Full Length Research Paper

A survey on conflict resolution mechanisms in public secondary schools: A case of Nairobi province, Kenya

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The broad objective of the study was to determine various mechanisms applied in resolving conflicts within public secondary schools in Nairobi province. This study used descriptive and exploratory research design. A sample comprising of principals, representatives of Boards of Governors (BoG's), class teachers, students and education officers was used to investigate the understanding, perceptions and impacts of conflict resolution mechanisms in their respective schools. The research instruments included a questionnaire and an interview schedule, which were administered to the respondents. The data collected was subjected to qualitative and quantitative analysis. They were analyzed using SPSS. Frequency distribution tables, percentages, and charts were used to present data. The findings showed that, the concept of "conflict management" refers to an act and also a process of resolving disputes between two or more parties with the view of coming to a resolution. The study showed that when the students are faced with a conflict of personal nature the majority of them deal with the conflict through constructive approaches. It is however, important to note that when student react as a group they are likely to be influenced by group behaviour, which in most cases is very destructive. This could be a factor that contributes to destructive scenes especially when resolution of conflicts between groups of students and the school administrators or teachers does not find an amicable solution. Effective communication is therefore, essential in analysis of conflicts in public schools as well as in identifying their root causes. The findings showed that the causes of conflicts in public secondary schools are varied. Resolution of various forms of conflicts would therefore, require specific strategies since the root causes may be unique. The study recommends that school administrators and teachers should seek to embrace open systems where everyone is let to air their views and the areas of conflict discussed openly. In addition, they should encourage democratic representation in the choice of leaders namely; prefects, P.T.A members and B.O.G Members. This would help in eliminating the perceived feeling of discrimination or favouritism amongst teachers and students. The schools should also seek to educate all the stakeholders on the best way of solving conflicts. This can be achieved by say starting a peer educator's movement that will create awareness to students about the negative effects of conflict and act as mediators in conflict resolution in schools. It will also serve to identify the parties involved in conflict and exposing them to the whole school so that, they face shame and deter from doing the acts in future. The schools should also embrace guidance and counseling programmed since its one of the best way to deter destructive mechanisms of resolving both personal and group conflicts especially amongst students. Guidance and counseling is the most appropriate to control spread of bad inner feelings.

Key words: Conflict management, conflict resolution, secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is when two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature and have not been aligned or agreed about yet, including: within oneself when you are not living according to one's values; when

values and perspectives are threatened; or discomfort from fear of the unknown or from lack of fulfillment. Conflict is inevitable and often good, for example, good teams always go through a "form, storm, norm and perform" period. Getting the most out of diversity means often-contradictory values, perspectives and opinions (McNamara, 2007).

Conflict resolution is the process of attempting to resolve a dispute or a conflict. Successful conflict resolution occurs by listening to and providing opportunities to meet the needs of all parties and to adequately address interests, so that, each party is satisfied with the outcome (Weaver, 2003). Conflict practitioner's talk about finding the win-win outcome for parties involved, versus the win-lose dynamic found in most conflicts. While 'conflict resolution' engages conflict once it has already started , 'conflict prevention' aims to end conflicts before they start or before they lead to verbal, physical, or legal fighting or violence. Conflict itself has both positive and negative outcomes (Fillipo and de Waals, 2000).

The art of conflict resolution or conflict management is grounded on the fundamental principles of management processes as outlined by Fredrick Taylor (Taylor, 1911). Conflict management as a process entails ensembling of activities of planning and monitoring the performance of a process, especially in the sense of a conflict resolution process. It involves the application of knowledge, skills, tools, techniques and systems to define, visualize, measure, control, report and improve processes with the goal to a harmonious environment of co-existence. Taylor developed his management theories in his book Shop Management published in 1903, making it arguably the first scholarly work on management. Although there were books and published pieces on what could be termed "management" these were more of a "guide to" or trade publication on best practices. Shop Management approached the role of manager as a general role with specific functions with respect to collaborative work.

Mention the term conflict and most people worldwide envision fights, riots or wars. Schools as organizations in their own right have managers who are judged with the responsibility of maintaining their stability in order to achieve organizational goals. Conflicts in Kenya's public secondary schools are on the rise in the recent past, (East African Standard, July 23, 2004). According to Musembi and Siele (2004), the government said that, he was concerned over the disturbances in learning institutions where in some cases students have burnt down schools and even attacked teachers. This mainly arises due to unresolved conflicts between the students and the schools' administrators. This prompted the calling of a consultative meeting to address rising unrest in secondary schools. It was as a response to the burning

down of several institutions by students in Nairobi and districts in its environs, destroying property worth over twenty million Kenya shillings. The majority of the incidents happen in secondary boarding schools, with few exceptional cases reported in day secondary schools. Some of the emergencies that arise as a result of unresolved conflicts include: arson attacks, riots and violence which result in injury and loss of life and property.

Educationists equally agree that most schools now spend little time on academics because discipline consumes so much time. This has had negative impacts on the academic standards and performance. It is also widely acknowledged that violence against teachers, other students, and destruction of property both in the learning institution and surrounding communities has greatly increased in the past years (Onsarigo, 2007).

Problem statement

Conflict management is different in meaning to conflict resolution. The latter - conflict resolution - refers to resolving the dispute to the approval of one or both parties, whereas, the former - conflict management - concerns an ongoing process that may never have a resolution. In institutions such as public secondary schools, clear-cut policies ought to exist to provide guidance on how the administrators ought to manage or resolve conflicts.

To make education relevant to the social needs of the country, there is need for a critical re-examination on what our schools aim at and how or what is managed socially impacts on the products. While, we focus on learning institutions, it is pertinent to note that the promise of choice to make schooling socially relevant lies on the ability of stakeholders, especially, the policy makers and implementers, to clearly articulate the agreed social norms and values required for the development of the nation (Cascio, 1992).

The role of management in conflict resolution is therefore, crucial for effective and efficient organization of school management. However, the researcher will not overlook the fact that, the role of management in conflict resolution is only one of the many functions, which could lead to better organization in schools.

In appreciating the importance of management in education, Olembo et al. (1992) essentially, provide awareness of the skills, values, and knowledge required for competent and professional management of schools in Kenya.

They did not however spell conflict resolution mechanisms applied by the bodies that are entrusted with the administrative tasks of the student and staff personnel. Conflict management is one of the important aspects in solving most of the problems in organizations in the world today. Kenya is not an exception.

A previous empirical study by Onsarigo (2007) had sought to determine factors influencing conflicts in institutions of higher learning. The study established that,

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it is better to expose and resolve conflict before they damage people's relationships or even before they degenerate into violence which undermines institutional stability and performance. The study concluded that social conflicts in educational institutions demand moral authority and leadership integrity to resolve them. If not resolved, they can have a destabilizing effect on institutional performance in all learning processes. The focus of this study was to establish and analyze the existing conflict resolution mechanisms in public secondary schools within Nairobi province.

Objectives of the study

The broad objective of the study was to determine various mechanisms applied in resolving conflicts within public secondary schools in Nairobi province. Besides, the study sought to achieve the following specific objectives:

(i) To establish the understanding of the term "conflict management" by both the students and the administrators in the context of the school environment.
(ii) To determine the major areas of conflict in public secondary schools in Nairobi.
(iii) To determine the mechanisms applied by the school administrators in resolution of conflicts and
(iv) To determine the mechanisms applied by the students in resolution of conflicts

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

(i) What is the understanding of the term "conflict management" by both the students and the administrators in the context of the school environment?
(ii) Which are the major areas of conflict in public secondary schools in Nairobi?
(iii) What are the mechanisms applied by the school administrators in resolution of conflicts?
(iv) What are the mechanisms applied by the students in resolution of conflicts?

Justification of the study

This study is very valuable to the management of both private and public secondary schools since, it seeks to provide vital information about conflict resolution in schools. This in turn, would help the school management to determine suitable ways in dealing with conflict in educational sector. The study would also be important to the management of organizations and government ministries especially the ministry of education, science and technology in their bid to deal with conflict in schools

and improve the education standards in the country. The study would assist the ministry of education and specifically the Kenya Institute of Education in developing a curriculum that can be used to enhance the capacity of the administrators, the teachers, and the students in handling conflicts in schools. This would help to reduce organizational school conflicts. The study is worthy because it addresses the causes of institutional conflict and be able not only to propose solution to improve stability in the educational institutions but also in other public organizations/sectors in Kenya prone to all sorts of conflicts.

Scope of the study

The scope of the study was all public secondary schools in Nairobi province. A sampling frame was obtained from the provincial directorate of education offices. The study targeted the schools principals, teachers, and students. The Nairobi province is an administrative unit of Kenya which is defined to include the city of Nairobi (Nairobi central), Athi-River municipality, Ngong municipality, Thika municipality, Kikuyu municipality, Limuru municipality, Kiambu municipality and Ruiru municipality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of conflicts

Conflict may be viewed as occurring along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling), and behavioural (action) dimensions. This three-dimensional perspective can help us understand the complexities of conflict and why a conflict sometimes seems to proceed in contradictory directions (Mayer, 2001). As a set of perceptions, conflict is a belief or understanding that one's own needs, interests, wants, or values are incompatible with someone else's. There are both objective and subjective elements to this cognitive dimension. Conflict also involves an emotional reaction to a situation or interaction that signals a disagreement of some kind. The emotions felt might be fear, sadness, bitterness, anger, or hopelessness, or some amalgam of these. And in conflicts, it does not take two to tango. Often a conflict exists because one person feels in conflict with another, even though those feelings are not reciprocated by or even known to the other person. The behavioural component may be minimal, but the conflict is still very real to the person experiencing the feelings.

Conflict also consists of the actions that we take to express our feelings, articulate our perceptions, and get our needs met in a way that has the potential for interfering with someone else's ability to get his or her needs met. This conflict behaviour may involve a direct attempt to make something happen at someone else's expense. It may be an exercise of power. It may be violent. It may be destructive. Conversely, this behaviour may be concilia-

tory, constructive, and friendly. But, whatever its tone, the purpose of conflict behaviour is either to express the conflict or to get one's needs met. Again, the question of reciprocity exists. Obviously, the nature of a conflict in one dimension greatly affects its nature in the other two dimensions. People can go rapidly in and out of conflict, and the strength or character of conflict along each dimension can change quickly and frequently. And even though each of the three dimensions affects the others, a change in the level of conflict in one dimension does not necessarily cause a similar change in the other dimensions. Sometimes an increase in one dimension is associated with a decrease in another dimension (Mayer, 2001).

Conflict occurs between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings. Because of the wide range of potential differences among people, the absence of conflict usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction. Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad. However, the manner in which conflict is handled determines whether it is constructive or destruct-tive (Deutsch and Coleman, 2000). Conflict is defined as an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other (Fisher, 1990). The incompatibility or difference may exist in reality or may only be perceived by the parties involved. Nonetheless, the opposing actions and the hostile emotions are very real hallmarks of human conflict. Conflict has the potential for either a great deal of destruction or much creativity and positive social change (Kriesberg, 1998). Therefore, it is essential to understand the basic processes of conflict so that; we can work to maximize productive outcomes and minimize destructive ones. This review describes some common sources of conflict, the nature of conflicts in modern organizations, and the general strategies of approaching conflict that are available.

Nature of conflicts in organizations

According to Roloff (1987), "organizational conflict occurs when members engage in activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network, members of other collectivities, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of the organization (p. 496)". This definition can be broadened by conceptualizing conflict as an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (that is, individual, group, organization, etc.). Calling conflict of an interactive process does not preclude the possibilities of intra- individual conflict, for it is known that a person often interacts with self. Obviously, one also interacts with others.

Conflict may occur when: A party is required to engage in an activity that is incongruent with his or her needs or interests; when a party holds behavioural preferences, the satisfaction of which is incompatible with another person's implementation of his or her preferences; when a party wants some mutually desirable resource that is in short supply such that the wants of everyone may not be satis-fied fully; when a party possesses attitudes, values, skills, and goals that are salient in directing his or her behaviour but are perceived to be exclusive of the attitudes, values, skills, and goals held by the other(s); when two parties have partially exclusive behavioural preferences regarding their joint actions; and when two parties are interdependent in the performance of functions or activities.

This definition is much more inclusive, which implies that conflict can relate to incompatible preferences, goals, and not just activities. It should be recognized that in order for conflict to occur, it has to exceed the threshold level of intensity before the parties experience (or become aware of) any conflict. This principle of conflict threshold is consistent with Baron's (1990) contention that opposed interests must be recognized by parties for conflict to exist.

According to Kirkwood (2002), various types of conflict that exist in organizations include data conflicts, structural conflicts, relationship conflicts, and interest conflicts. Conflicts can lead to disputes, grievances, lawsuits, complaints, strikes, and disciplinary actions. Conflict can occur at a number of levels of human functioning. Conflict in your head between opposing motives or ideas is shown by your "internal dialogue" and is at the intra-personal level. Beyond that, the primary concern here is with social conflict, that is, conflict between people whether they are acting as individuals, as members of groups, or as representatives of organizations or nations. Interpersonal conflict occurs when two people have incompatible needs, goals, or approaches in their relationship. Communication breakdown is often an important source of interpersonal conflict and learning communication skills is valuable in preventing and resolving such difficulties. At the same time, very real differences occur between people that cannot be resolved by any amount of improved communication. "Personality conflict" refers to very strong differences in motives, values or styles in dealing with people that are not resolvable. For example, if both parties in a relation-ship have a high need for power and both want to be dominant in the relationship, there is no way for both to be satisfied, and a power struggle ensues. Common tactics used in interpersonal power struggles include the exaggerated use of rewards and punishments, deception and evasion, threats and emotional blackmail, and flattery or ingratiation. Unresolved power conflict usually recycles and escalates to the point of relationship breakdown and termination (Fisher, 2000).

Role conflict involves very real differences in role defini-tions, expectations or responsibilities between individuals who are interdependent in a social system. If there are ambiguities in role definitions in an organization or un-clear boundaries of responsibilities, then the stage is set for interpersonal friction between the persons involved.

Unfortunately, the conflict is often misdiagnosed as inter-personal conflict rather than role conflict, and resolution is then complicated and misdirected. The emotional intensity is often quite high in role conflict since people are directly involved as individuals and there is a strong tendency to personalize the conflict (Fisher, 2000).

Inter-group conflict occurs between collections of people such as ethnic or racial groups, departments or levels of decision making in the same organization, and union and management. Competition for scarce resources is a common source of inter-group conflict, and societies have developed numerous regulatory mechanisms, such as collective bargaining and mediation, for dealing with inter-group conflict in less disruptive ways. Social-psychological processes are very important in inter-group conflict (Fisher, 1990). Group members tend to develop stereotypes (oversimplified negative beliefs) of the opposing group, tend to blame them for their own problems (scape-goating), and practice discrimination against them.

These classic symptoms of inter-group conflict can be just as evident in organizations as in race relations in community settings. Inter-group conflict is especially tense and prone to escalation and intractability when group identities are threatened. The costs of destructive inter-group conflict can be extremely high for a society in both economic and social terms.

Multi-party conflict occurs in societies when different interest groups and organizations have varying priorities over resource management and policy development. These complex conflicts typically involve a combination of economic, value and power sources. This complexity is often beyond the reach of traditional authoritative or adversarial procedures, and more collaborative approaches to building consensus are required for resolution (Cormick et al., 1996).

International conflict occurs between states at the global level. Competition for resources certainly plays a part, but value and power conflict are often intertwined and sometimes predominate. The differences are articulated through the channels of diplomacy in a constant game of give and take, or threat and counter threat, sometimes for the highest of stakes. Mechanisms of propaganda can lead to many of the same social-psychological distortions that characterize interpersonal and inter-group conflict (Fisher, 2000).

Resolution of conflicts in schools

The chief executive or a school manager, that is, the principal, is responsible for the overall organization, control and maintenance of standards in the school as specified in the Education Act of 1968 (Republic of Kenya, 1968). A principal is therefore, a manager of school and is accountable for all that happens in the school. He is in charge of a community of variety of staff and students and it is to her/him that they look upon for guidance and direction (Iravo, 2002).

Kochhar (1988) emphasizes the importance of the principal whom he notes is the key cornerstone in the arch of school management and has the steering wheel in his hands. Kochhar asserts that the principal should be a group leader who knows how to involve people, arrange conditions and initiate process that bring out the best in each participant, that is the school personnel who include employees (teachers, non-teaching staff), and the students.

The principal stimulates the teamwork, co-ordinate their efforts, plans what to be done, directs the finding of solutions to common problems of the institute and evaluates performance to get reason for failure or success. Ozigi (1977) emphasizes that, the school reputation largely depends on the principal who can make or mar the school.

Kochhar (1988; 125) continues to assert that Schools are bad or good, in a healthy or unhealthy, mental, moral and physical condition flourishing or perishing, as the principal is capable, energetic, of high ideals or the reserve. Schools rise to fame or sink to obscurity as greater or lesser principals have charge of them. It is said "The school is as greater as the principal because everything in the school, the plant, the staff, the curriculum, methods and techniques of teaching among other human relationship, bear the impress of his/her personality and the way conflict resolutions are handled". Schools do not become great because of magnificent buildings but because of magnificent principals who are keen on the role of management in conflict resolution.

The principal therefore occupies a very significant office in any educational system. To be effective he needs, among others: drive, energy, vision, personality and management in conflict resolution technique. Organizations, especially large and complex ones employ different groups of people who have to be coordinated in the best way possible in order to achieve both individual and organizational goals. This means that the management has to create an environment in which members can cooperate with each other. However, work groups usually have a tendency to compete for limited resources, power and status, to the extent of disrupting the cooperative efforts. Besides internal conflict, management also faces conflict from external forces. These may include government, trade unions and economic conditions, Van Wyk (1989).

According to Griffin (1994), a principal's public and professional reputation will depend more on the standard of stability in his school than on any other single factor that is, good stability brings good results in every field of school endeavour. A principal who lets any form of conflict out of his hands is risking trouble. Should an instance of mass conflict occur, the wise principal will resist the temptation to find a scapegoat, be it the Ministry of Education, the board of governors, politicians, parents and and staff, but will instead take a long hard look at his own conflict management methods. If his school becomes

unstable in any way, then it implies that, foundations of management in conflict resolution were not established in the school, and the blame for this is his/hers.

The Center for Conflict Resolution in Schools (CCROSS) was founded in 2003. Currently staffed entirely by volunteers, CCROSS is a non-profit centre working with school administration to develop and promote effective conflict resolution strategies in Kenyan Schools. One key distinction between school conflicts in Kenya as compared to the West is that, whereas, in the latter, most school conflicts arise out of "relatively" petty interpersonal differences, in Kenya, school conflict is a form of dissent, a way of expressing opposition to the laws and norms of both school and the larger culture (CCROSS, 2004).

Theoretical framework

The contingency theory of strategic conflict management, which began as an elaboration, qualification, and extension of the value of symmetry, has, over the last decade, come into its own and emerged as an empirically tested perspective. Contingency theory argued that the complexity in strategic communication was best repre-sented by a continuum of stance, not by a limited set of models of excellence (Fisher and Keashly, 1988). This meta-theoretical analysis, while acknowledging the inspi-ration of the excellence theory, celebrates the maturing of the contingency theory by consolidating the development and advances the theory has made since 1997; docu-ments the discoveries that have either added new insights to the theory or refuted postulations; charts the streams of research that have been extended and expanded from the original framework; and records the ongoing dialogue the theory has offered to the field to continually challenge prevailing presumptions and presuppositions (Pang et al., 2007).

Contingency theory in conflict resolution was pioneered by Fisher and Keashly. In brief the theory, which comes mainly from organizational psychology, is that, at different points during a conflict different types of third party intervention are more or less effective. The implication is that the distinction which Burton makes between disputes and conflicts - noted above, is not necessarily useful. Research from organizational psychology analogously applied to deep-rooted conflicts suggests moments at which substantive issues (interests) are most salient whereas at other times miscommunication and misper-ceptions block attempts to resolve. The assumption is that subjective elements get worse as conflict escalates. Fisher and Keashly (1988) summarized their argument as: "A contingency approach to third party intervention is based on the assessment that social conflict involves a dynamic process in which objective and subjective elements interact over time as the conflict escalates and de-escalates. Depending on the objective-subjective mix, different intervention will be appropriate at different states

of the conflict." (p. 34).

Although, Fisher did, in a later article, consider Burton's human needs approach as the basis of analytical pro-blem solving, this seems to have been a brief foray - and later work discusses a contingency approach without reference to basic human needs. Where Fisher does en-gage Burton (and Azar) he seems to view needs-based problem-solving as part of a broader peace-building process and separates conflict resolution from a needs approach: "The analysis of protracted inter-group con-flicts as rooted in denial of basic human needs explains why such disputes defy traditional methods of conflict management and resolution" (Fisher, 1993: p. 248). Fisher places needs-based 'peace-building' within a contingency framework as, activities designed to improve the relationship and meet the basic needs of the parties, in order to de-escalate the conflict and render it amen-able to peacemaking. Peace building can then take its place as the essential bridge between peacekeeping and peacemaking. Conflict resolution in an organization prac-tice depends on a circumstance, that is, a contingency. Contingency theory recognizes the influence of given solution on organizational behaviour patterns. There is no one best way to do things. Difficult in deter-mining all relevant contingency factors and showing the relationship can be very complex.

The sociological conflict theory

While conflict is accepted as a central fact of society, every society has its unique conflicts. Greek thinkers from Heraclitus to the Sophists treated conflict as a primary social fact. Jean Bodin, the harbinger of modern theories of sovereignty, expanded the ideas of conflict from Niccolo Machiavelli who founded the origin of the state and its key institutions in the same place. Thomas Hobbes (1651) developed them into a materialistic rationalism. There are two distinct traditions of conflict theory useful for the study. The power relations tradition of political philosophy, reflecting view of: Machiavelli, Bodin, Hobbes and Mosca who have analyzed conflicts in the policy in terms of power relationships as well as seeing the state as the central object of analysis.

Sociological Conflict Theory is largely a synthesis of these two traditions focusing on the unequal distribution of rewards in society. While Karl Marx is its leading archi-tect, Wright Mills, Ralf Dahrendorf, Irving Louis Horowitz, Lewis Coser, Herbert Mucus, Randall Collins and Andre Gunder Frank are among the noted conflict theorists of contemporary sociology, whose direction of argument, we adopt in understanding the role of conflict in the Kenyan public universities.

Game theory

Game theory provides analytical tools for examining strategic interactions among two or more participants. By using simple, often numerical models to study complex social relations, game theory can illustrate the potential for

and risks associated with, cooperative behaviour among distrustful participants. Though, less familiar than typical board or video games, the lessons from these more abstract or hypothetical games are applicable to a wider array of social situations. Games used to simulate real-life situations typically include five elements: players, or decision makers; strategies available to each player; rules governing players' behaviour; outcomes, each of which is a result of particular choices made by players at a given point in the game; and payoffs accrued by each player as a result of each possible outcome. These games assume that each player will pursue the strategies that help him or her to achieve the most profitable outcome in every situation.

Real life is full of situations in which people - intentionally or unintentionally - pursue their own interests at the expense of others, leading to conflict or compete-tion. Games used to illustrate these relationships often place the interests of two players in direct opposition: the greater the payoff for one player, the less for the other. In order to achieve a mutually productive outcome, the players must coordinate their strategies, because if each player pursues his or her greatest potential payoffs, the shared outcome is unproductive. This concept is illustrated below, using the Prisoner's Dilemma Game.

This and other games illustrate the potential for coope-ration to produce mutually beneficial outcomes. However, they also highlight the difficulties of obtaining cooperation among distrustful participants, because each player is tempted to pursue his or her individual interests. Coope-ration requires that both players compromise, and forego their individual maximum payoffs. Yet, in compromising, each player risks complete loss if the opponent decides to seek his or her own maximum payoff. Rather than, risking total loss, players tend to prefer the less produc-tive outcome. These models can provide insight into the strategic options and likely outcomes available to participants in particular situations.

From this insight, decision-makers can better assess the potential effects of their actions, and can make deci-sions that will more likely produce the desired goals and avoid conflict. Game theory can be used to explain and address social problems in Kenyan public secondary schools. Since games often reflect or share charac-teristics with real situations - especially competitive or cooperative situations - they can suggest strategies for dealing with such circumstances. Just as we may be able to understand the strategy of players in a particular game, we may also be able to predict how people, political factions, or states will behave in a given situation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adapted a descriptive research design where the re-searcher conducted a field survey in selected public secondary schools. The survey design was based on the use of questionnaires

that were used as data collection instruments. The population of the study was scattered since the schools are located separated from each other therefore a survey was appropriate. The major purpose of descriptive research design is a description of the state of affairs as it exists at present (Kothari, 2003). The researcher applied this design to investigate the current situation on the conflict resolution mechanisms applied in public secondary schools in Nairobi pro-vince. This design was adopted because it allows the collection of large amounts of data from the target population.

Population and sampling design

The target population of this study comprised of the secondary school administrators, teachers, and the students drawn from the Nairobi province. They formed the respondents of the study. The sampling frame for the schools was the list of all secondary schools as obtained from the provincial directorate of education's office. To ensure representativeness, Nairobi province was sub-divided into five clusters namely; Southern, Western, Central, Northern and Eastern. A random sample of respondents was drawn from each cluster. The respondents to be interviewed were then selected through simple random sampling from selected schools within each cluster. This ensured that there was no bias in sampling given that the universal population of the schools, teachers, students, and administrators in Nairobi is large. Selection of administrators and teachers was done through purposive sampling.

According to Kothari (2003), purposive sampling is applied where the researcher intends to pick subjects that satisfy a given criterion. This category of the sample shall therefore comprise of the head teacher, a representative member of the board of governors, class teachers, and head of guidance and counseling. Students were derived from all class levels (forms) irrespective of their stay experience at the school. The class teachers assisted in selection of five students for the interviews. Table 1 presents a summary of the sample design.

Data collection methods

The focus during the field survey was to gather primary data. This is factual data collected for the first time to address the problem at hand. The questionnaire was the principal tool in collecting primary data. The questionnaire contained structured, semi-structured and open-ended questions. According to Kinoti (1998), semi-structured questions may elicit adequate qualitative and quantitative data.

The questionnaire was structured into four sections. The first section requested the general information of the respondent; the second captured information on the understanding of the term "conflict management" by both the students, teachers, and the administrators in the context of the school environment; the third section captured information on major areas of conflict in public secondary schools in Nairobi; and finally, the fourth section captured data on the mechanisms applied by the school admi-nistrators in resolution of conflicts. The interview guide was used to gather data from the key informants who were drawn from the heads of education offices at the divisional, district, and provincial levels.

Data collection procedures

After obtaining a research permit from the Ministry of Education, the researcher, sought authority from the provincial director of education and the district education officers in order to facilitate interviews with the selected informants. The questionnaires were administered to the respondents from within their respective schools A deadline was set by which the completed questionnaires and

Table 1: The sampling design.

Cluster	Number of schools	Category	Sample per school	Total sample
Southern	5	H/Teacher	1	5
		BOG	1	5
		C/teachers	4	20
		Students	5	25
Western	5	H/Teacher	1	5
		BOG	1	5
		C/teachers	4	20
		Students	5	25
Central	5	H/Teacher	1	5
		BOG	1	5
		C/teachers	4	20
		Students	5	25
Northern	5	H/Teacher	1	5
		BOG	1	5
		C/teachers	4	20
		Students	5	25
Eastern	5	H/Teacher	1	5
		BOG	1	5
		C/teachers	4	20
		Students	5	25
Totals	20	H/Teacher		20
		BOG		20
		C/teachers		100
		Students		125

interviews were ready. To ensure high response rates, the researcher interpreted each of the sections of the questionnaires to the respondents to ensure that they fully understood the questions before answering. Secondly, the researcher ensured that the respondents picked were not in a hurry and had adequate time to answer the questionnaires.

Data analysis methods

After the fieldwork, before analysis, all the questionnaires were adequately checked for completeness. The information was coded and entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The data was checked to ensure that the output was free from outliers and the effect of missing responses was at minimum. Quantitative analysis involved generating descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics included frequency tallies, and their corresponding percentage scores. The findings were presented by using tables and charts as found appropriate. Qualitative analysis involved categorizing of data from interviews and field notes into common themes and presented using frequency distribution tables and charts.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The broad objective of the study was to determine various mechanisms applied in resolving conflicts within public secondary schools in Nairobi province. This chapter presents an interpretation and discussion of results derived from the field study.
The findings were drawn from teachers, students and administrators from a sample of 20 secondary schools within Nairobi province. The chapter addresses all the study objectives.

General profile of the sample

The sample for the study was gathered from the 100 teachers, 125 students and 40 members of administration drawn from across 20 schools.

Table 2. Demographic profile of the students' sample.

Gender	Number of respondents	% of the total
Male	95	76.0
Female	30	24.0
Total	125	100.0
Form/ Class level	**Number of respondents**	**% of the total**
One	7	5.6
Two	14	11.2
Three	59	47.2
Four	45	36.0
Total	125	100.0

Source: Survey data (2009).

Table 3. Demographic profile of the teachers' sample.

Gender	Number of respondents	% of the total
Male	62	62.0
Female	38	38.0
Total	100	100.0
Key subject areas	**Number of respondents**	**% of the total**
Arts	29	29.0
Sciences	44	44.0
Languages	27	27.0
Total	100	100.0
Teaching experience	**Number of respondents**	**% of the total**
Less than 5 years	24	24.0
6-10 years	19	19.0
More than 10 years	57	57.0
Total	100	100.0

Source. Survey data (2009).

Profile of the students' sample

Table 2 shown, presents the demographic characteristics of the students' sample. The sample comprised of 76% of boys and 24% of girls. A majority of the respondents (47.2%) were drawn from the third level class (Form three) while, 36% were drawn from the fourth level class (form four). The remainder was drawn from levels one and two. This shows that most of the sample students were drawn from the upper levels and hence, were well versed with the cultures of their respective schools.

Profile of the teachers' sample

Table 3 shown, presents the demographic characteristics of the teachers' sample. The sample comprised of 62% of male teachers and 38% of female teachers. A majority of the sample teachers (44.0%) were specialized in teaching of sciences.

The remainder was fairly split with 29% teaching arts subjects and 27% teaching language subjects. The findings further indicate that, a majority of the respondents (57%) had teaching experience of more than ten years. This shows that most of the sample teachers were well versed with the cultures of their respective schools as well as the teaching profession.

Respondents' understanding of "conflict management"

The students' perspective

The sample students were requested to give their under-

Table 4. Sources of conflicts to the students.

	Yes		No	
	n	**%**	**n**	**%**
Fellow students (N=122)	100	82.0%	22	18.0%
The teachers (N=118)	60	50.8%	58	49.2%
The school administration (N=116)	52	44.8%	64	55.2%

Source: Survey data (2009).

standing of the term "conflict management" in the context of public secondary schools. The respondents gave varied opinions in regard to the concept of conflict management. According to the findings, conflict management refers to: a way to solve conflict between individuals who have disagreed between a certain issues; settling conflicts or grudges between different people by uniting them; managing of misunderstandings and disagreements among parties involved in the school that is, administration, students, prefects; solving of disputes among students, teachers and workers etc; in case of any misunderstanding one is able to refrain from it by not contributing e.g. a strike; being able to solve problems where conflicts arises; being able to solve issues without violence; it is a way of bringing two parties together after they had a conflict/misunderstanding; it is the act of resolving disputes among teachers, students and the school administration by coming up with possible solutions after identifying the cause of the conflict; the ability to resolve conflicts created in order to maintain peace and unity; an act of dealing with student who are indisagreement either with themselves, teachers or school administration, so as to successfully arrive at a resolution; the ability to understand and be able to manage a misunderstanding between two parties; managing or resolving conflict in an institution; management of disagreements between students and administration; the act of preventing and controlling conflict when they occur without hurting any of the people involved; different methods of stabilizing indifferences in schools; a process of solving disagreement between two people; and it is a process whereby, disagreement between two or more parties can be solved, so as to come to an agreement immediately as possible.

The findings indicate that from the students' perspective, "conflict management" is a process as well as an act. This means that, an intervention has to be put in place in order to solve indifferences between two or more parties. In case of a public secondary school, the parties involved include the students, teachers, and the school administrators. The findings also indicate that the process of conflict management can only be initiated after the root cause of the conflict has been identified. The findings of Table 4 indicate that most students (82%) experience indifferences with their fellow students while the teachers account for almost half of the conflicts (50.8%) while, the school administration contributes 44.8%.

The teachers' perspective

The sample teachers were requested to give their understanding of the term "conflict management" in the context of public secondary schools. The respondents gave varied opinions in regard to the concept. According to the findings, conflict management refers to: taking care of the differences that may occur in between individuals e.g. teachers-student, student-management, and teacher-management; setting and resolving misunderstanding or dispute between two people/parties in an institution; resolving conflict/ disputes arising out of school activities; resolving/managing any misunderstanding/ problems that may arise in school and can interfere with smooth running of the institutions; handling conflict between school management authorities and students; the ability to solve a problem amicably within the institution; the ability to solve a problem within the institution or between individuals; how conflict is handled when it occurs and how it is prevented; restoration of order and stability; bringing into control or curbing the disagreement in the school by devising methods of avoiding conflicts and creating peace amongst the students and the teachers; ability to effectively communication with students; and approaches to control misunderstandings among teachers, students, administration and subordinate staff.

The findings of Table 5 indicate that, the findings from the teachers are similar to those reported by the students. That is, most teachers (90%) reported that they usually experience indifferences with their fellow teachers than when compared to the students (72%) and the school administrations (67.7%). This observation indicates that the teachers are largely in conflicts in each of the three categories. This is because their work involves more of interaction with the fellow teachers, the students and the administration. In case of the students, they mostly interact with their fellow students and the teachers and they rarely interact with the school administrators.

Causes of conflicts in public secondary schools

Causes of conflicts between students and fellow students

The second research objective had sought to determine the major areas of conflict in public secondary

Table 5. Sources of conflicts to the teachers.

	Yes		No	
	N	**%**	**n**	**%**
Fellow teachers (N=100)	90	90.0	10	10.0
The students (N=100)	72	72.0	28	28.0
The administration (N=96)	65	67.7	31	32.3

Source: Survey data (2009).

Table 6. Causes of students to students conflicts in schools (n=123).

	Responses	**% of total**
Discrimination from the top student leadership (captains, prefects etc)	94	76.4
Feelings of superiority of some classes or form levels over others	93	75.6
Difference in perceptions on certain issues	85	69.1
Preferential treatment of certain students by the teachers or Admin	85	69.1
Differences in individual capabilities	77	62.6
Differences in their social-cultural backgrounds back at home	75	61.0
Limited resources (finance, materials, facilities etc.)	71	57.7
Difference in target goals amongst students	52	42.3
Differences in religious affiliations	51	41.5
Reward of individuals based on their individual performance rather than to overall school performance	44	35.8
Work interdependence that is pooled	22	17.9

Source: Survey data (2009).

Table 7. Causes of teachers to teachers conflicts in schools (n=97).

	N	**% of the total**
Difference in perceptions on certain issues	87	89.7
Feelings of superiority of some subject teachers over others	61	62.9
Limited resources (finance, materials, facilities etc.)	54	55.7
Differences in their social-cultural backgrounds	47	48.5
Preferential treatment of certain teachers by the Admin	43	44.3
Difference in target goals amongst teachers	43	44.3
Reward of individuals based on their individual performance rather than to overall school performance	40	41.2
Differences in individual teaching capabilities	33	34.0
Differences in religious affiliations	18	18.6
Work interdependence that is pooled	16	16.5

Source: Survey data (2009).

schools in Nairobi. The findings are grouped by each category of respondents. Table 6 indicates a multi-response analysis of responses regarding the causes of conflicts between the students and their fellow students. The findings are arranged in a descending order of prevalence. The findings indicate that, the five top most causes of student-student conflict are: discrimination from the top student leadership namely; captains and prefects; feelings of superiority of some classes or form levels over others; difference in perceptions on certain issues; and preferential treatment of certain students by the teachers or the school administration. Other conflicts arise due to differences in individual capabilities; differences in their social-cultural backgrounds back at home; limited resources (finance, materials, facilities etc.); difference in target goals amongst students; and differences in

Table 8. Causes of students to teachers conflicts in schools (n=117).

	Responses	% of total
Dictatorship amongst teachers	95	81.2
Preferential treatment of certain students by the teachers or Admin	86	73.5
Difference in perceptions on certain issues	75	64.1
Unrealistic academic targets for students by the teachers	56	47.9
Unethical teaching practices	55	47.0
Reward of teachers based on their students performance rather than to their performance appraisal reports	41	35.0

Source: Survey data (2009).

Table 9. Causes of teachers to students conflicts in schools (N=117).

	N	% of the total
Dictatorship amongst teachers	58	62.4
Unrealistic academic targets for students by the teachers	55	59.1
Difference in perceptions on certain issues	53	57.0
Preferential treatment of certain students by the teachers or Admin	47	50.5
Reward of teachers based on their students' performance rather than to their performance appraisal reports	32	34.4
Unethical teaching practices	8	8.6

Source: Survey data (2009)

indicate that the leading cause of conflict amongst teachers is the differences in perceptions on certain issues (89.7%). Other major causes include: feelings of superiority of some subject teachers over others; limited resources (finance, materials, facilities etc.); differences in their social-cultural backgrounds; preferential treatment of certain teachers by the administration; difference in target goals amongst teachers; and instances where individual teachers are rewarded based on their individual performance rather than to overall school performance. The findings indicate that, rarely do conflicts arise amongst teachers due to their differences in individual teaching capabilities, religious affiliations, and work interdependence that is pooled.

Causes of conflicts between the students and the teachers

The findings of Table 8 indicate a multi-response analysis of responses regarding the causes of conflicts between the students and the teachers, from a students' perspective. The causes are arranged in a descending order of prevalence. The findings indicate that students mainly conflict with teachers when they portray a dictatorial tendency (81.2%), when they demonstrate preferential treatment of certain students (73.5%), and when they differ with teachers on how to approach or resolve certain issues (64.1%). Other instances occur, when teachers set for students unrealistic academic targets as well as when they demonstrate unethical teaching behaviours. Rarely, do students conflict with their teachers as a result of the reward systems applied by their respective schools?

The findings of Table 9 indicate a multi-response analysis of responses regarding the causes of conflicts between the students and the teachers, from the teachers' perspective. The causes are arranged in a descending order of prevalence. The findings concur with the findings from the students' perspective. That is, students mainly conflict with teachers when they portray dictatorial tendencies; when they demonstrate preferential treatment of certain students; when they differ on how to approach or resolve certain issues; and when teachers set unrealistic academic targets. Rarely, do students conflict with their teachers as a result of the reward systems applied by their respective schools as well as teaching ethics?

Causes of conflicts between the students and the school administration

The sample students were requested to indicate the causes of conflicts between students and the administrative organs of public secondary schools in Nairobi. The respondents were view that, it is at times dictated by the way of democracy toward the students and the entire

school fraternity. It may arise in cases where the school administration fails to sufficiently provide the necessary resources for effective learning e.g. food and learning aids. The students perceive this as ignorance on the part of the administration. Conflicts also arise when the administration seeks to impose things to students instead of pursuing dialogue. In addition, there are times when the school administrators set rules and regulations which students find unrealistic to adhere to in the school environment.

Some respondents were view that arbitrary increase of school fees charged puts the administration into a collision path with the students. Favouritism was also identified as a source of conflict. For example, this occurs when teachers/ the administration dismisses some students whilst favouring others. Expulsions or suspension from schools are perceived by students to be unjustified since they are not given a chance to be heard. One of the student respondent said: "there are times we note dishonesty among school administrators. For example, they may favour some students because they come from wealthy background since they are likely to receive something small from them thereby, discriminating against students from poor backgrounds". Lack of proper channel of communication between students and school administration was also cited as a source of conflicts between the two parties.

Other causes of conflicts identified by the sample students included: application of harsh disciplinary measures; hostile punishment subjected to some students; administration being too strict to the students; laziness among students; general indiscipline where students fail to adhere to school rules and regulations; non-participatory decision making (governance) where students are not fully involved or represented; and failure by the administration to take note of students' opinions and also failure to promptly respond to their complaints. This makes the students to revolt since they feel like they are being treated as a minority group instead of being treated as a key stakeholder.

Causes of conflicts between the teachers and the school administration

The causes of conflicts between the teachers and the school administrators were as well varied. They included: lack of proper communication to teachers; imposition of strict deadlines for various activities; differences in perceptions on management of certain issues in the school; dictatorial tendencies on the part of school administrators; poor physical working conditions; lack of administrative support in provision of learning aids as well as psycho-social support when they are in need; where administrators use school resources for personal selfish gains; inability to perform tasks assigned (failure to meet deadlines); unauthorized absenteeism; tribalism; setting

unrealistic targets for teachers; setting goals that are not specific; engaging teachers in "crush programs" where they have to cover wide sections of syllabus in fraction time; laxity in implementation of school policies; unreasonable demands by school administration; favouritism; and finally, laxity among teachers.

Methods of resolving conflicts in public secondary schools

The third objective of the study had sought to determine the mechanisms applied by the school administrators in resolution of conflicts. From the administrators' perspective, five main approaches were identified. They include: having regular meetings where the aggrieved parties can air their grievances; inviting resource persons from the provincial education office; dialogue with the parties involved in conflict with the guidance department; regular consultation with prefects to identify areas of conflict; and punishing the involved parties by assigning them harsh tasks, corporal punishment, and giving suspensions.

However, the fourth objective of the study had sought to determine the mechanisms applied by the students in resolution of conflicts. The findings are presented in Table 10. The findings indicate that, the most popular approaches to conflict management amongst the students include: instilling firmness in pursuing own side of the issue; attempting to investigate the issue in conflict so as to find a solution acceptable to all; trying to bring all concerns out in the open so that, the issues can be resolved in the best possible way; exchanging accurate information with the parties in conflict in view to solved the problem together; embracing negotiations so that, a compromise can be reached; avoiding an open discussion of differences between conflicting parties; and sticking to own solution to a problem.

Conclusion

The study has shown that, the concept of "conflict management" refers to an act and also a process of resolving disputes between two or more parties with the view of coming to a resolution. At school level, it emerged that perceived conflict occurs because of ignorance, poor communication, and lack of proper people management. Actual conflict generally occurs when there are multiple paths to accomplish the same goal. The study showed that, when the students are faced with a conflict of personal nature, majority of them deal with the conflict through constructive approaches such as instilling firmness in pursuing own side of the issue; attempting to investigate the issue in conflict so as to find a solution acceptable to all; trying to bring all the concerns out in the open, so that, the issues can be resolved in the best possible way; exchanging accurate information with the

Table 10. Methods applied by students in resolution of conflicts.

	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Frequently		Always	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The case was argue with them to show the merits of his position (N=120)	29	24.2	21	17.5	40	33.3	11	9.2	19	15.8
There was negotiation so that, a compromise can be reached (N=121)	14	11.6	12	9.9	32	26.4	30	24.8	33	27.3
To try to satisfy their expectations (N=119)	34	28.6	10	8.4	35	29.4	15	12.6	25	21.0
To try to investigate the issue in conflict so as to find a solution acceptable to them (N=119)	10	8.4	17	14.3	26	21.8	21	17.6	45	37.8
To be firm in pursuing the side of the issue (N=121)	16	13.2	15	12.4	17	14.0	16	13.2	57	47.1%
To attempt to avoid being "put on the spot" and try to keep a conflict with them to oneself (N=119)	28	23.5	18	15.1	31	26.1	21	17.6	21	17.6%
To hold on to the solution to the problem (N=121)	22	18.2	13	10.7	35	28.9	22	18.2	29	24.0
To use "give and take" so that, a compromise can be reached (N=118)	35	29.7	19	16.1	24	20.3	8	6.8	32	27.1
To exchange accurate information with them in view to solved the problem together (N=117)	12	10.3	6	5.1	35	29.9	16	13.7	48	41.0
To avoid an open discussion of some differences with them (N=119)	29	24.4	16	13.4	21	17.6	24	20.2	29	24.4
To accommodate their wishes and move on (N=119)	36	30.3	15	12.6	27	22.7	20	16.8	21	17.6
To try to bring all their concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved in the best possible way (N=117)	12	10.3	10	8.5	32	27.4	21	17.9	42	35.9
To propose a middle ground for breaking deadlocks(N=115)	23	20.0	26	22.6	29	25.2	10	8.7	27	23.5
To go along with their suggestions (N=112)	19	17.0	17	15.2	42	37.5	15	13.4	19	17.0
To try to keep a disagreement with them to oneself in order to avoid hard feelings (N=116)	35	30.2	22	19.0	33	28.4	4	3.4	22	19.0

Source: Survey data (2009).

parties in conflict in view to solved the problem together; embracing negotiations so that, a compromise can be reached; avoiding an open discussion of differences between conflicting parties; and sticking to own solution to a problem. It is however important to note that when student react as a group they are likely to be influenced by group behaviour, which in most cases is very destructive. This could be a factor that contributes to destructive scenes especially when resolution of conflicts between groups of students and the school administrators or teachers does not find an amicable solution. Effective communication is therefore, essential in analysis of conflicts in public schools as well as in identifying their root causes. The findings showed that, the causes of conflicts in public secondary schools are varied. Resolution of various forms of conflicts would therefore, require specific strategies since the root causes may be unique.

RECOMMENDATION

The study revealed that, conflicts usually arise in schools due to application of closed systems of governance.

Therefore, school administrators and teachers should seek to embrace open systems where everyone is let to air their views and the areas of conflict discussed openly. In addition, they should encourage democratic representation in the choice of leaders namely; prefects, P.T.A members and B.O.G Members. This would help in eliminating the perceived feeling of discrimination or favouritism amongst teachers and students. The schools should also seek to educate all the stakeholders on the best way of solving conflicts. This can be achieved by starting a peer educator's movement that will create awareness to students about the negative effects of conflict and act as mediators in conflict resolution in schools. It will also serve to identify the parties involved in conflict and exposing them to the whole school, so that, they face shame and deter from doing the acts in future.

The teachers and the administration should strive to treat the students in the best possible way. The schools should embrace dialogue in resolution of conflicts. This can be enhanced through building of strong relationships between the teachers and the students to an extent that they are free to speak out on issues that affect both parties. The schools should also give equal opportunities

to all students and offer rewards for every effort achieved by the student no matter how little it is. Teachers should implement a system that promotes students to own the school rules instead of imposing to them. The schools should regularly undertake stakeholders' satisfaction surveys to gauge the attitude of teachers and students towards various approaches to governance especially the communication channels. The schools should also embrace guidance and counseling programmed since its one of the best way to deter destructive mechanisms of resolving both personal and group conflicts especially amongst students. Guidance and counseling is the most appropriate to control spread of bad inner feelings.

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