with heavy responsibilities such as head prefects. These students were frequently called away from class for meetings, administrative tasks, or disciplinary issues, leading to missed lessons and declining grades. This observation aligns with Byamugisha et al. (2024), who documented similar challenges in other parts of Tanzania. However, some teachers offered a more optimistic view, noting that capable student leaders who received good support were often able to maintain strong academic records alongside their leadership duties. This suggests that the relationship between leadership and academics depends heavily on individual capacity and the level of support provided by the school. Lin (2022) reached a similar conclusion, emphasising that leadership roles tend to harm academics only when schools fail

to set clear boundaries and provide adequate guidance. In Kisarawe, schools that offered better structure and mentoring appeared to experience fewer problems with academic interference.

Selection Criteria and Teachers' Views on Fairness: Teachers held differing opinions about how student leaders should be selected. Many strongly supported merit-based selection focused on academic performance and discipline records, arguing that strong students set better examples and are more likely to earn respect. This view aligns with Theory X thinking, which emphasises placing authority in those who have already demonstrated compliance with rules.

Other teachers favoured more democratic, election-based approaches, believing that students chosen by their peers would have greater legitimacy and acceptance. Bush (2020) found that perceived fairness in the selection process is crucial for student satisfaction and cooperation. The current lack of a clear, consistent, and transparent selection system across Kisarawe schools appears to create confusion and uneven confidence in student leaders.

4.4.2 Students' and Student Leaders' Perceptions of Student Leadership

Perceptions of Participation Fairness: Ordinary students expressed fairly critical views about how democratic the selection of student leaders really is. While some appreciated the existence of elections, many felt the process was superficial or heavily influenced by teachers. This sense of limited genuine participation aligns with Mallei (2024), who found that when students feel excluded from choosing their leaders, they become less invested in supporting them. This finding also connects to McGregor's Theory Y, which suggests that people are more motivated when given meaningful opportunities to participate. In Kisarawe, the largely teacher-controlled selection processes may be contributing to disengaged students, making the work of student leaders more difficult. Abdullahi (2022) and Omodan (2020) reached similar conclusions in Nigeria, noting that democratically elected leaders tend to enjoy much higher levels of peer cooperation.

Recognition and Motivation of Student Leaders: Student leaders across the sampled schools frequently expressed a sense of being under-appreciated. Many described dedicating considerable time and energy to their roles organising events, resolving conflicts, and enforcing rules yet receiving little formal or informal recognition from teachers or administrators. This lack of acknowledgment is significant. Byamugisha et al. (2024) found that recognition is a key driver of motivation among student leaders, and its absence often leads to burnout and disengagement. From a Theory Y perspective, this represents a missed opportunity to nurture intrinsic motivation. Ally and Libent-Mabagala (2022) emphasised in their Tanzanian study that schools with formal mentorship and recognition programmes tend to have stronger and more confident student leadership.

Perceived Influence of Student Leaders in Decision-Making: Students and student leaders consistently reported that they have limited real influence over important school decisions. Although student councils and prefect systems exist, most major decisions about rules, schedules, and discipline are made by teachers and administrators, with student input often being tokenistic. This gap between formal structures and actual power is well documented. That genuine authority given to student leaders strongly correlates with better engagement and school outcomes. In Kisarawe, the largely symbolic nature of student leadership appears to undermine its credibility and effectiveness. Mager and Nowak (2012) warn that when student participation feels ceremonial, it can foster cynicism that extends beyond school into later civic life.

Social Dynamics and Peer Relations: Leadership roles significantly affected social relationships. Student leaders often described experiencing social isolation or distance from former friends, while ordinary students reported mixed feelings ranging from respect to suspicion toward their leaders. Kim (2020) noted that this social friction is common when leaders must balance authority with peer relationships. Abdullahi (2022) emphasised that positive, approachable leadership styles tend to create better peer dynamics and more effective discipline. In Kisarawe, democratic and supportive leadership approaches produced noticeably healthier social relationships compared to more authoritarian ones.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The study concludes that teachers in Kisarawe District secondary schools hold generally positive views of student leaders' competence in routine tasks, but express concern over their limited ability to enforce discipline due to peer pressure and weak authority. Students and student leaders, on the other hand, consider the election process reasonably fair and feel somewhat recognised, yet they report having little real influence on major decisions and often face social challenges in their roles. Overall, the findings support a balanced leadership approach guided by McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y combining necessary structure and guidance with genuine empowerment and participation.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends structured leadership training, formal mentorship, collaborative decision-making forums, and clear conflict resolution mechanisms. When properly implemented, these strategies can significantly strengthen student leadership, school governance, and academic outcomes in Kisarawe secondary schools.

Declaration of Interest

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