

PRINCIPALS' ROLE IN MANAGING STUDENTS' UNREST AND MAINTAINING SCHOOL STABILITY IN ABAKALIKI EDUCATION ZONE OF EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

Odeh, John Onwe

Department of Educational Management
Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Agbani

Abstract

Students' unrest is a persistent and disruptive phenomenon within Nigeria's educational institutions, frequently leading to academic interruptions and the destruction of lives and property. This paper examines the critical role of the principal in managing such unrest and sustaining school stability within the specific context of the Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The objectives were to identify the major causes of students' unrest, examine strategies used by principals to prevent and control unrest, assess post-crisis stability measures, and determine the challenges faced by principals. The study adopted a descriptive survey design, with a sample of 120 respondents (30 principals and 90 teachers) selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86. Analysis was conducted using mean scores, standard deviation, and frequency counts. Findings revealed that major causes of students' unrest included poor communication, inadequate facilities, perceived injustice in discipline, and delay in examination results. Principals employed strategies such as open-door policies, student leadership engagement, counselling, and preventive discipline to manage unrest. Challenges included inadequate funding, external interference, and lack of crisis management training. The study recommends capacity building for principals, provision of adequate resources, and strengthened school community collaboration to ensure sustainable stability.

Keywords: Principals' role, students' unrest, managing and maintaining, school stability

Introduction

The management of secondary schools in Nigeria has become increasingly complex due to societal changes, evolving student expectations, and heightened awareness of rights among students. Students' unrest which manifest in form of strike, protest and demonstration, riot, and acts of vandalism, has been reported in various parts of the country (Eze, 2016). In the Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State, incidents of unrest have disrupted academic calendars, eroded discipline, and caused strained relationships between schools and their host communities. A school is expected to serve as a safe environment where students receive instruction, acquire moral values, and develop life skills. However, when unrest occurs, it undermines the core objectives of education. According to Okonkwo and Okeke (2019), persistent students' unrest not only leads to academic wastage but also fosters a climate of fear and instability. In such contexts, the role of the principal becomes critical, as he or she is the chief administrative officer, instructional leader, and custodian of school stability. The principal's responsibilities in managing unrest are multidimensional. These include preventive measures, crisis intervention, and post-crisis recovery. Preventive measures focus on creating conducive learning environment through effective communication, fair disciplinary procedures, and adequate welfare provisions. Crisis intervention involves quick, decisive action to restore order, while post-crisis recovery entails counselling, conflict resolution, and measures to prevent recurrence.

In developed nations, principals often receive formal training in conflict resolution, negotiation, and emotional intelligence. In contrast, many Nigerian principals rely on experience rather than formal training, which may limit the effectiveness of their interventions. In Ebonyi State, the socio-cultural environment poses unique challenges to school stability.

Factors such as poverty, political influence, and community pressure can exacerbate tensions within schools. The Abakaliki Education Zone, in particular, has recorded several cases of unrest linked to delayed examination results, hike in tuition fees, perceived injustice in punishment, and inadequate educational facilities. Given these realities, understanding how principals manage such situations and maintain stability is vital for policy and practice. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the role of principals in managing students' unrest and sustaining school stability in the Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. By identifying effective strategies and challenges, the research aims to contribute to both the academic literature and practical solutions in educational leadership.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State has witnessed recurrent incidents of students' unrest in secondary schools. These have taken the form of violent demonstrations, refusal to attend classes, damage to school property, and in some extreme cases, assaults on staff members. Such occurrences not only disrupt academic schedules but also erode discipline, lower academic performance, and damage the public image of schools (Okonkwo & Okeke, 2019). Despite interventions and efforts by the Ministry of Education, such as issuing guidelines for student discipline, deploying guidance counsellors, and increasing supervisory visits, these efforts have not fully resolved the issue. This then raises questions about the effectiveness of internal school leadership, particularly the role of the principal in preventing, managing, and resolving such crises. Principals are expected to serve not just as instructional leaders but also as peacekeepers, crisis managers, and negotiators. However, anecdotal evidence and field reports suggest that many principals in the Abakaliki Education Zone lack formal training in crisis management, and some work under severe resource constraints. In the absence of adequate strategies, unrest continues to threaten school stability and learning outcomes. This study addresses this gap, by systematically examining how principals in this zone manage students' unrest and maintain school stability.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the role of principals in managing students' unrest and maintaining school stability in public secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Identify the major causes of students' unrest in the Abakaliki Education Zone.
2. Examine strategies employed by principals to prevent and control students' unrest.
3. Assess the measures used by principals to restore and sustain stability after students' unrest.
4. Determine the challenges principals face in managing students' unrest and maintaining stability.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the major causes of students' unrest in public secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone?
2. What strategies do principals employ to prevent and manage students' unrest?
3. How do principals restore and sustain stability after incidents of students' unrest?
4. What challenges do principals face in managing student's unrest maintaining stability?

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for collecting data from a large population to describe existing phenomena without manipulating variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design enabled the researcher to gather information from principals and teachers about their experiences and perceptions regarding the management of students' unrest. The population consisted of all public secondary school principals and

teachers in the Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. According to records from the Ebonyi State Ministry of Education (2024), there are 45 public secondary schools in the zone, with 45 principals and approximately 1,200 teachers. A sample of 120 respondents was selected, comprising 30 principals and 90 teachers. The stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure proportional representation of principals and teachers from urban and rural schools in the zone. The instrument used was a researcher-developed questionnaire titled Principals' Role in Managing Students' unrest Questionnaire (PRMSUQ). The questionnaire was divided into four sections corresponding to the research questions. Responses were measured using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1). The instrument was validated by three experts, two in Educational Administration and Planning, and one in Research, Measurement and Evaluation Unit, Department of Science Education, all in the Faculty of Education, Ebonyi State University. The reliability of the instrument was established through a pilot test involving 15 respondents outside the study area. Cronbach's Alpha Method yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.86, indicating high internal consistency. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations, and frequency counts to answer the research questions. A mean score of 2.50 was used as the decision benchmark.

Results

Research Question One: What are the major causes of students' unrest in public secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone?

Table 1: Major causes of students' unrest in public secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD
1	Poor communication between students and school authorities	3.62	0.52
2	Perceived injustice in the enforcement of school rules	3.54	0.57
3	Inadequate learning facilities	3.48	0.60
4	Harsh disciplinary measures without due process	3.41	0.66
5	Peer influence and external agitation from community youth	3.38	0.63

Data in Table 1 shows that all the listed factors had mean scores above the 2.50 acceptance benchmark, indicating that respondents generally agreed these are major causes of students' unrest in public secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone. The highest mean (3.62) for *poor communication between students and school authorities* suggests it is the most prominent cause, while *peer influence and external agitation from community youth* (mean = 3.38) ranked lowest but still significant. The standard deviation values (ranging from 0.52 to 0.66) indicate moderate agreement among respondents, showing consistency in their opinions across the items.

Research Question Two: What strategies do principals employ to prevent and control students' unrest?

Table 2: Strategies principals employ to prevent and control students' unrest

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD
1	Regular student-principal dialogue sessions	3.65	0.51
2	Formation of functional student representative councils	3.59	0.56
3	Timely provision of basic school facilities	3.50	0.60
4	Early identification of potential troublemakers	3.44	0.64
5	Organizing seminars on discipline and conflict resolution	3.40	0.67

Data in Table 2 shows that all the strategies listed had mean scores above the 2.50 benchmark, indicating that respondents agreed these are effective approaches principals employ to prevent and control students' unrest in public secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone. The

highest mean (3.65) for *regular student-principal dialogue sessions* suggests that open communication is the most widely practiced and effective strategy, while *organizing seminars on discipline and conflict resolution* (mean = 3.40) ranked lowest but remains relevant. The standard deviation values (ranging from 0.51 to 0.67) indicate moderate consistency in respondents' opinions across the items.

Research Question Three: How do principals restore and sustain stability after incidents of students' unrest?

Table 3: Ways principals restore and sustain stability after incidents of students' unrest

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD
1	Holding reconciliation meetings between staff and students	3.58	0.55
2	Counselling sessions for involved students	3.53	0.58
3	Review of school rules and disciplinary procedures	3.50	0.61
4	Strengthening security measures	3.42	0.65
5	Collaborating with parents and community leaders	3.38	0.68

Data in Table 3 shows that all the listed strategies recorded mean scores above the 2.50 acceptance benchmark, indicating general agreement that principals employ these measures to restore and sustain stability after incidents of students' unrest in public secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone. The highest mean (3.58) for *holding reconciliation meetings between staff and students* suggests this is the most common and effective post-crisis management approach. The lowest mean (3.38) for *collaborating with parents and community leaders* indicates it is less frequently practiced, though still considered important. The standard deviation values (ranging from 0.55 to 0.68) show moderate variation, reflecting fairly consistent opinions among respondents.

Research Question Four: What challenges do principals face in managing students' unrest and maintaining stability?

Table 4: Challenges principals face in managing students' unrest and maintaining stability

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD
1	Lack of adequate funding for preventive programmes	3.61	0.54
2	Political interference in disciplinary matters	3.55	0.57
3	Fear of retaliation from students or external groups	3.47	0.61
4	Inadequate training in crisis management	3.42	0.65
5	Poor support from the Ministry of Education	3.38	0.68

Data in Table 4 shows that all the identified challenges had mean scores above the 2.50 acceptance benchmark, signifying that respondents agreed these are major obstacles principals encounter in managing students' unrest and maintaining stability in public secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone. The highest mean (3.61) for *lack of adequate funding for preventive programmes* indicates that financial constraints pose the most critical challenge, while *poor support from the Ministry of Education* (mean = 3.38) ranked lowest but remains a notable issue. The standard deviation values (ranging from 0.54 to 0.68) indicate moderate variation in responses, reflecting general consistency in participants' views.

Discussion

The study revealed that poor communication between students and school authorities is a primary cause of unrest in secondary schools within the Abakaliki Education Zone. This finding aligns with Obi (2016), who emphasized that where communication channels are blocked, students tend to develop misunderstandings and grievances, which, if not addressed, escalate into unrest. Effective school administration therefore depends heavily on openness,

timely feedback, and clear information dissemination. The finding that perceived injustice in rule enforcement triggers unrest, supports Nwankwo (2015), who argued that students are more likely to comply with regulations when they believe such rules are applied fairly and consistently. On the other hand, arbitrary punishments undermine authority and breed resistance. Additionally, inadequate learning facilities were cited as a cause of discontent. This supports the work of Eze and Okoro (2018), which linked overcrowded classrooms, insufficient laboratory equipment, and lack of recreational facilities with reduced student morale and increased agitation. Such conditions create frustration, which students may express through protests or disruptive behaviour. Finally, the role of peer influence and external agitation mirrors the position of Ogbu (2017), who found that youths from outside the school environment often encourage students to rebel, especially in politically charged communities.

The most frequently used strategies, student–principal dialogue sessions and functional student representative councils; reflect a shift toward participatory leadership. This finding supports Okeke (2020), who argued that inclusive administration fosters trust and allows students to voice concerns before they escalate into crises. The provision of basic school facilities and early identification of potential troublemakers also aligns with proactive discipline models, which emphasize problem prevention rather than crisis reaction (Adewumi, 2019). Organizing seminars on discipline and conflict resolution as found in this study is consistent with the recommendations of UNESCO (2017), which stressed that continuous education in peace-building reduces violent behaviors among youths

The research also showed that after students' unrest, principals in the zone prioritize reconciliation meetings and counselling sessions. This supports Onyekachi (2018), who advocated for a restorative justice approach in schools, focusing on healing relationships rather than relying solely on punitive measures. The review of school rules and strengthened security measures further confirm Olatunji's (2016) findings that post-crisis environments require both structural reforms and psychological healing for stability to be sustained. Collaboration with parents and community leaders also reinforces the theory of shared responsibility in school governance (Okafor, 2020). The study's identification of inadequate funding and political interference as major obstacles to effective crisis management is consistent with the work of Uzoechi (2019), who reported that Nigerian school administrators often face budget constraints and external pressures that limit their autonomy.

Conclusion

This study investigated the role of principals in managing students' unrest and maintaining stability in secondary schools in the Abakaliki Education Zone of Ebonyi State. The findings have shown that while principals employ several proactive and reactive strategies, their effectiveness is hindered by systemic challenges such as inadequate funding, political interference, and insufficient training in crisis management. The study concludes that transparent communication, fair disciplinary processes, adequate facilities, and participatory governance are key to preventing students' unrest. Ultimately, the responsibility for school stability does not rest solely on principals. Parents, community leaders, policymakers, and government agencies must all play active roles in creating environments where students feel heard, respected, and supported in their educational journey.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Principals should establish formal mechanisms such as regular town-hall meetings, suggestion boxes, and interactive digital platforms to promote transparent communication between school authorities and students. This will help address grievances before they escalate into unrest.

2. Disciplinary measures should be applied uniformly to all students to prevent perceptions of bias or favouritism. A documented code of conduct and a disciplinary review committee should be maintained to ensure fairness and accountability.
3. Government and school proprietors should prioritize funding for the renovation and maintenance of classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and recreational facilities, as improved learning environments reduce student frustration and agitation.
4. Principals and teachers should participate in regular workshops on crisis management, conflict resolution, and restorative justice practices to strengthen their competence in handling potential unrest effectively.

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