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Youth Violence in Secondary Schools in Kenya: Prevalence, Manifestations and Prevention

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to investigate youth violence in secondary schools in Kenya, focusing on a sociological analysis of its prevalence, manifestations and prevention. The study was motivated by the recent spate of incidents of student unrest in secondary schools. Theories and literature on youth violence were reviewed and a conceptual framework developed to guide the study. Data was collected from 238 students, 16 secondary school Head teachers, educational experts and community stakeholders by use of questionnaires, focus group discussion and interviews. The collected data was quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. The findings revealed that youth violence is a social phenomenon common in many Kenyan secondary schools, although its nature and magnitude varied across the geographical locations of the sampled schools. In the light of these findings, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education should review the situation existing in Kenyan schools with a view to determining the social problems that make students' lives more and more meaningless. Professional in-service training programmes for teachers and school managers should also be emphasized for effective administration. In addition, the parents and the community should be involved in school matters, including the formulation and implementation of school rules. The study concludes with recommendations for further research on youth violence from a broader perspective in contexts stated.*

1. Introduction:

Youth violence as a widespread phenomenon in Africa, mainly since the 1960's, is the subject of a much older and wider "youth phenomenon" dating as far back as the middle ages, and spread widely across Europe in countries such as France, Italy, Germany and England, where the movement initially confined itself to the university campuses and centred on disobedience to authority (for example, the king and his delegates) and on the refusal to be disciplined (Hobbes in Lipset and Altbach 1969: v).

Centuries later, in 1848, as a workers' revolution was being organized in Vienna, Austria, Friedrich Engels could not but illuminate some of the peculiar features of recalcitrant students' behaviour in a narrative he published:

The students, about 4,000 strong, well armed, and far better disciplined than the National Guard, formed the nucleus, the real strength, of the revolutionary force, and were in no ways willing to act as a mere instrument in the hands of the committee of safety (the governing organ of the revolution). Though they recognized it, and were even its most enthusiastic supporters, they yet formed a sort of independent and rather turbulent body, deliberating for themselves in the "Aula" ... preventing, by constant agitation, things from settling down to the old everyday tranquility, and very often forcing their resolutions upon the committee ... (quoted in Christman 1966: 40).

In the seventeenth century, in the heat of political controversy in Europe, and in England in particular, Thomas Hobbes, the Oxford philosopher who advocated unquestioning loyalty to the Monarch, was quick to locate one of the sources of tension. "The Universities have been to this nation, as the wooden horse was to the Trojans...I despair of any lasting peace among ourselves, till Universities here shall bend and direct their studies to the settling of it, that is, to the teaching of absolute obedience to the laws of the King...The core of the rebellion, as you have seen by this, and read of other rebellions, are the universities; which nevertheless are not to be cast away but to be better disciplined..."(quoted in S.M Lipset and P.G Altbach 1969: V).

Youth violence in North America has on the one hand directed its thrust at the injustices and imbalances in the socio-economic structure, seeking to redress the inequalities and institute fairness in access to and distribution of the opportunities in life. On the other hand, at the micro-level, it has also sought to influence the socialization process in educational

institutions in terms of ideology, and curriculum practices and research, in accordance with the desired social ends. Consequently, student politics and activism were diversified in accordance with the situation and opportunities at the time, ranging from Students for a Democratic Society, fighting for general racial and economic equality and harmony in society, to the more intercultural Black Students Association fighting for dignity, equality and recognition for the blacks in America, Africa and elsewhere.

On the African scene, youth violence has not been less noticeable. In the recent past, a trail of them throughout the entire continent has concerned everybody, although the issues at stake and the demands and the methods used vary greatly. Since the mid-1960's and more intensively from the 1970's to 1990s, nearly every African country has in one way or another been shaken by youth violence, as has been evident in Egypt, Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Congo, Zaire, South Africa, Kenya and Ethiopia, to mention a few on the continent. Closer to home in East Africa, manifestations of youth violence have been observed not only in Universities but also in other institutions of higher education and training and even in some secondary schools. The general contention in the struggle has revolved, among other things, around the fight against a seemingly conservative and repressive adult society.

Youth violence is not a recent phenomenon in Kenya, but has been a problem over the years. Indeed the violence can be closely linked to adolescence. They exhibit problems that can simply be identified as indiscipline problems (Makinde 1987:17).

The nature of youth violence in secondary schools is multi-faceted as it involves indiscipline that is destructive of the individual student, school property and the school community where such upheavals take place. The problem with the current nature of secondary school indiscipline is that it has become very violent and ghastly (Ndeti 2002: 4). Experts in education say that liberal parents, the ban on caning, some provisions in the Children Act and the lack of role models exhibiting high moral integrity are some of the factors that have robbed teachers of the power to correct wayward students. Teachers dare not punish a student lest they be dragged to court. They neither cane nor use other forms of punishment as these amounts to abuse according to the law.

Thus the failure to accommodate student aspirations and expectations has led to dissatisfaction, resulting in student upheaval and activism. The Kenyan Philosophy of Education emphasizes the attainment of mutual social responsibility by students as they go

through secondary education. The Koech Report (1999) observes that mutual social responsibility, if properly inculcated into minds of the young through an inclusive education curriculum, would play a critical role in the development of virtues such as honesty, confidence, a good work ethic, concern for others' welfare, and overall integrity of character, which are essential ingredients for success. Therefore schools as centres of learning ought to have an inclusive curriculum, which is carefully and well developed with diversified co-curricular activities that adequately cater for all the academic and non-academic needs of students. This should be implemented to the letter in an effort to inculcate self-discipline in individual students.

It is no surprise to learn that, in spite of the adverse effects of student militancy on the community, the community as a whole or in part plays an active role in sponsoring, supporting and financing evident activities that are intrinsically viable agents of community-school violence. For example, it is not uncommon for community members to vend drugs to students, to act as middlemen and to provide supplies of weapons (however crude) to school compounds and surroundings.

2. Statement Of The Problem:

Youth violence is a major problem around the world. Efforts are being made globally to highlight student violence as a growing social problem deserving international attention and action. To date, youth violence has been placed on the global and national agenda of most countries in the world. Civil societies and the media in Kenya, for example, have continued to highlight youth violence as an issue affecting schools and as a social problem deserving attention.

Most educators, however, attribute youth violence more to changes in society and the fact that teenagers no longer automatically respect conventional values. Schools that were once mentorship institutions are now identified with bullying and gang rape.

This study sought to determine and examine the prevalence, manifestations and prevention of youth violence in Kenyan secondary schools in order to help determine the conditions and methods of intervention needed to bring about behavioural rehabilitation and restitution.

3. Purpose Of The Study:

The main objective of this study was to investigate the nature, manifestations and prevention of youth violence that has characterized student life in many Kenyan secondary schools. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- i. Establish the prevalence of youth violence in secondary schools in Kenya.
- ii. Determine manifestations of youth violence in Kenyan secondary schools.
- iii. Identify methods to curb or else minimize youth violence in secondary schools.

4. Methodology:

4.1. Research Design:

This study used the ex-post facto design. An ex-post facto research design is defined as: Systematic empirical enquiry into which the scientist does not have direct control of independent variables because their manifestations have already occurred or because they are inherently not manipulable. Inferences are made, without direct intervention, from concomitant variation of independent and dependent variables (Kerlinger 1973:379).

This research design was relevant for the present study because the study is not only concerned with the collection and description of data, but it also seeks to investigate and establish the existence of certain relationships among the variables under investigation. Further, the researcher was not able to manipulate variables like age, gender, academic qualification, professional grade and administrative experience of the participants and further they were beyond the scope of present study.

4.2. Participants:

Random selection was used to pick two hundred and forty (240) students from the sampled schools. Six education officers were purposively sampled from the district education office. The parents and community leaders were purposively sampled from development groups registered at the culture and social services district offices. Selected education officers,

parents and community leaders were included in the study in order to get a good representative number of respondents, reduce bias and effect reliable data collection.

5. Research Instruments:

5.1. Questionnaire:

The questionnaire asked specific questions which called for specific answers (Lovell 1977). The questionnaire was preferred due to its suitability for the study as suggested by Mugenda (1999:71), who observed that questionnaires are commonly used to obtain important information about a population. Each item in the questionnaire was developed to address a specific research question of the study.

Questionnaires are among the most widely used data-gathering instruments and are preferred to other methods when factual information is required. Those who advocate the use of this technique argue that the questionnaire has unique advantages and, if properly constructed and administered, it may serve as the most appropriate and useful data-gathering device in a research project. It can give the respondent a good chance to give confidential information regarded as embarrassing if communicated orally. When questionnaires are administered to a group of respondents, they have an advantage in that they are less costly in terms of time, money and effort and ensure a (100%) hundred percent return rate. Another main advantage in using this method of data gathering is that information can be obtained on many topics that are not necessarily observable.

5.2. Interview Schedule:

Structured interviews were conducted with six selected educational administrators in the office of the interviewees. Sometimes the questions were supplemented with discussion of arising matters (unstructured questions). Each interview took 25-35 minutes. This method was very appropriate because of its flexibility. It allows issues to be probed and further questions to be asked as the need arises. The researcher made sure that the respondents were comfortable by being warm and friendly and creating a suitable environment where the interviewee was able to respond to questions freely. The data that was collected on the spot was tape-recorded as well as manually recorded. One limitation of the interview schedule was

that it required highly skilled and trained investigators, interviewers and note takers. It also required a considerable amount of time and energy for information management and review.

5.3. Focus-Group Discussion:

In focus-group discussions (FGDs) people from similar backgrounds or experiences are brought together to discuss a specific topic of interest to investigators. In this research one focus group discussion with parents and community leaders was organised. There were seven ladies and four men present although initially six men and six women had been invited. The focus group discussion took about fifty minutes. They were held in the Office of culture and social services. This was preferred for the collection of qualitative data because it would help generate more information, especially if participants have gone through similar experiences (Patton 2002). Focus groups have an advantage over surveys and other techniques because they allow for interaction among participants, which encourages an in-depth look at a problem or issue (Krueger 1994). Other advantages FGDs include the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues arising out of the discussion, which the researcher may not have thought important at the design stage. A further advantage of this method is that it increases the number of the participants in a qualitative study by interviewing more people at one time, which makes its findings valuable and believable.

The researcher sought the FGD members' permission to record the deliberations, which was granted. The informed consent enabled the researcher to gather detailed and accurate information relating to the study focus. The use of probing questions solicited additional information, which had not come out clearly using other tools. The purpose was to explore the range of opinions and views on the topic of interest. However, information obtained cannot stand on its own and therefore needs to be complemented by survey data to show the distribution of opinion and beliefs uncovered. The ideal number is usually between five and eight. Data collected here was recorded manually and also tape-recorded for further content analysis.

6. Discussion Of Findings:

The results in Table 1 show that youth violence emerges in different ways and that the nature of this occurrence varies greatly between schools facing similar challenges. These include fighting among students 37.5%, drug taking (cigarette/bhang smoking, consumption of alcohol as a sign of victory and comradeship) at 25%, boycotting classes 20.9%, burning school property 8.3% and assaulting teachers 8.3%.

Manner of youth violence	N	%
Fighting among students	9	37.5
Drug taking	6	25.0
Boycotting classes	5	20.9
Burning school property	2	8.3
Assaulting teachers	2	8.3
Total	24	100.0

Source: Field data, 2009

Table 1: Manner of occurrence of youth violence as reported by head teachers

The findings from focus group discussions and interviews confirm the questionnaire results, and revealed that youth violence has emerged in every region of the country, disrupting schools in urban and rural areas as well as in cities. Youth violence is higher than ever, and by all indications, still increasing. A particularly noticeable aspect of youth violence is its tendency to occur in definite geographical areas. Further, youth violence tended to cluster in certain localities within the province. The research also revealed that in locations where youth violence occurred, the same issues and outcomes were usually observed in all strikes in the district. In both rural and urban schools, student indiscipline was characterized by violence accompanied by disruptive behaviour, like absconding from school, fighting fellow students, boycotting classes, burning school property, assaulting teachers and taking drugs. The results suggest that youth violence is a significant problem in secondary schools. If nothing is done to lower the incidences of student violence, many negative consequences will result. For example, destruction of property, loss of life, and the dropout rate of the perpetrator and the victim will continue to rise. The number of students who stay at home to avoid incidences of youth violence will also increase.

On manifestation of youth violence Table 2 shows that the students in the sample are at risk of absconding from school (41.7%). 18.2% of the respondents agreed that boycotting classes enabled them communicate a certain feeling or dissatisfaction, while 16.7% of the respondents reported that striking against school administration (riots, demonstrations and sit-ins) were a manifestation of youth violence. Other manifestations of youth violence that affect both the aggressor and the victim alike include burning school property (14.3%), killing fellow students (7.3%) and boycotting meals (1.7%).

Manifestation of youth violence	N	%
Absconding from school	172	41.7
Boycotting classes	75	18.2
Striking against the administration	69	16.7
Burning school property	59	14.3
Killing fellow students	30	7.3
Boycotting meals	7	1.7
Total responses	412	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2009.

Table 2: Manifestation of youth violence as reported by students

These research findings agree with the head teachers' responses that youth violence in secondary schools is manifested in more than one way. These manifestations include absconding from school (34.4%), fighting among students (28.1%), boycotting classes (15.6%), striking against the school administration (15.6%) and burning school property (6.3%) as indicated in Table 3.

Manifestation of youth violence	N	%
Absconding from school	11	34.4
Fighting amongst students	9	28.1
Boycotting classes	5	15.6
Striking against the administration	5	15.6
Burning school property	2	6.3
Total responses	32	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2009.

Table 3: Manifestation of youth violence as reported by head teachers

The results in Table 3 suggested that head teachers' views were consistent with those of students (see Table 2). The investigation concludes that youth violence takes various forms. Some are political in nature, others stem from socio-economic issues while others involve students who simply enjoy acts of hooliganism (especially after sporting events). Militant students may be temperamental, manifesting a "don't care-attitude", such that they terrorise other learners, although unprovoked. Some may abscond from school while others may go to the extreme of teasing and provoking their educators so that the educators decide to chase them out of the classroom (Powell et al 1995:48).

The study established that students' perceptions of pragmatic intervention against youth violence in schools were varied. 29.69% strongly agreed that showing understanding and tolerance was crucial in preventing youth violence. 21.29% considered the strengthening of religious institutions, with an almost significant number calling for the establishment of regular channels through which students could air their grievances (19.98%). Guidance and counseling was rated at 17.09%, punishment of wrong-doers rated at 11.76%, while a minority of students considered enlisting the support of the community (0.28%) as listed in Table 4.

Possible intervention	N	%
Showing understanding/tolerance	106	29.69
Strengthening religious institutions	76	21.29
Establishing regular channels through which students could air their grievances	71	19.89
Guidance and counseling	61	17.09
Punishment of wrong-doers	42	11.76
Enlisting the support of the community	1	0.28
Total responses	357	100.00

Source: Field data, 2009.

Table 4: Possible measures to deal with youth violence in schools as perceived by Students

7. Conclusion:

Youth violence is a social phenomenon common in many Kenyan secondary schools, although its character and intensity varied with the categories of schools selected for this study. By observing the demographic characteristics of respondents, youth violence cuts across the ages and genders of students as well as across the location, status and category of schools. The impression that only male students perpetrate militant acts, as has previously been posited, is outdated, as many female students were reported to have participated in strikes and other forms of indiscipline, just like their male counterparts. This problem calls for concerted efforts on the part of the Ministry of Education and other agencies to provide appropriate guidance to students. Therefore there is need for development interventions to address not only individual learners' needs, but also the general patterns and trends of youth violence.

Most students—male or female—resort to violence in order to achieve their goal and get what they want. This is typical of students who are exposed to aggressive media, an

aggressive environment and more often to a violent or a lax family setup. Such students disrupt class processes and undermine the quality of the classroom learning environment. A situation such as this thus seems to require a deliberate policy move to equip schools with professional services for the counseling, guidance and rehabilitation of students in their school years.

8. Recommendations:

8.1. Review Of Situations In Schools:

The findings of the study revealed that youth violence is a social phenomenon affecting schools in both rural and urban areas and is mostly attributed to lax or punitive administrations. This undoubtedly causes students to resort to militant behaviour as a way of achieving their goals and getting what they want. In view of this, it is therefore recommended that the Ministry of Education should review the situation existing in schools with a view to determining the social problems that make students' life more and more meaningless with each passing day. This review should be conducted by education experts who are sufficiently knowledgeable, not only on the structure of education, but also on the issues affected by globalization.

8.2. Training And Retraining Of Heads Of School For Efficient And Effective Leadership:

It has been observed that school governance, among the intra-school factors, seems to have had a precipitating influence on students' revolts and riots. In some incidences, appointments of head teachers and their deputies at provincial and district levels are not based on qualifications, experience or competence in educational management as provided in the scheme of service, but on other parameters, such as religious and political affiliation. The Kenyan government should therefore intensify its efforts to train and retrain head teachers and their deputies through conducting induction courses, seminars and refresher courses on management in order for them to run schools efficiently and effectively. These programmes should be based on needs assessment to ensure that existing performance gaps are accurately identified and addressed. These should have the following content: human resource management, discipline, conflict resolution, motivation, inter-personal relations, public relations, the work ethic, performance appraisal and financial management. These

programmes would improve head teachers' organization and planning skills for work, innovation and coping with more routine activities and provide the qualities needed for personal effectiveness in order to respond to regular and irregular occurrences of anti-social behaviour in environments having different characteristics.

8.3. Need For School-Community Partnership:

The findings of this study have revealed that community partnership is fundamental for the prevention of youth violence in secondary schools. This is because community involvement and support facilitates communication between school staff and parents about students who are experiencing difficulties. It is therefore recommended that the Government of Kenya should develop a code of conduct for students, in consultation with the stakeholders of the school, concerning all aspects of the education policy, as well as the formulation and implementation of new laws with a view to involving parents and the community and providing consistency in dealing with actions by students.

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