Group-Based Assignments: Member Reactions to Social Loafers

Joseph Reginard Milinga[1], Ezelina Angetile Kibonde[1], Venance Paul Mallya[1] and Monica Asagwile Mwakifuna[1]

1) Mkwawa University College of Education, University of Dar es Salaam. United Republic of Tanzania

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Joseph Reginard Milinga
Mkwawa University College

Ezelina Angetile Kibonde
Mkwawa University College

Venance Paul Mallya
Mkwawa University College

Monica Asagwile Mwakifuna
Mkwawa University College

Abstract

Understanding how student teachers undertake their group work may provide a solid foundation for developing essential skills required for the 21st Century teachers, and subsequently help improve group-based assessment in higher education. However, social loafing has been found to interfere with this assessment mode. This article reports on undergraduate student teachers' processes involved in doing group-based assignments amid the existence of social loafing tendencies amongst group members. It focuses on how students organize themselves in doing the work and their reactions to social loafers. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews involving 18 purposefully and conveniently selected participants from Mkwawa University College of Education in Tanzania. The findings indicated procedures that students observe in doing their group assignments such as the formulation of own group norms and rules. Additionally, it was found that group members employed humanitarian, punitive and threatening approaches as they reacted to social loafers. The article concludes that proper planning for students' group assignments is important, in which both instructors and students should play their roles accordingly to overcome the problem of social loafing when the use of group-based assessments is indispensable within higher education contexts.

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Distribución de Tareas en Grupo: Reacciones a los Holgazanes Sociales

Joseph Reginard Milinga
Mkwawa University College

Ezelina Angetile Kibonde
Mkwawa University College

Venance Paul Mallya
Mkwawa University College

Monica Asagwile Mwakifuna
Mkwawa University College

Resumen

Comprender cómo los estudiantes de profesorado realizan su trabajo en grupo puede proporcionar una base sólida para desarrollar las habilidades esenciales requeridas para los maestros del Siglo XXI y ayudar a mejorar la evaluación grupal en la educación superior. Sin embargo, la actividad social interfiere con este modo de evaluación. Este artículo informa sobre los procesos de estudiantes de profesorado de pregrado en la realización de tareas grupales en medio de la existencia de tendencias sociales entre los miembros del grupo. Se centra en cómo los estudiantes se organizan para hacer el trabajo y sus reacciones ante los holgazanes sociales. Los datos recopilados por entrevistas semiestructuradas incluyeron a 18 participantes de Mkwawa University College of Education en Tanzania seleccionados a propósito y convenientemente seleccionados. Los resultados indicaron los procedimientos que los estudiantes observan al realizar sus tareas grupales, como la formulación de normas y reglas propias del grupo. Además, se encontró que los miembros del grupo empleaban enfoques humanitarios, punitivos y amenazadores cuando reaccionaban ante los holgazanes sociales. En conclusión: en las asignaciones grupales de los estudiantes es importante que instructores y estudiantes desempeñen sus roles para superar los problemas.

Palabras clave: asignación de grupos, educación superior, reacciones de los miembros, actividades sociales, teoría del intercambio social

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U nderstanding how student teachers carry out their group assignments as part of their continuous assessment can be an essential step in efforts to improve assessment practices within higher education (HE) contexts. It is considered an important step because the use of group work has been found to shoulder different challenges besides its potential benefits being documented in the empirical as well as theoretical literature. From the literature, it is learned that the use of group work has been emphasized for various reasons as part of continuous assessment in HE. Specially, the benefits associated with the use of group work include its ability to promote collaborative learning skills among students (Hassanien, 2006), as well as enhancing students' academic achievement and socialization (Frykedal & Chiriac, 2011). It also improves task performance and the development of learners' critical thinking skills (Petty, 2009). Indeed, the use of group work is also considered an effective strategy in addressing diversity issues in education provision (Morgan, 2004; Opdecam & Everaert, 2018). Certainly, the use of group work is believed to facilitate the development of some of the skills and competences being emphasized as important in the 21st Century (Geisinger, 2016; Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe & Terry, 2013; Mishra & Mehta, 2017).

Despite the potential benefits of using group work in education, working in groups is not always a rewarding experience especially when justice (that is, distributive, procedural, and transactional) is not observed when students engage in group assignments (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). One of the dark sides of working in groups amongst students is the existence of social loafing and/or free-riding tendencies (Davies, 2009; Gaur & Gupta, 2013; Opdecam & Everaert, 2018), and certainly leading to conflicts (LaBeouf, Griffith & Roberts, 2016). Further empirical evidence indicates that working in group situations is a stressful experience to some students especially the active team members (Hall & Buzwell, 2012; Livingstone & Lynch, 2000), partly because of social loafing phenomenon.

Conceptually, social loafing is a situation whereby individuals withdraw their efforts while working in group situations compared to when they work alone and rely on other group members to have the work done, while expecting to benefit equally on the performance outcomes (Baron & Branscombe, 2012; Horowitz & Bordens, 1995; Jassawalla, Malshe &

Sashittal, 2008; Njie, Asimiran & Basri, 2013; Webb, 1995); those displaying the behavior are referred to as social loafers. As a result, the literature is replete with negative consequences associated with the occurrence of social loafing when individuals work in groups in different contexts (Cheng & Warren, 2000; Latane, Williams & Harkins, 1979). It is observed that, the interest in the study of social loafing has even been extended to assessment practices especially in higher education contexts (Hall & Buzwell, 2012; Liden, Wayne, Jaworski & Bennett, 2004; North, Linley & Hargreaves, 2000; Pieterse & Thompson, 2010). While that is the case, studies reporting on social loafing with respect to how students organize themselves in executing their group work and the measures they take to address the social loafing phenomenon from Tanzanian scholarly space are so far unknown. This article, therefore, reports on the study that was conducted to addresses this knowledge gap.

Theoretical Framework, Literature Review and the Current Study

In broader sense, 'groups are collections of people who perceive themselves as forming a coherent unit to some degree' (Baron & Branscombe, 2012, p. 394). Like living organisms, social groups develop and finally die. According to Tuckman's Model of 1965 and its revised version of 1977; although from a Therapist perspective, group development involves five stages (Bonebright, 2009, pp. 113-114): *forming* ('the group becomes oriented to the task, creates ground rules and tests the boundaries for interpersonal and task behaviours'); *storming* ('a time of intergroup conflict'); *norming* ('the group develops cohesion'); *performing* ('the group members adapt and play roles that will enhance the task activities'); and *adjourning* ('involves terminating task behaviors and disengaging from relationships').

In the context of the present study, some of these stages have relevant implications on how student teachers go about doing their group assignments. For instance, they need to understand the specific needs of the tasks, solving any potential conflicts that might arise in the due course, performing the tasks in the manner considered appropriate by the group members, and finally submit the completed task to respective instructors for

marking and grading purposes (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). Social loafing behavior among the group members may manifest in some of these stages as student teachers work on their group assignments, which then reflects particular group processes in relation to member reactions to the social loafers. This is the general aim of the present article.

When working in groups, especially in organizational settings, people constantly are involved in exchange relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Based on the Social Exchange Theory (SET), such exchanges need to be supported by certain rules and norms for effective accomplishment of different tasks among the parties involved (ibid.). The exchanges include reciprocity and negotiated rules; as well as *rationality* ('the use of logic to ascertain likely consequences and how one should achieve those things that are valued'), *altruism* ('benefiting others even at an absolute cost to ourselves'); *group gain* ('putting the benefits into a single common pot'), status consistency ('the allocation of benefits based on one's station within a social group'), and *competition* ('harming others even when it risks one's own earnings') (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 879). These rules and norms, literally understood as inherently being part of the group processes, are likely to operate within the groups of student teachers when performing different assignments as part of their continuous assessment in higher education. The interest of this article is based on understanding this puzzle in order to have a fuller view of how student teachers execute their group assignments at a Tanzanian tertiary education institution.

In higher education contexts, student groups are formed in order to facilitate the teaching and learning processes. In this context, depending on different circumstances, the groups can be formed by instructors or by students themselves. Importantly, however, proper formation of small groups may result in decreased social loafing tendencies (Synnott, 2016). In either case, the goal is to ensure that students participate accordingly in the assigned tasks; lack of which puts the intended process of learning and its subsequent outcomes in jeopardy. Indeed, literature is inconclusive about which method of group formation is better than the other. For instance, the use of instructor-formed groups have been reported to be less effective due to such factors as social loafing (Pieterse & Thompson, 2010), hence compromising the quality of the learning process when students work in

groups. On the contrary, in recent study, Mbalamula (2018) reported randomized assignment of students to groups as being effective in enhancing student performance on their coursework scores, suggesting instructor-formed groups being better than student-formed ones similar to what was observed by Synnott (2016).

Various factors have been found to determine students' attitudes towards group work and their actual participation. The factors evolve around those related to student characteristics (Revere, Elden & Bartsch, 2008), as well as those relating to the nature of the tasks in terms of their complexity and student workloads (Gupta, Li & Sharda 2013; Kyndt, Dochy, Struyven & Cascallar, 2011; Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003; Struyven, Dochy, Janssens & Gielen, 2006). Further empirical evidence shows that group cohesiveness is essential for group work effectiveness (Alfares, 2017; Bravo, Catalán & Pina, 2018; Piezon & Donaldson, 2005), hence reduced likelihood for social loafing to occur. Similarly, Wolff, Druskat, Koman and Messer (2006) illustrate a clear link between group's emotional competence and its effectiveness as viewed from the ways group members deal with those who do not observe group norms. Indeed, previous research studies, most of which are based in different socio-cultural contexts from those of the present study, have examined on the factors associated with social loafing (Njie, Asimiran & Basri, 2013; Li & Campbell, 2008; Liden, Wayne, Jaworski & Bennett, 2004; North, Linley & Hargreaves, 2000), as well as possible ways to reduce the behavior (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Sharp, 2006; Kuisma, 2007; Pieterse & Thompson, 2010; Piezon & Donaldson, 2005; Swaray, 2012).

Other evidence indicates that students' participation in group work may be increased when students have reasonable experience of group work (Maiden & Perry, 2011), hence reduced tendencies of social loafing. Similarly, it is claimed that member involvement in activities related to the group work is essential for the success of the group (Alfares, 2017; LaBeouf, Griffith & Roberts, 2016). It is shown that group cohesion and ability of group members to overcome potential conflicts arising within the group, while emphasizing the importance of instructors' guidance to students while performing their group work (Persons & Calabro, 2013) are important factors in group work undertaking. Additionally, member

familiarity before forming groups and embarking on doing group work is essential for group effectiveness (Decuyper, Dochy & van den Bossche, 2010; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp & Gilson, 2008).

As social actors within the groups, the students are most likely to take different initiatives in attempting to accomplish their group assignments with a view to getting better scores. With social loafing interfering with this common intent for most students in their schooling, the use of different mechanisms to deal with such behavior within their groups is deemed crucial and necessary. This can be achieved through member confrontation to the social loafers (Zastrow, 2009), and reporting to instructors (Boren & Morales, 2018; Goo, 2011). Boren and Morales (2018) observed that member reactions to social loafers were determined by their status, with low status social loafers strictly being treated as per the rules established without further negotiations as opposed to high status social loafers.

A closer analysis of the reviewed literature on group-based assessment and social loafing suggests that empirical studies documenting the processes undertaken by student teachers in accomplishing their group-based assignments in higher education is sparse. In particular, the literature in this field is silent about how students initiate the process of doing their group assignments, how they accomplish it, and how non-loafing group members react to social loafers when working in groups from undergraduate student teachers at a Tanzanian tertiary institution. Specifically, the study addresses the following two research questions:

1. How do student teachers initiate, and go about doing their group assignments at the College?

2. How do group members react to social loafers when doing group assignments at the College, and how effective are these reactions?

Research Methodology

Design and Approach

This study was informed by qualitative approach. The approach was chosen because the study aimed to unveil the participants' subjective views of the issue under investigation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

Consequently, a case study design was used for its ability to provide sufficient and appropriate detail of the phenomenon to allow other practitioners working in similar contexts to benefit from this information (Bassey, 1981). In this case, a single case study design was used (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). It was, therefore, possible to provide both participants' and researchers' perspectives during the interpretation and discussion of the findings (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010). As Zainal (2007) notes, this enabled to get a clearer understanding of the processes involved by the students in carrying out their group assignments.

Participants and Study Site

The participants for the study were 18 Second and Third Year undergraduates who had been group leaders in different group-based assignments in one or more courses at Mkwawa University College of Education in Tanzania. Of these participants, five were female and 13 were male. In terms of their years of study, three were Second Years while 15 were the finalists, Third Year students. These participants were believed to provide enunciated and practical experiences on how they undertook their group assignments and their reactions to the social loafers than the First Year students could do. Purposive and convenient sampling techniques were used to select the participants in which volunteer samples were used (Teddlie & Yu, 2007) as was determined by overarching schedules of the potential participants. In addition, convenient sampling was used to select the study site. It was convenient to conduct the present study at this site because all the authors were working as members of teaching staff at this institution by the time the research was conducted. The permit to conduct the research was granted by the University after which the researchers invited the students to participate in the study during regular lecture sessions. Additionally, some course instructors who had provided group-based work for the students were consulted in order to access students who had been leaders in the groups they once worked in. Thereafter, the potential participants were identified and verbally invited to participate in the study. Then, appointments with the participants for interviews were made.

Data Collection Instrument

Face-to-face semi-structured in-depth personal interviews with the students were used to collect data. The interview questions were first developed by the first author of this article, and then shared among the four authors in order to improve its questions. For consistency purposes, it was agreed that each of the authors to read the introductory paragraph of the interview guide containing information about the purpose of the study and participants' consent and assurance of anonymity of their views to the interviewees. In addition, the participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and that they had full freedom to withdraw consent at any point during the interview process. Having developed the final version of the interview questions, a colleague with good expertise in qualitative research was consulted and agreed to go over the interview questions prior to data collection. The inputs helped to improve the quality of the instrument.

The data were collected in the period between May 2018 and September 2018. The data were audio-recorded using voice recorders and note books. The duration for the interviews ranged from 15 to 45 minutes. There was no time limit for conducting the interviews in order to allow for collecting as much information as the participants were able to provide. In total, 18 interviews were conducted of which each author interviewed a minimum of four interviews. With this number, it was observed by all the authors that no new ideas could continue to emerge, signifying a saturation point (Sohn, Thomas, Greenberg & Pollio, 2017). The interviews were conducted in convenient staff offices including the authors' ones for their successful accomplishment. The interview questions focused on how participants initiated and went about doing their group assignments, their reactions to social loafers and effectiveness of these reactions.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data reported in this article were analyzed using both deductive and inductive approaches while observing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases

of thematic data analysis which, in the order of the *first* to the *last*, are familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Our analysis, thus, began with noting down the initial ideas relevant to our research questions during the entire process of data collection (*phase 1*). Then, after data gathering each author transcribed the data individually followed by a repeated listening to the audio-recorded data and reading and rereading the transcripts to ensure that all important information was adequately captured. Transcription of the interviews was done by writing the audio data on a computer followed by repeated review of the transcripts in order to identify recurring responses which helped to generate initial codes of the data (*phase 1 & 2*). We then harmonized the coded data into potential themes based on their relationships, in a repeated review fashion (*phase 3 & 4*), in order to define and name each theme (*phase 5*). In line with the research questions, this then led us to have three main section headings and/or thematic lines as presented in the section that follows. These are procedures involved in doing group assignments (with three sub-themes), member reactions to social loafers (with three sub-themes), and effectiveness of the member reactions. Accordingly, the development of the three section headings was achieved through the use of a more deductive approach reflecting the research questions, whereas the sub-themes were developed inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this way, a more interpretative approach was used. For the purposes of communicating the findings, the most relevant transcripts were selected to support our lines of argument and inform the relevant research community, practitioners and other stakeholders on the problem under investigation including the use of this particular article (*phase 6*). It should be noted, however, that in analyzing the data the phases were accomplished in an overlapping fashion.

Presentation and Interpretation of the Findings

Procedures Involved in Doing Group Assignments

The intent of the present study was to understand how student teachers go about doing their group work with a view to suggesting appropriate ways of

improving group assignments as part of continuous assessment of students in higher education. From the analysis of students' responses, the following themes came out reflecting the processes undertaken by student teachers in carrying out their group work.

Member identification and familiarity. During the interviews, it was revealed that member identification and familiarity varied depending on the method used to form the groups and the courses pursued. It was easier for the group members to identify and familiarize themselves in student-formed groups than in instructor-formed ones because they had a tendency of doing several group tasks together, as opposed to teacher-formed groups in which students were selected randomly to form the groups. It was also reported that member identification and familiarity was easily done in the courses with few students because many students knew each other unlike in the courses with many students. The following excerpt by one of the participants exemplifies the experiences:

> In student-formed groups, groups are formed depending on our subjects and interests, but instructors insist on gender balance especially female students because they are fewer compared to male students. In teacher-formed groups, students are assigned to groups randomly based on their names on a course whereby sometimes we are not familiar with each other. [Participant 9]

Another participant intensely explained as follows:

> In most cases the groups were formed by individual students depending on the subjects and interests but in few cases instructors were dictating the process by selecting members who will form groups. [Participant 7]

Relatedly, participants expressed that after being provided with the tasks it was important for members of the group to know one another, especially in instructor-formed groups. The participants explained that instructors usually form the groups and post them on the notice boards for students to view. After the posting, students then find one another by writing their

mobile phone numbers on the posted list of student groups in order to do the assigned group work. Participants' experiences with such situations are evident in the following statements:

> … there is another way whereby you are already been grouped by the teacher; course instructor arranges the names based on the students registered for the course and those forming a certain group write their mobile numbers so as to meet and go for the questions. [Participant 3]

It can be argued that the initiation of doing of group work is likely to be difficult in instructor-formed groups as group members may be unfamiliar. It might be even worse if the majorities in such groups are the social loafers, or those who are less concerned with academic achievement, something that is likely to affect the group performance on particular assignments.

Familiarization with the group assignments, task division and performance. It was observed that when provided with group assignments, the student teachers had to first familiarize with the task during their first meetings. As part of familiarizing with their group assignments, it was learned that the students involved in task division and performance. In the process, they set timelines or schedules for their meetings in order to share and discuss what they had been assigned among themselves. The participants maintained that the number of meetings for the group assignments would be determined by the deadline for submitting the task and its associated level of difficult as exemplified in the following selected statements made by the participants:

> After being provided with the tasks, we as members meet together so as to familiarize ourselves with the tasks given, then every member is given a task to work on. After task distribution among members, another day is suggested for everyone to present what he/she has read from various reliable sources during which we may improve some areas of weakness. [Participant 10]

Similarly, another participant stated as follows:

> In my group we happened to meet for about three to four times before compiling the work. The first time is for getting general understanding where we meet and discuss together the task and the requirements of the assignment. The second time we divide the tasks to each individual member of the group and the third time we meet to bring and discuss the feedback of each member's task and lastly the fourth time we start to compile the work. [Participant 12]

Yet, another participant explicitly stated:

> ….actually according to my experience, the work should be done from the very day you are given the task, with at least three meetings whereby during the first meeting the task is divided among the group members so that everyone can go to search for answers on a specific task given based on the question. Then on the second day you meet whereby everyone is required to present and share with the group members to see whether is relevant to every member or not. Thereafter, you meet again for the third time for corrections and finally submit the task. [Participant 1]

Specifically, regarding what determines the number of meetings for their group tasks, some participants remarked as follows:

> … the number of meetings depends on the nature of the group activity provided. If the task is easier or shorter we meet fewer times compared to when we are provided with a difficult or a long activity, such as project work which usually takes much time compared to other group activities like seminars. [Participant 7]

> We usually meet for about three to four times. It was a practical task that was provided on a weekly basis so we met for three to four times to accomplish a week task. The assignments were provided in each week starting from the fourth week of the Semester, so we had almost ten assignments in a Semester. [Participant 11]

Formation of group norms and rules. In understanding how student teachers performed their group work, it was learned that they formed appropriate norms and rules to guide the performance of their group assignments. In forming such rules they stated explicitly what was expected of each group member in accomplishing the assignments. The rules they formed included aspects of member attendance to group meetings and the quality of contributions to the group work. The following statements from one of the participants are worth quoting regarding these issues:

> After forming the groups we usually meet, we set our timetable, prepare some guidelines on how to go about doing the work. So, we prepare some conditions to guide the participants in order to participate fully in doing the work. [Participant 2]

Member Reactions to Social Loafers

The participants provided different responses regarding what actions they take as a response to the social loafers. Following the analysis and interpretation of the findings, these responses are presented as 'approaches to dealing with the social loafers', which are categorized into three broad thematic lines as follows:

Humanitarian approach. It was observed that the participants reacted to the social loafers by trying to make them part and parcel of the group; they did not want to lose them from the groups and subsequently discontinuation from studies. This involved understanding the problems or factors which made them not participate in carrying out the group work and accordingly accommodate them in the groups. The following statements by the participant illustrate the case:

> Actually, for example on my side for those who don't participate fully or if they don't turn up for discussion…, we weigh the reasons for not participating, or if there could be some problems they face…perhaps one may fail to contribute to the discussion because of the problems, … will include his/her name … only to help them. … Sometimes there are those who social loaf because

> they don't know how to do the work, when this happens those who know assist those who don't in order for them develop the ability to do the work so that in future could be able to do. [Participant 2]

Additionally, the participants highlighted that they usually advised the social loafers on the importance attached to group assignments and their contribution to the groups as the case of the following statements from the participants: "In that regards it depends. For the group that I am leading maybe we can call him/her and talk to them". [Participant 1]. And: "We ask them to increase the efforts when task is provided". [Participant 9]

Another humanitarian approach involved including the social loafers in the finally submitted work as a means of rescuing them from having negative consequences of not participating in the groups including discontinuation from studies. The following statements from the participants indicate the case:

> At the end you find many students who loaf are forgiven due to humanitarian reasons ... We start thinking that if his/her name will not appear in the group work he/she might be discontinued from the College due to incomplete course work results. [Participant 9]

Punitive approach. In almost all the interviews with the participants, this emerged as the common approach taken by student teachers in reacting to the social loafers when doing their group work at the College. The participants maintained that, as a means of sharing the cost of producing group assignments, they usually impose monetary fines to those who do not participate in doing group assignments as scheduled and in line with their established group norms and rules. The fines include paying for all stationery costs involved in completing the assignments such as typing and printing of the final work. The following statements from some of the participants are worth quoting:

> We ask them to pay money for the whole work which will be printed for presentation and submission. Although it is not proper, we still ask them to do so. [Participant 9]

> In my group, we had set an agreement that any member who will not show up when we meet for the work or who fails to participate fully in the work will pay for the stationery cot of the work in order for his/her name to be included in the group. (Participant 16)

In relation to the punitive approach, it was learned however, that the social loafers had developed their own ways of reacting to group members following their loafing tendencies. For example, ironically, some were concerned about their nonparticipation in the group assignment and even before being punished by other group members regarding paying the stationery costs, they compensated their nonparticipation with payment for all the costs. The following statements by one of the participants typify the case:

> Most often and this is like an existing custom that to some even if you have not done something to them, they will be the first individuals to punish themselves saying that I will pay for stationery costs for the whole work because I know that I didn't participate in doing the work. So, as a group in most cases we agree that they should pay for the costs because we can't incur double costs of working for the group tasks and pay for stationery costs. But to some we take it easy by including their names when we finally submit the work in order to rescue them from carrying the course that because of their weakness… [Participant 3]

Threatening approach. It was observed that students employed the so-called 'threats' in order to challenge those with loafing tendencies so as to make them participate meaningfully in group work. The threats included reporting to course instructors, excluding them from being participants of the finally submitted work, and insisting that there would be individual presentation of the work before instructors. The following statements are worth quoting regarding these reactions:

> Sometimes we threaten them by saying that we are not going to write their names if they don't contribute anything in the discussion. After threatening them, they take their phones and search materials on the Internet then come up with their ideas even

> though sometimes are not from any reliable sources. [Participant 9]

While the foregoing excerpt indicates lack of preparedness and seriousness of some group members when working in groups, which is a typical incident of social loafing, the following statements by one of the participants show why group members do not prefer reporting to course instructors of the loafing behavior of some group members:

> In most cases we did nothing. But sometimes we reported to the instructor informing him/her of the member participation on the group assignment. In the first case, when ignoring a person who social loaf, this means that the person will not get knowledge of the concept from the task. When reported to the instructor, it is like some marks are to be reduced for these members. But this is very rare as it leads to misunderstandings among group members. [Participant 12]

From the quotations above, it appears that some students do not attend sessions when group assignments are given, or instructors do not have time meeting with all group members when providing group assignments to students, instead only have contact with one of the group members (possibly considered as group leader) and provide some extra information and/or guidelines on what is expected of every group member. This seems to affect some of the students in carrying out their group tasks.

Effectiveness of the Member Reactions to the Social Loafers

Our inquiry on whether the reactions of group members to the social loafers yielded mixed results, indicating both positive and negative changes in behavior of the social loafers towards their participation in group work. Overall, a few participants who used to report the loafing tendencies for some of the group members expressed that the approach was effective in some ways. The following statements from the participants illustrate these issues:

> The measures were somehow effective because some students changed their behaviors and started to participate in the group work especially when they were reported to the instructors. [Participant 9]

The participant continued stating further that:

> Some students did not change, for example when you ask them to pay money for stationery costs of the group work they pay because they have money, and continue loafing because they know that they will pay money. [Participant 9]

Yet, another participant elaborated as follows:

> To a larger extent the effective measure is reporting to the instructors because many students fear of being reported to the instructors. [Participant 7]

Similarly, in our probes on the effectiveness of the employed reactions to the social loafers, another participant underscored that:

> To some extent they [measures/reactions] were effective because some students changed, although there are some challenges whereby some students opt to pay money which will be used in typing and printing rather than participating in the group work without considering its effects academically. [Participant 10]

It can be learned, therefore, that the participants were rather concerned about the payment of stationery costs for group work, indicating the possibility of developing more negative consequences to both the loafing and non-loafing group members, as viewed from exchange relationships. The consequences include the development of conflicts among group members as exemplified by the following statements made by the participants:

> Sometimes this mechanism [the punitive approach] worked very effectively but as time went by, we realized that it brought enmity among the group members so we had to stop it. [Participant 11]

From the participants' responses regarding the effectiveness of the reactions indicates a number of factors that determined their effectiveness. The determinants include the intensity of the punishment given, as well as the non-loafing group members' awareness of and avoidance of conflicts with the social loafers. It was also observed that gender-related factors in the group composition accounted for the effectiveness of member reactions to the social loafers. This was especially true when the loafers were female students in groups led by male counterparts. To avoid falling into the trap of sexual harassment, some students tended to leave the social loafers unchallenged, hence continued incidents of social loafing. This is typified by the following participant:

> ...as you know due to the nature of our College whereby most of the group leaders are males, some girls take the advantage of loafing by explaining the excuses to group leaders, and group leaders afraid of asking them many questions because it could be interpreted as sexual harassment… [Participant 9]

From the expressions regarding effectiveness of the reactions to social loafers above, one learns that if you have enough money you can be exempted from full participation in group work provided that you manipulate other members about non-attendance or participation, and that will pay for stationery cost for the group assignments, in return. Generally, it can be said that the reactions used by students to address the problem of social loafing have not been effective enough to curb it despite some of the observed positive outcomes. In view of that, more appropriate intervention measures could be employed to complement with students' initiatives against social loafing at this institution.

Discussion

Procedures Involved in Doing Group Assignments

Understanding group work processes in educational assessment encompasses a consideration of several issues for successful

accomplishment of group assignments by student teachers. The consideration begins with group formation and member identification in relation to the ways through which the groups are formed. Ideally, two ways of forming groups for assessment of student progress are worth noting: instructor-formed and student self-formed methods. In relation to these methods, the instructor-formed groups were reported to be more challenging in initiating and organizing the group assignment tasks and being more susceptible to the occurrence of social loafing as compared to student-formed groups similar to what was observed in some of the previous studies (Opdecam & Everaert, 2018; Pieterse & Thompson, 2010). Based on the findings of the present study, it follows that the occurrence of social loafing hindered proper organization and performance of the group activities among students. One of the notable challenges of instructor-formed groups had been associated with the 'diffusion of responsibility' phenomenon, as the case of helping in emergency situations (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). Student teachers' behavior of initiating their group tasks within instructor-formed groups is comparable to this phenomenon since group members could simply remain silent even when the groups for specific assignment(s) had been displayed by the course instructors while expecting someone else to initiate doing of the task. Consequently, much time for completing the group assignments is wasted something that compromises the quality of task performance. The findings highlight on the importance of proper formation of groups for students to accomplish their group assignment as part of their continuous assessment within the context of higher education. Furthermore, commitment among group members is required regardless of the method used to form the groups as this will help them save time and prepare a quality work.

In providing group assignments, it is important to note that not all tasks are suitable for group work (Curşeu & Pluut, 2013). In fact, group work as part of educational assessment needs to be involving on the part of students, and not simply making them recall the learned information and facts relevant to certain subjects or courses, nor should they be of extreme complexity. The findings of the study have shown that, there were variations in the nature of group assignments across the courses as implicated in the number of times the students met for the work, time spent

for completing them and their submission deadlines. In this context, proper planning for provision of group assignments to students on the part of instructors is important in order to realize the benefits inherent in the philosophy behind the use of group work in higher education. In this regard, course instructors are required to provide more relevant group work to students in order to engage them in collaborative learning groups (Curşeu & Pluut 2013), while at the same time balancing the weight of the task and the available time to complete it. A lack of consideration of these factors in relation to task complexity and student workloads as previous studies (Gupta, Li, & Sharda 2013; Kyndt et al., 2011; Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003; Struyven et al., 2006) suggest affects negatively their perceptions about group assignments which may consequently contribute to social loafing behavior. Attendance to such factors when planning for group assignments makes students develop interests in group work which may then reduce potential challenges associated with the use of group work. Thus, instructors need to prepare group tasks that call for collaborative and cooperative skills from the students to allow for sharing and constructing ideas and information among themselves; course instructors are required to help the student teachers develop appropriate team work skills to this end (Daly, Hoy, Hughes, Islam & Mak, 2015). Preparing such tasks may seem challenging; however, if course instructors possess the required skills in developing the tasks, the use of group work assignments may be a contributing factor to the development of team work and interpersonal skills and values that the 21st Century teachers need to possess.

Reactions to social loafers

Social loafing is worth viewing a threat to academic achievement of students especially when they are assessed on group work basis. To get rid of such threat, group members are likely to employ different means of minimizing the negative impacts associated with social loafing by reacting in different ways to the social loafers. The findings of this study have indicated three major approaches to dealing with the social loafers that the student teachers used; namely, humanitarian, punitive and threatening. Despite the deployment of these approaches, there was still recurring

incidents of social loafing when student teachers worked in groups. It was noted that the high use of humanitarian approach had contributed to the persistent cases of social loafing among student teachers at this institution. In other words, on the one hand, the students themselves are to blame for nurturing the behavior especially when they simply include the social loafers on submitting their group assignments to respective course instructors for marking. They did this in order to rescue their social loafing counterparts from being discontinued from studies, while at the same time experience negative consequences similar to what was pointed out by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) about altruism as one of the exchange relationships in group work situations. On the other hand, their failure to take more stiff measures against the social loafers may be due to lack of empowerment among the student teachers to deal with the social loafers; thus, empowering them could help deal with their loafing colleagues more confidently (Barfield, 2003).

The use of punitive approach has also been found to be less effective in dealing with the social loafers. It has been found that the commonly used punitive approach (paying for stationery costs) had often been a lighter punishment when the typing and printing costs are lower rendering its ineffectiveness. Consequently, some of the social loafers were even being motivated to loaf expecting to incur relatively lower stationery costs for their group work, the behavior that could be referred to as 'self-punishing' or 'defensive mechanism' following their loafing; this is a kind of self-presentation (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). This is not only an inequitable exchange but also a threat to delivery of quality education and its ultimate goal of producing quality teachers. This kind of unfairness is even multiplied when there is no proper mechanisms of awarding marks on the basis of individual contribution to group work as previously reported (Hall & Buzwell, 2012; Hassanien, 2006; Refeque, Balakrishnan, Inan & Harji, 2018). This, indeed, needs to be rethought if the value of using group work has to be attained in higher education, particularly when preparing teachers for the 21st Century teaching and learning (Geisinger, 2016; Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe & Terry, 2013; Mishra & Mehta, 2017). Developing such skills in teachers is crucial because of their pivotal teaching roles; as (Gordon et al., 2009) postulate, teachers are expected to possess and enable

learners acquire the skills. This makes it necessary for universities preparing teachers to promote the acquisition of these skills by student teachers and, for that reason, there is no doubt that properly planned group assignments for students, in which the problem of social loafing is taken care of, can help develop some of the important skills needed by teachers.

The use of threats in response to social loafers was highlighted by the research participants. Similar to Zastrow's (2009) notions of confrontation, in using threatening approach, it is important to note potential drawbacks of using threats in reacting to other group members as these may negatively affect the lives of the groups and individual members. That is why the promotion of emotional competence within groups is essential in enhancing group effectiveness (Wolff et al., 2006), hence reduced likelihood of social loafing behavior. It was also observed that some group members reported to course instructors of the social loafers. The finding provides support to its use as a means of conflict resolution (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). This implies that instructors need to work closely with students in order to help them conduct their group assignments accordingly. Indeed, social loafing resembles to a group disease which can have far reaching consequences to individual members and the delivery of higher education in general (Latane, Williams & Harkins, 1979), hence needs to be treated at this particular institution.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The need to focus on the process in addition to the outcome part of group-based assessment is essential in understanding student performance on the tasks in the context of existing social loafing tendencies. Responding to this need, this article is set out to understand how student teachers are involved in group assignments and their reactions to social loafers. The article has indicated that, when working on group assignments, students involved themselves in different processes reflective both positive and negative experiences, including those related to decision making about their tasks and the social loafers. They begin with getting to know one another and then formulate their own norms and rules including scheduling for their meetings. There is no doubt that all this is possible because of the

employment of leadership and decision making skills among the group members. Therefore, training the students on the skills may facilitate their working in groups (Boren & Morales, 2018). The article has revealed three main approaches used by students to react to the social loafers each of which with their inherent drawbacks. In order for the group assignments to be effective, the perceived weaknesses of the used approaches should be addressed for bringing about fruitful results to both students and instructors.

The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of group-based assessment and social loafing in higher education by emphasizing on the importance of proper planning for group assignments, member familiarity, and group norms and leadership skills in successful accomplishment of student group assignments. In addition, knowledge of how non-loafing students react to social loafers is an important contribution the paper makes to existing body of knowledge on the subject, pinpointing on the need to consider the relevance of group assignments in relation to students' workload and their commitment to group work. Indeed, when providing students with group assignment a consideration needs to be made that the students study several other courses which all contribute to their excessive workloads which, then, may affect their participation in different group assignments realized through their loafing tendencies. This observation, however, does not disregard the importance of student commitment to their academic tasks. It only emphasizes that instructors on their part can be the source of the problem in relation to the way they form student groups, the nature of group tasks they provide to students, the deadline they set and, although often overlooked, the kind of support they provide to students in the process of completing the group tasks. When these are attended, the value of using group-based assignments can be experienced by both the students and course instructors.

Based on the findings of this study; first, it is recommended that the instructors should be aware of their role in providing group-based assignments to students such as helping them to form appropriate groups, providing relevant work, supervising the work and instilling leadership skills to the students. Second, students should be trained on the importance of group work and, how to work and manage conflicts arising thereof. Third, as limitations are inherent in almost all studies including the present

study, thus its limitations are worth acknowledging. The findings of this research, which focused on a small sample of second and third-final year undergraduates, may not be generalized to the greater population of students at this institution and that of Tanzanian universities. Future researches, therefore, should adopt larger-scale empirical approaches to address a similar problem. Importantly, it would also be useful to investigate the experiences of potential social loafers of working on group assignments, as the voices represented in this article are of those students who did not identify themselves as social loafers.

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Joseph Reginard Milinga is an Assistant Lecturer in Educational Psychology at Mkwawa University College of Education, a Constituent College of the University of Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania.

Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3826-1583

Ezelina Angetile Kibonde is an Assistant Lecturer in Curriculum and Teaching at Mkwawa University College of Education, a Constituent College of the University of Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania.

Venance Paul Mallya is an Assistant Lecturer in Curriculum and Teaching at Mkwawa University College of Education, a Constituent College of the University of Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania.

Monica Asagwile Mwakifuna is an Assistant Lecturer in Science and Mathematics Education at Mkwawa University College of Education, a Constituent College of the University of Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania.

Contact Address: Joseph Reginard Milinga, Mkwawa University College of Education, P. O. Box 2513 Iringa- Tanzania

Email: regjoseph2002@gmail.com