

# Conflict Management as a Tool for Restoring Discipline in Kenyan Public Secondary Schools

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## Abstract

*Conflict is a part and parcel of human organization all over the world. Therefore, potential for conflict exists because people have different needs, values, views and goals. In schools, internal conflicts occur because sometimes administrators, teachers and students have different perceptions and attitudes towards certain issues. The study examines how conflict management is used as a tool for restoring discipline in Kenyan secondary schools and it is guided by human needs theory. The study employed mixed methods approach which embraced both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data from secondary students, headteachers and teacher counselors. This study has concluded that failure to train headteachers and teacher counselors on conflict resolution; management skills and a lack of clear communication among all the stakeholders constitute some of the causes of conflict in secondary schools. The study has recommended that conflict management and peace keeping skills should be incorporated into teacher education syllabuses.*

**Key Words: Conflict, Discipline, Management, Students, and Tool**

## Introduction

Conflict occurs when the objectives, goals, values, or needs of individuals or groups clash (Weeks, 1992:33; Kriesberg,1973:17; Pruitt and Rubin, 1994:11). Diverse human interests and needs are sometimes incompatible with social needs; religious beliefs, and group goals of others. The result is often violence. In Kenyan public secondary schools, there are various causes of conflicts. Some of the common causes of conflict in public secondary schools in Kenya and other parts of the world include a lack of dialogue between head teachers and students, unsatisfied needs, peer influence, culture shock and a lack of role models among others. These factors may cause students to either leave school in order to avoid an annoying situation, or result to anti-social behavior as they look for escape routes. Riots and demonstrations and particularly in public secondary schools can be seen as collective escape valves for a collective frustration and especially when the school is the source of that frustration. In order to develop desirable behavior in students, teachers in Kenya use any methods available to identify the causes of such conflicts so as to manage them and where possible resolve them. Some of the methods used by

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teachers to manage conflicts are counseling, suspension, expulsion, detention, imposition of fines, and caning among others.

The current study has employed Burton's human needs theory in order to explain the causes of deviant behavior in schools. According to Burton (1990:2), conflict is related to human relationships at all societal levels. The importance of this theory to conflict management in schools is that it focuses on ineffective institutions which are unable to satisfy the basic human needs. Whenever, such non negotiable needs such as food, accommodation, identity, and recreation are not met, conflict in schools is inevitable and particularly among adolescent population. These categories of students are trying to establish their autonomy from adults aggressive and prone to violence. Gurr (1970) supports this view when he cites grievances of people who feel deprived of what they perceive as values to which they are entitled. Such people are likely to be frustrated and to engage in irrational and deviant behavior.

Bell (1992) and Baptiste (1990) also maintain that in any school community all over the world, there is potential for conflict because conflict is part and parcel of human organizations. Mulu (2008) too has observed that disparities in wealth, natural resources, technology and power among social classes and ethnic groups cause grievances, animosity and conflict. Thus, it appears that potential for conflict exists because people have different needs, views and values.

### **Discipline in Kenyan public schools**

The public concern about conflicts in Kenya's educational institutions has been often reported in the media. In addition, numerous studies have vividly underscored the pervasiveness of this problem. Conflicts in educational institutions have largely been attributed to lack of management skills, especially in conflict management and resolution. Conflicts have persisted in Kenyan secondary schools, middle level colleges, and tertiary institutions even though there have been various legislations that serve as guidelines for management and administration of educational systems. Yet, in spite of these policies, there have been increased cases of conflict between 1980 and 2008 (Ministry of Education 2008). The number of conflicts in public secondary schools alone increased from 22 (0.9%) in 1980 to 300 (7.5%) in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2008). Often, conflicts in schools are mostly manifested in riots which result in destruction of property and occasionally death and rape especially of girls in co-educational boarding secondary schools. For instance, on July 13th, 1991, male students at St Kizito Mixed Secondary school invaded the girls dormitory and raped more than 70, with 19 girls losing their lives in the scuffle (Perlez, 1991).

Further, on March 28th, 2006, mass rape again, of about 15 girls occurred against Kenyan school girls of Kangubiri Girls Secondary School in Nyeri district, in Central province (Wanyama, 2006). In March, 2000, twenty six girls were killed after a dormitory fire razed Bombululu Girls Secondary school in Coast province (Ochura, 2014). On March 25, 2001, 68 students were burnt to death and scores injured by two students at Kyanguli Secondary School in Machakos District, Eastern province (Rowan, 2001). This happened when two students poured petrol on the dormitory and set it ablaze for unknown motives.

Other forms of school indiscipline include bullying. Ngigi (2010) gives the following breakdown about bullying: In May 2006, a 15 year old Form One learner, Samuel Gituro, of Nyeri High School in Nyeri district, Central province succumbed to injuries caused by a bully. In June 2006, students of St. Marys Boys' High school in Taita Taveta District, Coast Province, went on the rampage demanding to be allowed to bully Form One students. Later in the month, Moyale High school in Moyale district, North Eastern Province, was closed after students protested the suspension of 11 bullies from the school.

Indeed, Snodgrass (2005), Egbochuku (2007), Giddens (2006), Kambo (2012) Kibui (2013) and Beauchamp (1993) maintain that violence and bullying in particular, is a worldwide problem and it often leads to negative lifelong consequences both on the students who bully and on their victims. It creates a negative atmosphere on the general school climate and on the right of the students to learn in a safe environment without fear. Further, conflict among students has been associated with drug abuse. Students who abuse drugs tend to be irrational and violent. This study therefore, sought to establish the extent to which drug abuse was prevalent among secondary school students.

### **Approaches to conflict management**

The origins of human violence are as complex as the solutions needed to solve them. Thinkers, historians, and scientists have explored this issue for centuries, but answers remain elusive. The roots of a violent act are multiple, intricate, and intertwined. The mix of factors varies according to the individual and the circumstances. Understanding violence, after it has occurred is difficult; trying to assess a threat and keep it from being carried out is even more of a challenge. That is why it is essential to learn the proper skills needed to manage conflict (Lincoln, 2002:11). The conflict management field understands that although all conflicts cannot be resolved, learning how to manage conflict can decrease the odds of nonproductive escalation. Conflict management involves acquiring skills related to conflict resolution, self-awareness about conflict modes, conflict communication skills, and establishing a structure for management of conflict in an environment (Coleman, 2006, and Deutsch, 2006).

According to Forret (1925), Sanford (1964), Hanson (1991), and Thomas (1976), strategies for conflict resolution vary according to the different philosophical bases of those involved. Generally, these bases encompass the win-lose, lose-lose and win-win approaches to conflict resolution. When conflict no longer interferes with the ongoing activities of those involved, it is concluded that it has been effectively managed. Conflict management is therefore, the process of removing cognitive barriers to agreement. Depending on the situation, conflict management techniques often focus on changing structure, changing process or both. Sometimes structural modifications are not very creative, and the response to conflict is simply more rules leading to hardening of the role structure. Such efforts can appear to improve the situation outwardly but not without revolving the underlying problems. Given the negative effects of unresolved conflicts, it was important to establish the extent to which managers of educational institutions at secondary level of education were prepared to handle conflicts.

### **Objectives of the study**

The primary goal of the study was to establish the preparedness of secondary school teachers in conflict management as a tool for restoring discipline in Kenyan secondary schools. The specific objectives sought to:

- 1) establish the prevalence of drug abuse in secondary schools
- 2) determine the types of conflict experienced in secondary school settings.
- 3) examine readiness of headteachers in conflict management strategies.

## Research Design

To achieve these objectives, the study used a descriptive survey design with a mixed methods approach. Data was collected and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative techniques. Purposive and random sampling techniques were used to select the respondents. Using simple random technique 16 different categories of schools and 649 students were selected from four (four) administrative regions of Kenya out of eight (8) namely Central, Eastern, Nairobi and Rift Valley. The student age ranged from fourteen to eighteen years. Sixteen (16) headteachers and sixteen (16) teacher counselors were purposely selected. The study used questionnaires and interviews to collect data from the targeted participants. Self-administered questionnaires were thought to be suitable because they allow uniformity in terms of questions which are asked to all sampled population. Interviews were also used to provide clarification of issues in the questionnaires. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentages, frequencies, means and cross-tabulation and chi-square test at 0.05 level of significance.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first objective tapped information on prevalence of drug abuse in secondary schools by category of school and gender. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Rate of Drug Abuse by gender and school category among secondary school students by gender and school category**

School category	Boys Boarding		Girls Boarding		Mixed Boarding				Mixed Day/Boarding			
	Respondents by gender		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
Aware of drug abuse	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Aware	89	56.7	57	32.1	47	51.6	25	51.0	66	66.0	26	35.6
Not aware	68	43.3	121	67.9	44	48.4	24	49.0	34	34.0	47	64.4

(Primary data, 2013)

The analysis presented in Table 1 shows that 56.7% of the students in Boys Boarding Secondary schools and 32.1% of Girls Boarding Secondary Schools respectively were aware of drug abuse in their schools. In Mixed Boarding Secondary Schools, 51.7% of boys were aware of drug abuse in schools, while 51% girls were aware of drug abuse in mixed boarding secondary schools. Boys and girls in Mixed Day and Boarding Secondary Schools who were aware of drug abuse in their secondary school formed 66%, and 35.6% respectively. These findings indicate that more boys compared to girls in all categories of schools might have been tempted to abuse drugs. The responses by head teachers on the awareness of drug abuse among students are similar to those of students.

These results confirm that drug abuse is a problem in all categories of secondary school and this may explain why indiscipline is prevalent and especially among single-sexed boarding schools for boys and

mixed boarding schools. Individuals who are under the influence of drugs are not able to reason and are also more likely to act irrationally.

To determine whether there were any statistical differences on awareness of drug abuse in different types of secondary schools, data was subjected to chi-square test of significance. The findings are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Chi-square test on the rate of drug abuse in different categories of schools**

	Value	df	Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	41.744(a)	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	43.780	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	.005	1	.946

(Primary data, 2013)

The data contained in Table 3 show that the chi-square test values on different categories of schools were ( $\chi^2=41.744$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, then it means that there was significant statistical difference on the rate of drug use in different types of schools. The analysis indicates that awareness of drug abuse was higher in Boys' Boarding and Girls' Boarding Schools than in Mixed Boarding, and Mixed Boarding and Day Schools .

After analysing awareness of drug abuse among different categories, chi-square analysis was also performed on the awareness of drug abuse among male and female students. The findings are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3: Chi-square test on the rate of drug abuse among boys and girls**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	31.459(a)	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	31.840	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	18.368	1	.000

(Primary data, 2013)

The findings presented in Table 3 show that the chi-square test values for differences in boys and girls were ( $\chi^2=31.459$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, then it means that there was significant statistical difference on the rate of awareness of drug abuse between boys and girls in secondary schools. The analysis in this study indicates that boys are more likely to abuse drugs compared to their female counterparts.

### Types of conflicts experienced by students in secondary schools

Given that indiscipline behavior among students in Kenyan secondary students has been reported from time to time, the second objective sought to identify different types of conflicts that are experienced by students. The findings on headteachers responses on the types of conflicts/problems they experience from students are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Headteachers' Responses on Disciplinary problems prevalent among secondary school students**

Disciplinary Problems	N	Mean
Threats	14	2.3571
Rumours	14	2.7857
Verbal fighting	14	2.3571
Physical fighting	14	2.0000
Isolation by peers	14	2.7857
Theft	14	3.0714
Teasing	14	2.5000
Rudeness	14	2.7143
Peer pressure	14	3.5000

The data summarized in Table 4 indicate that threats had a mean score of 2.3571, rumours (M=2.7857), verbal fighting (M=2.3571), physical fighting (M=2.000), isolation by peers (M=2.7857), theft (M=3.0714), teasing/insults (M=2.500), rudeness (M=2.7143), and peer pressure (M=3.500) are types of conflicts found among students in secondary schools. These results have suggested that peer pressure, theft, isolation by peers and rumours, rudeness, insults, threats verbal and physical fighting in that hierarchical order are most common conflicts among students.

After dealing with Head teacher's information on types of disciplinary problems prevalent among secondary students, analysis on guidance and counseling teacher's responses on types of discipline problem among students was done. The pertinent results are contained in Table 5.

**Table 5: Guidance and counseling officers' view on disciplinary problems in schools**

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Threats	16	2.1875	.91059
Rumours	16	2.8125	.91059
Verbal fighting	16	2.8125	1.04682
Physical fighting	16	2.3750	.71880
Isolation by peers	16	3.1250	.88506

Theft	16	3.1250	1.08781
Teasing/insults	16	3.1875	1.10868
Rudeness	16	3.1875	.98107
Peer pressure	16	4.0625	1.23659

The findings in Table 5 show that the most prevalent disciplinary problem was peer pressure ( $M=4.0625$ ) followed by rudeness and teasing (mean 3.1875) respectively, theft and isolation by peers with (mean 3.1250) respectively. In relative terms, head teachers and guidance teacher counselors seem to be more aware of the disciplinary problems that confront students. However, both head teachers and guidance and teacher counselors have identified peer pressure, rudeness, teasing, theft and isolation by peers as the most common triggers of disciplinary problems.

### **Head teachers' readiness in conflict management**

The third objective sought to find out the preparedness of head teachers in respect to conflict management skills. The findings showed that the majority of teachers (59.6%) had no training on conflict management. This is an indication that a great number of the teachers lacked training and the necessary knowledge in conflict management. This deficiency may explain why there is a lot of indiscipline among students in public secondary schools in Kenya.

### **Existence of knowledge for conflict management skills in schools**

The study further sought to establish if time was allocated to conflict management skills in schools. There is evidence that students at secondary level of education are in a turbulent stage of life and if not guided they are prone to give into untested peer influence which is not always positive. The results further showed that over 40% of the students had not been guided and counseled on how to manage conflict.

To get further insight about head teachers' preparedness to manage conflict, they were requested to indicate whether they had ever heard about of peer mediation in schools as a tool of conflict management. The pertinent data showed that head teachers (44.1%) had not heard anything about peer mediation, while 42.3% had heard about it but had no knowledge of what it was all about. Only 13.6% knew exactly what it was about. These findings indicate that peer mediation as a tool of conflict management is not common among the head teachers in secondary schools. Lack of knowledge of peer mediation may explain why conflicts are common in secondary schools since students are not provided with the necessary knowledge to handle and manage their own challenges and those of their colleagues.

## **SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary**

The study findings have indicated that there were more riots (56.6%) in boys' boarding schools. Also the chi-square test analysis indicated that the rate of drug abuse was higher in boys' boarding schools and girls' boarding schools than in mixed boarding and mixed day and boarding schools. Bullying is also common in boys' boarding schools (45.8%) than in the other categories of schools. The study established that only 13.6% of the headteachers knew about peer mediation. In addition, 68.3% of the secondary schools did not have peer mediation programs. In addition (59.6%) of the teachers had never attended any training in conflict-management skills.

### **Conclusion**

The study established that violence is rife in secondary schools in Kenya. Nearly 60% of teachers had not attended training in conflict management skills therefore do not understand the value of peer mediation. Consequently, an overwhelming majority of head teachers (88.3%) did not have such programs in their schools. This means that students are not guided well on how to manage social-emotional problems associated with adolescence.

### **Recommendations**

The study makes the following recommendations.

- a) Head teachers and teacher counselors should be trained in conflict management skills that can help students and members of staff who may have social and emotional challenges.
- b) Students should be taught essential life skills which can help them to manage the adolescent social-emotional problems.
- c) Teachers should involve students in conflict resolution because students have more information on the causes of conflict and can play an important role in coming up with solutions to the problems they encounter.
- d) Students should be sensitized on the importance of seeking help from elderly persons who have had experience and challenges in life rather than from their peers.
- e) Schools should hold regular forums in which all the members of staff and students can share ideas on the welfare of students as well as members of staff. Such forums will make students cooperate during resolution of school crisis.



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