

Social Comparisons and Decisions Making Among Teacher-Members of Secondary School Disciplinary Panels

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Abstract: Educational institutions continue to adopt group decision making to address student related behaviours. However, incidences of student behaviour problems continue to rise in schools. The present study explored social comparisons and Decisions making among teacher-members of secondary school disciplinary panels. A multiple case study research design was adopted in this study. The sample size comprised 10 teachers. Data was collected using interviews and analysed thematically. The findings reported lateral, upward and downward social comparisons among the teachers which resulted in cautious shifts in decisions on offending students with behavioural problems. Implications have been discussed. There is need for designing a training manual in group decision making for teachers in schools.

Keywords: Social Comparison, Cautious Decisions, Risky decisions, Cautious Decisions, Shifts in Decisions, Teachers, Secondary Schools

1. Introduction

Social comparison, a social psychology phenomenon which was advanced by Festinger (1954) continues to receive lots of attention in education research. According to Gilbert et al., in Miao et al., (2018), social comparison among individuals has existed for decades. Festinger argue that individuals in a group always engage in comparisons with others on their own opinions and abilities (Festinger, 1954; Miao et al., 2018). Festinger's assumption that individuals are engaged in continuous comparison with others implies that human beings are interested in evaluating themselves to build their self-esteem. The direction of comparison is dependent on an individual's view of their own perspective with others (Arigo et al., 2020). Therefore, there are types of social comparisons namely upward comparison, downward comparison, and lateral comparison. When individuals compare themselves with those doing better than them or those they view as more superior, then this is known as upward comparison (Heaton, 2015).

The upward comparison takes place when individuals look at those they view as more superior and they emulate them (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007) and it can make very strong impact on people's thoughts and actions (Rancourt et al., 2015).

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Downward social comparison is with regards to an individual looking unto others who are seen to be low and worse off than themselves and this helps to boost their self-esteem (Heaton, 2015). On the other hand, when individuals are engaged in comparisons with their peers and people of similar age then they are said to engage in lateral social comparisons (Arigo et al., 2020). Thus, in upward social comparisons, individuals are motivated by other individuals' progresses and thus they are looking after the successful individuals to attain similar levels of success (Arigo et al., 2020). However, in downward social comparison, people are mostly threatened by their self-esteem, they compared with individuals that they are better than to enhance their self-worth (Arigo, et al., 2020).

Making decisions involves picking one choice from many available alternatives with an aim of achieving a desired outcome (March, 2010; Eisenfuhr, 2011). One of the most crucial functions which is crucial for operations in organizations including schools is decision making (Drucker, 2010). The importance of decision making in organizations has resulted in institutions adopting a group of individuals to carry out this task and not an individual. Thus, organizations have groups, teams, or committees responsible for making critical decisions which help in running day to day affairs. Group decision making is believed to be of great benefits including diverse knowledge available in solving a problem, more alternatives of opinions, more understood perspectives and a more acceptable decision is arrived at by the members of the task group involved (Lunenburg, 2011). Therefore, members in each task group generate options, evaluate them and endeavor to reach a decision that best addresses the problem at hand (DuBrin, 2012).

Schools are expected to adopt decision making mechanisms which are assumed to be rational, which implies that teachers and school principals make decisions, and in a behavioral problem of learners, there are alternatives to a problem, decision outcomes are analyzed, decision criteria are identified and there is high probability of making optimum choice among the available alternatives of decisions after which the decision made is implemented (Towler, 2010). Thus, the rational decision-making process comprises involves identification of a problem, generation of alternative solutions, evaluation of alternatives and finally the best decision made is implemented. Thus, school decision making is believed to be a logical sequence of activities meant to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed in implementing the decisions arrived at (Lunenburg, 2010).

Decision making in schools is expected to be participative in most countries in Africa. For example, in schools are expected to embrace collective decision making to bring stakeholders together (Mokoena, 2011). Similarly, in Namibia, principals of educational institutions constantly engage with other stakeholders namely teachers, students and parents (Smith & Amushigamo, 2016). Similarly, in Botswana, decision making in schools regarding students' behaviours are expected to involve all members of school councils which include students' representatives, staff representatives and parents' representatives. In Kenya, the decision making on students' behaviours are expected to involve the school principal, teachers, students, parents and the Sub-County education office. This is meant to address the students' behavior problems which continue to rise among learners in secondary schools. Magai, et al., (2018) reiterate the emotional and behavioral problems which continue to be exhibited among students in schools in Kenya. Moreover, the behavior problems among students in Kenyan secondary schools pose a great threat to the smooth running of schools, safety of other learners are at stake, and it affects teaching programmes.

Each of the Kenyan schools manage students' behavior problems by teachers who form a disciplinary panel. School disciplinary panels consist of teachers drawn from different departments within school, varied gender, age and teaching experiences among other significant factors considered in the appointment. It has been reported that decisions that are meant to address behavior problems among students in secondary schools are meant to be made by a group of teachers because of the strength of many diverse opinions which are available in addressing problems in school. Teachers forming such panels often make decisions regarding disciplinary offences affecting students after seeking each other's opinions, evidence presented, and ample discussions held regarding the problem under investigation. During the group deliberations, teachers experience a phenomenon known as the risky shift which may lead to risky decisions or cautious decisions. According to Stoner (1961) and Kirchler et al., (2017) group polarization explains changes in levels in the decisions that are made by individuals in the group. Risky shift occurs when individuals in a group make decisions which tend towards a risky level or option regarding a problem being investigated while the cautious shift occurs when individuals tend to be careful meant to avoid any potential harm or danger to an individual (Stoner, 1961; Kirchler et al., 2017). Cautious decisions in disciplinary panels aim to consider guidance and counselling sessions for learners with behavior problems.

School disciplinary panels operate as small social groups which adopt decision making that involves all members of the panel. The decisions that emanate from the disciplinary panels assist schools in making appropriate steps towards addressing problem behaviours among students. Thus, school disciplinary panels are susceptible to shifts in decisions leading resulting from lateral, upward or downward social comparisons among teachers. Thus, the problem of the study could be stated that, how does social comparisons influence decisions of students in disciplinary panels?

The specific research questions of the study were stated as follows: (i) *How does lateral social comparison influence adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?* (ii) *In what ways does upward social comparison affect adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?*, and (iii) *What is the influence of downward social comparison on adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?*

2. Literature Review

Previous studies on social comparisons and cautious decisions exist in varied fields, such as psychology, economics and business but very limited studies were available in the education context. Bolton and Ockenfels (2009) study reported that participants in small social groups always make a safe choice when they compare their decisions with other members of the group. Social comparison brings changes in decisions on financial matters among individuals (Bursztyn et al., 2014). In an experiment involving lottery choice, Bault et al., (2008) study reported that social comparisons existed among the participants and that individuals tend to make decisions towards social gains with others. Linde and Sonnemans (2012) reported that individuals make comparisons with others in making financial decisions and the decisions tend to be cautious in nature. In a study that involved participants in gambling, Dijk (2017) reported that participants engage in risky choices when in groups as compared to individuals who prefer cautious choices. Similarly, Fornasari et al., (2020) reported that when deciding for others, individuals often engage in cautious decisions as they make social comparisons in a group. Pahlke et al., (2015) also reiterate that in financial decision making, individuals are often engaged in cautious decisions. Bolton, et al., (2015)

also reported that in most decision-making processes in small groups, there is a tendency for most individuals to make cautious decisions. Eriksen and Kvaløy (2010) reported that individuals make risky decisions when in group settings as compared to when alone.

In an experimental study involving dyads, Mukherjee (2010) reported that individuals in groups tend to make cautious decisions when in groups due to social comparison with other members. In another study, Gerber et al., (2018) showed that most individuals always engage in upward social comparison but there was no evidence for downward comparison. Wang, et al., (2016) reiterate that social comparison influences group deliberations. Margolis and Dust (2019) indicate social comparison with other available group members with more attractive members lead to shift in decisions. Gamba et al., (2017) argues that social comparison makes groups make shifts in decisions. Fernández-Theoduloz et al., (2019) reiterate that social comparison among individuals makes shifts in decisions. In contrast, Linde and Sonnemans (2012) study reported that social comparisons enhance decision making among individuals. Linde and Sonnemans (2015) study reported that social comparisons make individuals to change their decisions. Similarly, Schwerter (2013) also indicate that social comparison enhances risky decisions when individuals are engaged in group tasks. In a financial decision-making study, Kacperczyk et al., (2015) reported that social comparisons during low performance often leads to risky decisions by managers in the Mutual Fund industry and this raises concern and fear of negative individual consequences among employees. Ding et al., (2018) argues that downward comparison enhances more positive impacts. Raue et al., (2020) study reported that upward social comparisons enhance shifts in group decisions.

In a Kenyan study, Aloka (2022) established that there was a low positive relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among the first-year university students. The social comparison regression model was adequate to predict the level of academic buoyancy among first year university students. In another related research, Sun, et al., (2023) reported that in outgroup contexts, individuals are more risk-seeking in upward comparison conditions than in downward comparison conditions. However, the difference disappears in ingroup contexts. Similarly, Tor and Garcia (2023) argue that individuals reasonably turn to social comparisons to reduce uncertainty before, during, and after competition. However, the extent to which they do so, and the behavioral consequences of social comparisons often fail to match the potential benefits of improved self-evaluation. In addition, Matthews and Kelemen (2024) reiterate that individuals are less able to shed off their own flaws and, in this way, individuals do not have the luxury of “subtracting” so easily in a way to compete on a dimension. Moreover, Peng, et al., (2025) argue that in the downward comparison condition, a stronger delta/theta power was correlated with a less risky decision. Similar findings are reported in a study by Pan and Xing (2025) which found that individuals were more sensitive to monetary vocabulary after being primed with upward social comparison, which may explain the internal mechanism of the specificity effect. In a related study, Tian, Li and Zhang (2025) showed that social comparison significantly predicted appearance anxiety. Finally, Petrescu, et al., (2025) concludes that social comparison is a major predictor of decision making among individuals in a group. From previous studies reviewed, most of them were in business, psychology and economics, but there seems to be a dearth of literature in educational institutions.

2.1 The present study

The present study examined social comparison and adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools in Kenya.

2.2 Research Questions of the Study

The research questions of the study were stated as follows:

1. How does lateral social comparison influence adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?
2. In what ways does upward social comparison affect adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?
3. What is the influence of downward social comparison on adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

Within a qualitative method, the study adopted a multiple case study to guide the data collection. Gall, et al., (1996) argues that this research design involves doing in-depth study among participants from their own perspectives in varied but similar contexts. In addition, Yin (1994) reiterate that this design ensures that the findings are strong because the research patterns are replicated in similar contexts.

3.2 Research participants

A total sample size of 10 teachers from the mixed gender (co-educational) schools obtained using simple random and purposive sampling techniques. 10 participants is appropriate as reported that such samples for multiple case studies often "lie under 50" respondents (Ritchie et al., 2003). The teachers were obtained using random and purposive sampling techniques because the participants comprised varied participants, the more experienced teachers, less experienced teachers, young teachers, older teacher-members of disciplinary panels (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton (2002).

3.3 Research Tools

The interviews were used to collect data. This involved obtaining data from individual teachers in which data was audio recorded in readiness for analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviews ensured probing for details, and it also provided for follow-up with the teachers after the process (Eliahoo (2011). The credibility of interview data was ascertained using methods such as thick description of data collection procedure, prolonged engagement with research participants, peer debriefing and member checking.

3.4 Procedure

The researcher first sought ethical clearance from The National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya. The researcher then made appointments with the principals of the two selected schools. On the day of data collection, teachers were issued with consent forms, where they read the procedure, expectations, and those who accepted to participate in the research signed consent forms, after which they handed the forms to the researcher. The duration of each of the interviews took approximately 45 minutes. The participants were debriefed after the interview sessions. The qualitative data was safely stored in preparation for data analysis.

3.5 Data analysis

The interview data was analyzed thematically. Thematic framework involves transcribing interviews, coding and grouping data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview data was grouped according to the research objectives of the study (Boyatzis, 1998). Three main themes of social comparisons emerged during grouping of data, namely, lateral social comparison, upward social comparison and downward social comparison. Data was grouped according to themes, and they answered the research questions of the study namely, (i) *How does lateral social comparison influence adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?* (ii) *In what ways does upward social comparison affect adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?*, and (iii) *What is the influence of downward social comparison on adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?*

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Results

The study findings reported three themes namely, lateral, upward and downward social comparisons and cautious shifts among teachers. The themes are presented and discussed as follows.

4.1.1 Theme 1: Lateral comparison

This theme was about comparisons among teachers who perceived themselves to be peers and contemporaries in the school. This theme answered the research question which stated that: *How does lateral social comparison influence adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?* The participants reported that there was a disciplinary case presented in one school of a grade 9 learner accused of vandalism. The learner was accused of destroying other learners' textbooks in class during a verbal exchange with another learner. In the group meeting, other members indicated that the accused girl did not destroy the books intentionally but because of the carelessness of the offending student. The panel members argued that making the girl pay for the destroyed books would make her leave school and this would lead to destruction of her life completely. Therefore, teachers shifted their decisions to a light punishment within school and recommendation for counselling. Some interview excerpts from panel members on cautions decisions made regarding this case are presented as follows:

"I had initially decided that the girl who had destroyed other learners' textbooks be suspended from school and that she should have been put to buy new books to replace the destroyed ones. However, my colleagues had a different opinion about the accused girl, that she was from a very poor home background and making harsh punishment would make her leave school and this destroys her completely. I changed my decision after hearing what my colleagues in the panel had felt about the case. I finally also felt that we needed to recommend that the girl be taken for counselling within in the school" (Teacher, 3)

"My earlier decision before we went for the disciplinary meeting was that the offence committed warranted suspension or another harsh punishment for the girl who destroyed

another learners' text books. During the disciplinary hearing, the girl was very remorseful and indicated that it was the other learner's mistake which led to the destruction of textbooks. I also listened to other fellow class teachers present their views and I changed my decision so that we forgive the girl and recommend that she undergoes counselling in school" (Teacher, 6)

"During the meeting, my initial decision in the case that was presented shifted when I listened to my colleagues' evidence about the case. I then changed my decision to agree with my other colleagues who had concrete evidence" (Teacher 4)

"The meeting brought to us lots of evidence which led to some of us changing our decisions. I changed my decision when I compared my views with those of other colleagues at the meeting. I later realized that the student offender needed another chance since she has not been making offences at school" (Teacher 7)

The results presented above argue that lateral social comparisons occurred among the disciplinary panel members during decision making process and it led to shift in decisions to cautious ones which led to reformation of the accused learners within school. The members engaged in lateral comparisons by seeking opinions from other members and this made the teachers adjust their decisions to cautious ones. The findings also indicated that downward comparisons existed, and older teachers changed their decisions to concur with those of the younger teachers.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Upward comparisons

This theme answered the research question: *In what ways does upward social comparison affect adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?* The upward comparisons take place when individuals look up to those that are above them or viewed to be better off on certain aspects (Yip & Kelly, 2013). During the disciplinary hearing processes, there were upward comparisons among the members in terms of perceived position of seniority in school, age, teaching experience and other factors. In one disciplinary hearing panel, there was a learner who assaulted another during class lessons. However, there were perspectives brought up by more experienced teachers who indicated that the time was critical for the girl and that she needed to be in school to perform well in her exams. This led to change to cautious decisions which included guidance and counselling. The results on cautious decisions are presented:

"My initial decision on this case was that the girl was to be suspended for having engaged in assaulting another girl in school. I had thought that the offence was a major one and this needed a tough disciplinary sanction so that the accused girl can learn from her actions. However, during the disciplinary hearing meeting, the senior teacher in the school argued that the girl was almost doing her final exams and that suspending the girl would make her drop out of school. The senior teacher argued that the school board of management would also not concur with the suspension decision if recommended by the disciplinary panel. I therefore changed my decision to counseling so that the girl would be monitored within school" (Teacher, 10)

“My decision before the disciplinary hearing was that the girl accused of assault needed to be given harsher punishment because according to the school rules, such an offence attracts heavy punishment. I changed my mind when I heard the opinions of other senior teachers within the disciplinary panel that suspension or any harsh punishment would be detrimental to the accused learner. The girl needed to be in school at this critical time to prepare well for her final examinations. I therefore changed my decision to agree with what the senior teacher recommended that there was need for seconding the girl four counselling” (Teacher, 8)

“In our disciplinary meeting, I had initially thought that punishment was needed. However, after listening to our deputy principal present his evidence on the matter, I changed my mind and agreed that there is need to give caution to the student” (Teacher 2)

The results indicated that young panel members changed their decisions to the recommendations by the senior teachers and the young teachers changed their decisions to the recommendations by the senior members of the disciplinary panels.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Downward comparisons

Downward comparison involves the comparison to an inferior target, and people compare with those that are “worse off” than them in certain aspects (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). This theme answered the research question which stated that: *What is the influence of downward social comparison on adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools?* In one instance, a male learner in grade 9 walked out of school without permission from the administration. Thus, it was reported that the male learner took one hour out of school, but he argued that he went for medication at the nearby hospital. However, members changed so that this new learner could be pardoned because he was yet to learn the school rules are regulations. Some interview excerpts from the teacher respondents are presented below:

“I had thought the case was serious when it was first mentioned to us that a boy had sneaked out of school. However, when it was reported that it was a new learner who had walked out of school, I changed my mind, that he needs to be given direction by older learners in their class. It was a case of ignorance on the new learner who walked to hospital without asking for permission from the teachers on duty as required. I changed my decision when I realized that young teachers who were the majority in the meeting had decided that the boy be pardoned and taught the rules in the school. We gave him the copy of the document which has the school rules and regulations so that he could go through them” (Teacher, 1)

“The case was interesting, the new learner walked out of school without permission as expected. We decided to pardon the new student and only gave him a warning that he should not do so again. I agreed with other younger teachers’ decision that he be given the set of rules and regulations so that he could read and understand them to be aware of

school expectations on all learners within and outside school. My decision was in line with other younger teachers' decision regarding this case today” (Teacher, 9)

“I had to listen to views of younger teachers who had more information about the case that was presented at the disciplinary panel meeting. My initial decision had changed after listening to views of teachers who had more evidence to present” (Teacher 5)

From the two interview excerpts, downward comparisons existed, and the older teachers changed their decisions to concur with those of the younger teachers. The cautious decisions that were made were meant to enhance the reformation of the accused learner within school and giving them the opportunity to learn more about the school rules and regulations.

4.2 Discussion

The study findings reported that individuals engage in lateral, upward and downward social comparisons. that lateral social comparisons occurred among the disciplinary panel members during decision making process and it led to shift in decisions to cautious ones which led to reformation of the accused learners within school. The results indicated that young teachers changed their decisions to the recommendations by the senior teachers and the young teachers changed their decisions to the recommendations by the senior members of the disciplinary panels. The findings also indicated that downward comparisons existed, and the older teachers changed their decisions to concur with those of the younger teachers. Similarly, Dijk (2017) reported that participants engage in risky choices when in groups as compared to individuals who prefer cautious choices. In addition, Fornasari et al., (2020) reported that when deciding for others, individuals often engage in cautious decisions as they make social comparisons in a group. Moreover, Margolis and Dust (2019) indicate social comparison with other available group members with more attractive members leading to shift in decisions. Gamba et al., (2017) argues that groups make shifts in decisions. Fernández-Theoduloz et al., (2019) reiterate that interaction among teachers lead to shifts in decisions. Ding et al., (2018) argues that downward comparison enhances more positive impacts. Raue et al., (2020) study reported that upward social comparisons enhance shifts in group decisions. The findings also agree with Festinger's assumption that individuals are engaged in continuous comparison with others imply that human beings are interested in evaluating themselves to build their self-esteem (Arigo et al., 2020). Therefore, there are types of social comparisons namely upward comparison, downward comparison, and lateral comparison. In contrast, Linde and Sonnemans (2012) study reported that social comparisons enhance decision making among individuals.

The study reported that social comparisons lead to shifts in decisions. In agreement, Aloka (2022) established that there was a low positive relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among the first-year university students. Similarly, Sun, et al., (2023) reported that in outgroup contexts, individuals are more risk-seeking in upward comparison conditions than in downward comparison conditions. In addition, Tor and Garcia (2023) also agreed that individuals reasonably turn to social comparisons to reduce uncertainty before, during, and after competition. In addition, Matthews and Kelemen (2024) also concur that individuals are less able to shed off their own flaws and, in this way, individuals do not have the luxury of “subtracting” so easily in a way to compete on a dimension. The findings also agree with most recent research by Peng, et al., (2025) which indicated that in the downward

comparison condition, a stronger delta/theta power was correlated with a less risky decision. Similar findings are reported by Pan and Xing (2025) that individuals were more sensitive to monetary vocabulary after being primed with upward social comparison, which may explain the internal mechanism of the specificity effect. Finally, Petrescu, et al., (2025) concludes that social comparison is a major predictor of decision making among individuals in a group.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that lateral social comparison influenced adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools. The teachers engaged in lateral comparisons by seeking opinions from other members and this made the teachers adjust their decisions to cautious ones. The study also concludes that upward social comparison affect adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools. Thus, young teachers changed their decisions to the recommendations by the senior teachers, and the young teachers changed their decisions to the recommendations by the senior teachers in the disciplinary panels. Finally, the study concludes that downward social comparison affects the adjustment to cautious decisions among teacher-members of disciplinary panels in secondary schools. Thus, downward comparisons exist in disciplinary panels and the older teachers changed their decisions to concur with those of the younger teachers. In conclusion, the study reported social comparisons occur when teachers engage in group tasks. The social comparisons led to cautious decisions on offending students with behavioural problems. The implication of this finding is that there is need to train the teachers on decision making before being appointed in such administrative positions. Another implication is that there is need for broad based membership and that teachers are not only be the stakeholders. The broad-based composition would allow for both cautious and risky decisions from members of disciplinary panels which would help address varied behaviour problems that emanate from learners.

6. Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study is that participants might have been affected to be socially desirable when being interviewed. Thus, during interviews, teachers might have had restraint in disclosing certain information about decision making about their school disciplinary panels. However, the study objectives were still achieved and the interviews provided detailed, accurate and corroborative information which assisted to answer the research questions of the study.

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