

## The Application of Referent Authority by Teachers in Enhancement of Classroom Role Performance: A Case of Machakos County in Kenya

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### Abstract

Teachers' classroom authority is fundamental for their successful role performance. Traditionally, teachers enjoyed legitimacy over the students, but that has been challenged by educational policy reforms and technology to a two-way social relationship with students referred to as referent authority. Unfortunately, school policies and school rules and regulations do not attract the use of personal characteristics in class as teachers are supposed to wield legitimacy. On the other hand, school curricula advocate for use of hidden curriculum as a way of achieving the whole personal performance. This article endeavored to establish the extent to which teachers used referent authority and the influence it had on their classroom role performance in Machakos County. A descriptive survey research design was employed. The target population was 369 principals, 4365 teachers, and 63973 form two and form Three students in 369 public secondary schools in the County. A total of 619 respondents were sampled using systematic, stratified, simple random and proportional sampling techniques. An interview schedule was used to collect data from the principals and questionnaires were used to gather data from teachers and students. Analyzed data from both teachers and students showed that they strongly agreed that teachers applied referent authority. Inferential statistics showed that referent authority had a significant influence on the role performance of teachers. This was also supported by head teacher responses who concluded that teachers who used referent authority in class influenced to a larger extent their performance. The study concluded that when teachers use more referent authority practices, their performance in the classroom improved more as compared to when they used the other three authority types. This study recommended that the Ministry of Education, universities/colleges and TSC need to review teacher training curricula to equip teachers in the use of practices and approaches that lead to referent authority.

**Keywords:** *Referent Authority, Teacher Classroom Role Performance, Class Management*

### 1.0 Introduction

Authority is the right conferred to individuals to make decisions and ensure that they are followed (Stangor, 2022). Singla (2015) opines that authority is separated from power as it has the element of legitimacy and is accompanied by discipline like habit formation. Power is differentiated as it involves punishment to instill fear and it is rather damaging. IGI Global (2022) observes that those in authority give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.

Authority is essential for an organization to achieve its goals. Accordingly, the fundamental utilization of authority is to influence the attitudes and actions of the people working under someone to do the right things at the correct time. It is important to think of what would happen if someone caused problems, who would settle conflicts or protect the rights of the people? In such cases, people in authority come in strong to provide order and security, manage conflict peacefully and fairly, and protect important rights and freedoms (Center for Civic Education, 2021).

Authority is equally needed in classroom settings to grow a suitable learning culture and to effectively promote positive behaviour (Eliot, 2009). According to Levin and Nolan (2014) and Savage & Savage (2010), there are five types of authority; legitimate, expert, referent, reward, and coercive authority. Of these, referent authority is more applicable in class as students learn although it is commonly assumed. Referent deals more with how the teacher is liked by students due to specific attributes inside or outside the course being studied. It centers on a valuable connection between learners and educators where learners view the instructors as individuals who care for them (Levin et al., 2014). Specifically, referent authority depends on the longing of the less powerful individual (the learner) to connect with and satisfy the more powerful individual who is the teacher. The stronger the student's attraction for identification with the teacher, the stronger the teacher's referent authority.

Research done by Cheema & Kitsantas (2014), Sleeter & Owuor (2011), and Pérez-Izaguirre (2019) found that positive teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships created deeper levels of engagement and had a positive effect on reducing disruptive behavior. Referent also supported the teacher in educating students within challenging classrooms as well as encouraging students' classroom participation. All these advantages of positive teacher-student relationships form part of teacher role performance.

The variable, teacher classroom role performance, in this article, was measured based on the regulation of interactions as Che, Shaharim & Abdullah (2017) found interaction enables the teacher to assess changes in students' behavior, strengthen students' senses, and inspire them to learn originally and innovatively. It also triggers students' thinking and steers clear of merely memorizing truths and knowledge. Management of students' time is another teacher's role. Resilient Educator (2013) enlightens that it is achieved by setting priorities and organizing lessons around the most important tasks. Effective communication also a vital role performance of a teacher as effective teaching requires only 50% knowledge and 50% communication skills (Sword, 2020). It also assists the teachers in maintaining students' discipline (Diloyan, 2017). Lastly, teacher role performance was measured by teachers' assessment of students' learning which is the ultimate goal of teachers' roles (TALIS, 2018).

Almulla (2015) argues that in the UK teachers used expert, referent, and reward more often than coercive authority. In sharp contrast, students who took part in the same study indicated that coercive authority accounted for a higher proportion of authority use. Likewise, Hawamdeh (2013) established that teachers in Jordan preferred referent authority and expert authority as they induced students to work hard and actually like the subject leading to a higher level of achievement. It also fulfilled students' need for care, passion, and respect fostering the teacher-student relationship. In the study other teachers felt that it reduced the feeling of alienation among students concluding that "Liking the teacher is one key leeway to obedience" (Hawamdeh, 2013). By contrast, teachers who opted for coercion failed to obtain students' cooperation.

In Africa however, research shows a difference, as more legitimate and coercive types are commonly used in schools. For instance, a study in South Africa Soldaat (2019) confirmed that corporal punishment was being used more which led to a defective teacher-learner relationship. Muthusamy (2015) expounded that the coercive authority in the class came in form of shouting, corporal punishment, and having clear rules. In Nigeria, also Umezina & Elendu (2012) established most teachers used punishment in form of; scolding, assaulting students verbally, and staying back after school to slash grass, fetch water, and wash school corridors or classrooms and toilets. Other teachers send students out of class, while others make them kneel or stand for a long time. Pulling students' ears or hair was also mentioned as a form of punishment. Akpokiniovo (2013) however established that in such a situation indiscipline did not end, instead, it escalated as the students got used to the punishments.

In Kenya, studies have found issues that deter teachers from using referent authority. Overcrowding in classes is one such factor. Ndethiu, Masingila, O'Connor, Khatete & Heath (2017) study covering the whole of Kenya, noted that in 15 lessons out of the 18 they observed, the classroom was congested with no space between the desks. The teachers were forced to stand in front of the class throughout the lesson. That, according to Blatchford, Bassett & Brown (2011) deterred teacher-to-student interaction and affected how teachers gave and obtained feedback. The large numbers in classes were attributed to the 100-percentage transition policy, envisaged by the Ministry of Education. The study result indicated that the teachers were not effective in utilizing expert, referent, and reward authority as they could not give attention to each student in their classes as a result of the large numbers.

The use of ICT in classroom has been found to provide interactive learning experiences and dialogue (Azmi, 2017). Teachers with good ICT command tend to attract learners who are associated with referent authority. The application of ICT has often not been used in Kenyan classrooms as a tool for teaching and learning due to inadequate computers, teachers' ICT skills and unreliable infrastructure was another deterrent (Bariu, 2020). In addition, corporal punishment is rampant in many Kenyan Public schools as guidance and counseling services seem to be inadequate. From the findings of the literature reviewed, issues in teachers' role performance have been reported such as indiscipline cases, poor academic performance, lack of teacher-student interaction, and communication issues.

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Worldwide, teachers are being encouraged to use more referent, expert, and reward authority in the classroom. This has challenged the traditional teachers in performance of their role as they feel they have lost their authority which is legitimate. Unfortunately, school policies, school rules, school environments, and regulations do not attract the use of personal characteristics in class as teachers are supposed to wield legitimacy. According to research conducted in Machakos County, teacher role performance had decreased steadily as there had been; minimal -teacher-classroom interaction and control increase in indiscipline cases, poor teachers-students communication, and students' poor achievements in their assessment KCSE included. Attempts to rectify the situation have been made in other areas relating to teacher role performance. However, there has been little work exploring the extent to which referent authority which is recommended has been used. Could the decrease in teacher role performance be a result of the authority teacher's use in class? This article assessed nine recommended referent authority practices which include teachers': attempts to make students know that they (teachers) were approachable, integrating personal interests of students in teaching, interacting with students as individuals, showing interest in learners' work by moving closer, sitting closer or near them to show interest in their work, talking to students after outbursts to show interest

in their students, learning and calling them by their names, making their students comfortable when they went to ask questions and lastly getting involved in important events in the students' lives outside school. This article intended to provide relevant feedback to teachers to understand the key referent authority practices that relate positively to their role performance.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Referent authority centers on a valuable connection between learners and educators where learners view the instructors as individuals who care for them (Levin et al., 2014). Specifically, referent authority depends on the longing of the less powerful individual (the learner) to connect with and satisfy the more powerful individual who is the teacher. The stronger students' attraction for identification with the teacher the stronger the teacher's referent power.

Teachers who use this kind of authority invest in personal assets such as charm, attractiveness, and prestigious accomplishments, and they are susceptible to persuading students to team up with them. The kind of teachers are those who have sensible values, are trustworthy, ethical, caring, and are interested in the student's welfare by liking them. They learn students' names, provide real inspiration and praise, tests and grades fairly, and make students feel safe and respected. They also invest emotionally in students (Savage et al., 2010).

In the US, the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET) (2018) opines that teachers should be approachable implying that they should possess the ability to make students comfortable when they come to ask questions. They extend warmth and comfort to the students. Besides, the teachers are willing to pay attention to their students especially those who do not have someone to listen to them at home. However, the study warns that listening does not amount to the teacher agreeing or being able to do what the students ask. Teachers who use referent authority command respect, they do not demand it.

NASSET (2018) informs that referent authority can also be gained by teachers who are considered to be funny, likable, humorous, light-hearted, or charming. It is understood when students want to associate, respect, and keep teachers who possess qualities judged to be cool by the students. Some teachers understand that to err is human and permit students to explore their "child" side without reprimanding them to grow up. These teachers can laugh at themselves when they blunder. When they make a joke, they ensure the joke focuses on the child but not making fun of the child. They do not blame students but rather they provide solutions.

Students know how to differentiate between a teacher who cares and when it is just about their job. Due to that, they will generally be more motivated to work hard for a teacher who truly cares (Savage et al., 2010). According to Madison (2014), two conditions must be developed for such a relationship to occur: teachers must realize that the students like them and secondly, they must communicate that they care about and like the students. That can be achieved through communication i.e., positive non-verbal motions, verbal and composed remarks, additional time, and consideration.

Cheema and Kitsantas (2014) did a study in the United States (US) to investigate the role of disciplinary climate in the classroom and students' Mathematics achievement and found out those classrooms that developed teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships created deeper levels of engagement. Such relationships were found to have a positive effect on reducing disruptive behavior. Teachers thus need to have the ability to create relationships with and among the students to educate students within challenging classrooms (Sleeter and Owuor, 2011). Besides, a study done by Camp (2011) in Missouri-Kansas City Named "The power of teacher-student relationships in determining student success" a value was found in which

students' academic achievement and behavioral success were made when teachers formed and maintained positive and supportive relationships with their students in class.

In Pérez-Izaguirre (2019) study, teachers who used this type of authority used a soft tone to give orders to students, while respecting students' working rhythm. They negotiated assignments and due dates to a certain extent, making them more flexible. They did not pressure them rather they tried to build a connection with students and get feedback on their activities. Their classes aimed to build close and trusting relationships with students. The finding was that students' classroom participation was encouraged. Based on that behaviour of the teachers, an adequate classroom environment for learning was created. That meant students viewed instructors as grown-ups they could trust in a scholastic climate, and felt enabled to work self-sufficiently, guided by teachers.

An earlier study done in Nigeria by Andabai and Basuo (2013) on teacher's personalities and classroom management of tertiary institutions found that teacher personality influenced students' motivation and class discipline. The study thus recommended that employers of teachers should not only consider educational qualifications, but teachers' personality should be strong criteria to be sought. The teachers ought to guarantee that their character talks decidedly to the learners in urging them to learn in tertiary establishments in Nigeria. The study however had results indicating the teachers' personalities affected teacher-student relationship. However, the study was done in tertiary education institutes in Nigeria and was only based on the teacher's personality. This study intends to investigate more indicators in authority and secondary schools in Kenya.

In conclusion, referent authority, while not sufficient in itself, has been ranked above all others in importance for creating a conducive classroom environment for good performance. It is along these lines that teachers can discover most confidence in their calling (Bailie, 2012). In brief, referent authority has been ranked the best for use by teachers whose intention is to improve their role performance in the classroom from the literature reviewed. However, there is a need to examine the extent to which the practices recommended for use in class settings have been used in public secondary schools in Machakos County as scanty findings exist to inform of the same.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The survey involved a mix of closed-ended questions that collected quantitative data and open-ended questions that collected qualitative research data (Orodho, 2019; Voxco Guide, 2021). Quantitative data was necessary to statistically test the extent of application, significant influence, and linearity between referent authority and teachers' role performance. Creswell (2014) demonstrates that collecting qualitative data was important to strengthen and mutually complement data produced by quantitative data.

The target population for this study included the principals, teachers, and Form two and Form Three students in the 369 public secondary schools in Machakos County. The students' target population for Form two and Form Three in Machakos County was 63973, while that of teachers was 4365 and the principals was 369 totaling 68707. The 10 percent rule as recommended by Mugenda & Mugenda (2003) was applied to sample the number of public schools to take part in the study. So 37 schools selected through systematic random sampling technique, took part in this study. A total number of 185 teachers were sampled from the five academic departments in public secondary schools namely; languages, sciences, humanities, technical, and mathematics departments. One teacher per department was randomly selected

from the identified schools. 397 students were sampled using Slovene formula as quoted in Yamane's (1973) and simple random sampling. So, the total number of respondents who participated in this study was 619 37 principals, 185 teachers, and 397 students.

The study employed two types of data collection instruments which were interview schedules for the principals and questionnaires, one for the teachers and another for the students. A pilot study was to validate the instruments while split half method was used to measure the reliability in which a score of 0.7 was obtained and was considered sufficient.

#### **4.0 Results and Discussion**

To establish the extent to which teachers' use of referent authority influenced their classroom role performance in Machakos County two questionnaires were used for both the teachers and the students. They had been requested to fill out a 5-likert scale, indicating the extent they agreed with referent authority and teachers' role performance indicators in their classroom. This was done by use of a tick (√) showing Strongly Disagree-1, Disagree-2, Undecided-3, Agree-4, and Strongly Agree-5.

Results obtained from the analyzed data showed that the most commonly applied practice in the area of referent authority by teachers based on strongly agree and agree was that 97.6% of the teachers agreed that they made students comfortable when they went to ask questions from the teachers, that was followed by teachers 96.6% who strongly agreed and agreed that they integrated personal interests of students in teaching, 95.2% indicated that they knew and called the students by their names while 94.6%, indicated they attempted to make students know that they were approachable while 91.1% talking to students after outbursts to show they were interested in their affairs. The last three practices that were least scored by the teachers were; 88.7% demonstrated that they encouraged students to talk to them freely and correct the teachers when they were wrong. Some 88.1% of teachers indicated they moved closer or sat near students to show interest and lastly, 84.6% of teachers involved themselves in student's important events outside school.

As for the students, the practice which they ranked first as being used by their teachers was that 94.5% indicated that teachers interacted with them as individuals which seemed to be in agreement with their teachers who indicated that they made their students feel comfortable when interacting. The students reported that 93.9% of their teachers knew and called them by their name a practice that came third in the teachers' response. The practice ranked number three was by the students was 91.6% that teachers show interest in our work by moving closer in class which was scored as the second last practice by the teachers' responses. Among the least rated practices by the students were teachers praising students when they accomplish tasks (85.1%, n=324) and showing interest in knowing students' different personalities and social needs (82.4%, n=314) in that order.

These results are almost similar as it is clear that the students and their teachers show that they interacted freely and the students were comfortable with their teachers which is a requirement of the teacher who uses referent authority. Although teachers involving themselves in student's important events outside school scored the least mean in this study, it is however good to note that in this study, teachers talking to students after outbursts/to show they were interested in their affairs was rated highly.

Nevertheless, and generally, the mean score for both teachers and students was the same 4.37 on the use of referent implying that they strongly agreed that referent authority is used in the classroom in public secondary schools in Machakos County. This is commendable as literature shows that although referent authority is not sufficient in itself, it is ranked above all others in

importance for creating a conducive classroom environment for good performance (Baillie, 2012).

The principals had been requested to explain the referent practices teachers use in their schools to increase interaction between themselves and the students and among the students themselves and the level of influence it had on students' performance. Amongst the practices mentioned were; peer teaching, group discussion, and question-and-answer methods of teaching.

For instance, one principal explained that:

*General group discussions, questions and answers, forums, and participation discussions were used by the teachers in my school. For interaction among students themselves, a lot of peer teaching goes on in the classes whereby the teachers use what we call "set pacers" to teach the others of course under the supervision of the teachers.*

Further, a principal specified that:

*One method used by teachers at times is the use of class symposiums for students to interact amongst themselves and interclass competition where a stream competes against another. However, this is done once in a while due to time factors.*

The responses from the two principals implied that peer teaching increased interaction between the students - student interaction and also teacher-student interaction. This is similar to Cheema & Kitsantas (2014) and Pérez-Izaguirre (2019) recommendation that referent authority practice made the teachers more attractive to the students thus enhancing teacher role performance specifically, having a positive effect on reducing disruptive behavior

Additionally, a principal had this interesting account:

*In my school, we have a program where we bring back students who were best students in the previous Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) to assist in peer teaching as they wait to be admitted to the university under the supervision of teachers. They also serve as a mentor to the other students out of class. Those who come from far we house them in the school compound. We also give them some stipend which some save to use at the university.*

The bringing back the students who performed better in KCSE meant more peer teaching took place in the classroom which is advocated for in referent authority. Apart from knowing their peers by their names, the student teachers, attracted their peers as they were considered heroes thus the other students wanted to be identified with them as observed when the teachers used referent authority (Levin et al., 2014). The student teacher did not possess legitimate authority. For them to succeed, they were left with little but to use referent and expert authority. They did not shout to the students, they respected them' they were more flexible, and did not pressure the students. Pérez-Izaguirre (2019) study indicated that such practices endeared the students to the teachers which led to improved academic performance which is the superlative role performance of a teacher.

In addition, a principal replied that:

*Teachers use team teaching whereby teachers who teach same subject divide it in terms of topics one is interested in or at times they go to class together (two or three teachers) in what we call lesson study here. Mainly veteran teachers pair themselves with new ones. During the lesson, they share insights and challenge students to be more engaged.*

These practices led to the classes to be interactive. It also encouraged the students to work in collaboration with their peers as they saw their teachers working as teams in classroom. Relationships were also created in the form of teacher-teacher and teacher-student

relationships. The power of such relationships cannot be underestimated as Camp (2011) asserted that value was found in students’ academic achievement and behavioral success when positive and supportive relationships were maintained. Besides, team teaching could also be interpreted by the students to mean teacher cared for them more so in the lesson study where more than two teachers attended class. Those teachers who were perceived to be caring and not just about their jobs were found to motivate students to work hard (Savage et al. 2010).

Further another principal expounded that:

*Some of the teachers are humorous and that spurs a lot of reactions from the students bringing about interactions between themselves and the teachers. As I do observe some teachers especially start their lesson with short stories related to their topics, then ask questions which lead to the topic. Those who called their students by their names had an advantage as they would prompt interaction easily.*

NASET (2018) observed that teacher’s humor fell under referent authority practices. Teachers who were considered to be funny, likable, humorous, light-hearted, or charming were judged to be cool by the students. They were respected and that encouraged the students to be attentive leading to improved academic performance. A linear regression model was fitted to test the formulated hypothesis that: “there is no statistically significant influence on teachers’ role performance as a result of their use of referent authority in public secondary schools in Machakos County” and results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Model Summary on Application of Referent Authority Statistics**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1. Teachers	.760 <sup>a</sup>	.577	.559	5.69097
2. Students	.850 <sup>a</sup>	.723	.690	4.57996

a. Predictors: (Constant), Referent Authority

Table 1 results indicate that the R<sup>2</sup> statistics = 0.577 and 0.723 imply that 57.7% and 72.3% variation in role performance could be explained by referent authority indicators for teachers and students respectively as per the model summary statistics. That means that only 42.3% and 27.7% of the variation in teacher role performance could not be explained by teachers’ application of referent authority practices from teachers and students respectively.

The overall regression model for teachers and students was statistically significant  $F(1, 167) = 44.820, p < .005$  and  $F(1, 379) = 90.145, p < .005$  respectively as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: F- Value, Means Squares, and the Significant Level**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Teachers	Regression	6.068	1	6.068	44.824	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	22.743	168	0.135		
	Total	28.811	169			
Students	Regression	27.281	1	27.281	90.145	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	114.700	379	0.303		
	Total	141.982	380			



A regression model test of the Hypothesis on application of referent authority was set and conducted and the findings are depicted in Table 3.

**Table 3: Regression Model Test of Hypothesis on Application of Referent Authority**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
Students	(Constant)	.713	0.226		12.018	0.000
	Referent	0.745	0.038	0.760	8.714	0.000
Teachers	(Constant)	6.685	0.883		10.331	0.000
	Referent	0.795	0.035	0.850	12.856	0.000

The regression results in Table 3, indicate a positive linear relationship between teachers' application of referent authority on role performance as indicated by the model standardized coefficients. The findings imply utilization of referent authority has a positive influence on classroom role performance. The significant value is  $< 0.05$ , therefore the null hypothesis that there is a statistically significant relationship between teachers' use of reward authority and classroom role performance was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was adopted. That means any increase in teachers' use of referent authority practices would contribute positively to teachers' role performance.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The study concluded that teachers in Machakos County who use referent authority ended up performing their role as classroom teachers better than those who use other types of authority. This is because this type of authority creates a relationship between the teacher and student which makes it easier for teacher role performance to be achieved.

## 6.0 Policy Recommendations

Recommend that head teachers manual may include strategies to increase referent authority. The induction of new teachers may emphasize more on connecting with students. Teacher curriculum may be enhanced to include more on referent authority.

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