

Review

Teaching conflict management skills in schools: Prerequisite for peace and achievement of millennium development goals in Kenya

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The Kenyan society is experiencing a lot of conflicts, some with devastating effects such as deaths, starvation, disease and destruction. These normally arise out of difference between people. Secondary schools being part of the society have not been left out of this challenge as evidenced by mass media reports on strikes, demonstrations and resulting closures. This being the formative age of the youth who are the majority of the Kenyan population according to 2009 census results, the opportunity of their being in school may be exploited by the society to address conflicts as a major challenge to peace today. The Ministry of Education can impart a curriculum that would perpetuate peaceful conflict management skills in the youth. So far, this has evidently not been done adequately creating gaps for mishaps such as the 2008 post-election violence, whereby if the international community had not timely sent the former United Nations Organization Secretary General, Koffi Annan of Ghana who mediated to resolve the conflict, Kenyans would have ended up in self-destruction. Police have been called in by various authorities, severally, to quell riots and disperse demonstrators across the country. Many people have been, sentenced to death, life in prison, jailed or fined by Kenyan courts due to their poor conflict resolution methods. A peaceful environment would facilitate achievement of 'millennium development goals' at the international level, and the vision of industrialization by 2030 in Kenya. It is against the backdrop of the importance of conflict management skills to Kenyans that this paper is addressed.

Key words: Conflict management skills, schools, disasters, curriculum, youth, peace, Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the world has experienced lots of disasters such as terrorist bombings, earthquakes, floods, tsunami, massacres, famine, wild forest fires and disease. Some of these were man-made arising out of conflicts between men. The result was a disrupted life, poverty, destruction, displacement of people, injury, and in some cases death. In such an environment, 'millennium development goals' may never be achieved. It is noteworthy that MDG's relating to education such as the one on gender parity was set to be achieved by 2005. So far, this is still a dream and it remains a wonder

whether Education for All by 2015 will be realized amidst conflicts.

Conflict parse is neither functional nor dysfunctional, it simply has the potential of either improving or impairing organizational performance, depending on how it is managed (Henkin et al., 2000). Ivancevich et al. (2005) describe functional conflict as when the result of a conflict or confrontation between groups enhances and benefits the organization's performance. Algert and Watson (2002) agree with Follet (2004) that dynamics and outcomes of conflicts depend on whether it is handled cooperatively or competitively. The youth are involved to a great measure as culprits (instigators of violence, as soldiers, as rioters, and demonstrators), and as victims (the displaced, injured, suffering, and bereaved). They

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are easily incited by the power wielders and organizers of these conflicts and since the Kenyan population is generally a young one, they form the bulk of those who face the consequences of these conflicts. It is because of this that Achoka (2009) asserted that if we are to have real peace, we must begin with the children. Schools therefore have a key role to play in fostering conflict management in the society since they provide an unrivalled opportunity to reach the majority of the youth in Kenya.

FORMS OF CONFLICTS EXPERIENCED IN KENYAN SCHOOLS AND SOCIETY IN GENERAL TODAY

Intrapersonal conflicts

This exists within the self or individual as a result of needs or wants not being met, when values that an individual believes in are being tested, assumptions are being made, knowledge is minimal, expectations are too high or too low, an when personality, race or gender differences are present. Dissatisfaction may arise when the individual desires to succeed but is affected by pressure to attend to personal and family matters (Deutshmark, 2005). Conflict may arise when a person feels torn between the desires to achieve 2 incompatible goals. For instance the head teacher or teacher may want to split his time between duty and domestic obligations or students desiring good results at the end of the course but may not want to sacrifice energy and leisure to meet this goal.

Interpersonal conflicts

When incompatible goals, cognitions or emotions between individuals or groups arise, the result would be opposition or antagonism between them (Ivancevich et al., 2005; Achoka, 2008). This may be between individuals or an individual and a group or vice-versa. A class may be complaining about their teacher, teachers unhappy with the head teacher or a prefect about the teacher on duty.

Intergroup conflicts

According to Henkin et al. (2000), this occurs when two or more groups hold positions that are opposed to each other. This may lead to antagonism which may slow down flow of production or stop it altogether. Differences between groups of people such as teachers, students, parents and school managers are in this category. Groups can come into resource conflict because of difference in perception of use and time management (Van de Bank, 2005). Student rebellion against established school authority continues to exist because of

the excessive nature of school management (Otieno, 2004).

OVERVIEW OF EVIDENCE OF CONFLICTS IN THE GENERAL SOCIETY FROM ASSORTED KENYAN NEWSPAPERS

International criminal court (ICC) plans to reopen investigations into the shooting and killing of over 400 Kenyans by security forces during the 2007/2008 post-election violence (Kiganya, 2002). Man lynched for allegedly butchering niece in Ongata Rongai, Nairobi (The Standard September, 2010).

Two men shot dead by police after municipal council tenants in Flamingo, Kivumbini and Kimathi estates in Nakuru rejected an eviction bid over a rent payment dispute resorting to demonstration disrupting business in town (Daily Nation correspondent, September, 2010). University of Nairobi students' Organization chairman refuses to vacate office after winning a hotly contested election that resulted in closure of the university due to student riots that ensued (Daily Nation Correspondent, May, 2010).

OVERVIEW OF EVIDENCE OF CONFLICTS IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS FROM ASSORTED KENYAN NEWSPAPERS

During the past two decades, the media has reported many cases of conflicts in schools across the country. The climax recorded was between April to June, 2008 when over 100 secondary schools in various provinces experienced unrest on diverse dates for diverse reasons, some with horrific consequences (Daily Nation (DN) and The Standard Newspapers, April to June, 2008). According to Oosterlink and Broekaert (2008), schools frequently appear to be centers of tensions, but on occasions, they are perhaps a manifestation of the society in its mirrored perspective.

Table 1 is a roundup of the data of reported cases of conflicts in Kenyan schools as per the mainstream Kenyan newspapers in which 7/8 of the provinces experienced conflicts resulting in mishaps such as deaths, injury, destruction and closure of schools. The most affected provinces were Central 26.8%, Rift Valley 21.7%, and Eastern 20.9% of the reported cases. There was no reported case in North Eastern Province.

Case highlights include over the decades

Upper Hill Secondary School (Nairobi Province): The school captain lost his life trying to save others from a burning dormitory suspected to have been set ablaze by his schoolmates (Ongwae, 2008).

Table 1. Provincial round-up of conflicts in schools in Kenya (January to June, 2008).

Province	No. of schools affected
Nairobi	19
Nyanza	27
Coast	24
Eastern	53
Rift Valley	55
Western	08
Central	68
North Eastern	00
TOTAL	254

Source: Ngare (2008, July, 14th, Daily Nation).

Nyeri High School (Central Province): Four school prefects set ablaze at night in a cubicle by resenting students (Daily Nation correspondent, September, 1999).

St. Kizito Mixed Secondary School (Eastern Province): 18 girls died due to a rape ordeal by boy schoolmates who had earlier been forcing them to join them in a strike plan without success (Daily Nation correspondent, December, 1993).

Alliance Girls High School (Central Province): Stage a protest march to ministry of education headquarters to complain about highhandedness of their school administration (Kiganya, 2002).

Endarasha High school (Central Province): Night arsonists set ablaze Form 1 dormitory suspected to be students protesting against school authority; 2 students burnt beyond recognition (Wafula, 2010).

The crisis sparked off public debate through various fora and media with the aim of exploring the underlying causes and identifying possible ways of dealing with and coping with the challenge. Factors proposed to be responsible for increasing conflicts in schools included: overcrowded curriculum, too much expectation or pressure to perform on students by stakeholders, examinations that condemn those who perform below average, moral decay in the society, negligent parents, highhanded school administration, indiscipline among students, drug abuse, and sponsors of schools who meddled in school affairs. It was also pointed out that the media spread information on strife further fanning violence and agitation across hither-to calm institutions (Daily Nation correspondent, August, 2008). Students who receive physical punishment have an increased tendency to act out, bully and attack others (Jaffe, 2003).

The result of all these, it was realized that poor conflict management techniques among the school community magnified the consequences of even simple disagreements. They led to wastage of teaching learning time, some students dropped out altogether, some suffer lasting trauma, negative public image about certain schools while some students are charged in courts for arson, assault, causing injury or murder. It is therefore

important to impart conflict management skills to the young generation during their formative years – in school. Without this, the society is preparing a youth grounded in a culture where destructive conflict management formula is the norm that will be passed on to the next generation. It is the duty of education stakeholders to ensure they capitalize on this by counteracting this behaviour and replacing it with a positive culture for overall benefit using the school curriculum.

IS THE CURRENT SCHOOL CURRICULUM ADEQUATELY IMPARTING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS?

Kenya government has in the recent past reviewed curriculum to respond to emerging issues such as; drug abuse, environmental management, HIV/AIDS and peace building. However, these are infused across subjects whereby they may be inferred or covered as independent topics in specific subjects.

Conflict resolution and management is addressed as a topic in history and Government subject only at the end of Form 1 in secondary school. A student who is persuaded by Form 1 that he is science oriented would therefore have developed a poor attitude towards it hindering learning defeating the ministry objectives. Besides only 1 brief topic out of a total history course of 32 (1/32) addresses conflict management parse in the 4 year secondary school cycle (Republic of Kenya, 2002). It is only inferred in some other subjects. Conflicts in Kenya impact negatively on the international community politically, socially and economically as expressed by President Museveni of Uganda in March 2008 “when Kenya is at war, the world bleeds”. Many Kenyans are still refugees in Uganda to date (Daily Nation correspondent, June, 2010). Considering the consequences conflicts have caused Kenya as a nation, is the government committed to its intention to impart adequate relevant skills and attitudes in the youth that are necessary not only for peace and development in the country but for survival of Kenya?

CONCLUSION

Owing to the fact that skills in conflict management are underlying our development process, and the very survival of our nation, it should be accorded its due significance. In this respect, education as a fundamental means through which knowledge is transfused across the masses should be a vehicle for attitude change towards this goal. Currently, schools focus more on Science, Mathematics and Language subjects because in Kenya, education is one of the flagships to industrialization (Vision, 2030) implicitly scientifically geared. The society must realize that in the absence of skills to manage conflicts, all the research, innovations and investments

will go to waste. As a nation, conflicts will reverse gains achieved, slow down progress and increase dependence on foreign relief, besides enhancing indebtedness to foreign bodies and hopelessness, loss of morale and loss of national pride. The time to act is NOW.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conflict management skills should be infused in all subjects so that all students, including the science oriented ones should be exposed adequately to relevant information for better skills and attitude.
2. Curriculum should be restructured so that the topic should cut across all Forms 1 to 4 thereby being taught progressively. In this case, History and Government should be a compulsory examinable secondary school subject.
3. School management should be in-serviced on conflict management skills so as to act as role models besides acting appropriately to avert crisis that may arise out of conflicts in their schools. Nir-Eyal (2005) found that principals who are authoritarian but have low self-esteem tend to misinterpret behaviour of others and hence initiate conflicts in schools some of which they are unable to contain.
4. More History and Government teachers should be employed to boost personnel for effective teaching. Wamukuru and Muthaa (2010) reported that, in 2008, government records indicated staff shortfall across all 26 subjects offered in secondary school curriculum out of whom 20.2% were to be History and Government teachers.

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