



The secondary school social environment and student violence in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Student violence has been a problem in the Kenyan educational system for a long time now. The first case of student unrest in Kenya was reported at Maseno School at the beginning of the 20th century (1908). To date, the situation is still unabated. The trend is rather alarming and the magnitude of violent acts by students is high and worrying. The paper therefore using a random sample of 251 students who were selected from five purposively chosen secondary schools in Njoro division were interviewed using a standardized research questionnaire. The students were selected using a combination of stratified random sampling and the systematic sampling techniques, which are probability sampling procedures. The data collected was analysed using both the descriptive and inferential statistics. It was found out that three factors related to the school social environment determined the students' participation in violence in secondary schools as discussed in this paper. The paper recommends that there should be a better understanding of the school social environment factors as aggravators of student violence in secondary schools.

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Introduction

From the beginning of the 20th century, cases of student unrest have been evident in Kenya (Kenya, 2001). The first case of student unrest was reported in Maseno School in 1908. During the 1980s and 1990s, the number of schools experiencing student unrest increased. According to available statistics, student unrest had increased tremendously from 0.9% in 1980 to 7.2% in 1990 (Kenya, 2001). These comprise of the known and recorded cases of student unrest though the figures are likely to be higher because of the unknown and unrecorded cases.

Secondary school students are the youth aged between 13 and 20 years. This is a social group that is undergoing drastic psychological, biological, and physical changes accompanied with a number of crises. The secondary school youths are in the process of transition from childhood to adulthood. This is the most unstable and crucial stage of human development in any given society. One of the most important features of this stage of human development is that most of the youth are likely to become violent and rebellious to the established authority and to the older generation, and thus the emergence of deviant behaviour.

It is assumed that the problem of student violence can be understood well by looking at the historical development of the educational system in Kenya. Within 18 months of independence, the Kenyan government recognized the need for a concerted and carefully planned attack on poverty, disease, and lack of education in order to achieve social justice, human dignity and economic welfare for all (Kenya, 1965). For some time now, the government of Kenya has embarked on tackling the three 'enemies' of poverty, disease and ignorance (illiteracy). On tackling the problem of illiteracy the Kenyan government embarked on the quantitative and rapid expansion of educational opportunities for all Kenyans. Primary school enrolment increased from 891,553 pupils in 1963 to 1,028,000 in 1965. Secondary school education was also being expanded vigorously (Kenya, 1965).

In 1962, there were 141 secondary schools in Kenya as compared to 222 in 1964. Evidently, there has been massive quantitative expansion of education in Kenya at all levels. For example, whereas in 1963 there were 151 secondary schools, by 1993 and 1998 the number had risen to 2,641 and 3,000 schools respectively and 3,234 schools in 2000/2001 (Kenya, 1999a, 2001). In 1998 there were 700,538 students enrolled in secondary schools in Kenya and a drop of 8.8% to 638,509 in 1999 (Kenya, 2000a). Similarly, growth has been achieved in the other levels of education. Gakuru (1998) observes that the greatest numerical gains of the quantitative expansion of the educational system have been made at primary and secondary levels. However, Gakuru is quick to point out that the economy of the country has not grown as rapidly as the educational system.

The quantitative expansion of the educational system has been achieved through numerous education commissions between 1964 and 1999 (Kenya, 1999). Though there has always been need to review the educational system of this country, the issues of the management of the educational system and student welfare matters have not been adequately addressed. The changes taking place within the educational system and in society at large have made it difficult for the sector to be managed properly. The end result has been the rise of a number of problems related to the whole educational system.

The problem of student violence in secondary schools is not a new phenomenon in Kenya. Episodes of student unrest and riots have been witnessed in Kenya's educational institutions from as early as 1970s up to now. Kinyanjui (1976) discusses the causes of secondary school strikes, which took place throughout Kenya in 1974. In 1974 there were 70 secondary school strikes, two technical schools strikes, two university strikes, one teacher training college strike and a Roman Catholic Seminary strike (Kinyanjui, 1976). Kinyanjui further asserts that strikes in 1974 were a countrywide phenomenon and were not restricted to a particular region though there is a possibility that some cases may not have been reported.

Nkinyangi (1981) argues that students' disturbances increasingly seem to recur at all levels of the Kenyan educational system. He further argues that in 1980, at least one strike per day was reported in Kenya's institutions of learning. In the recent past, this phenomenon of students' disturbances has been witnessed even in primary schools (Nation, June 5, 2000). Pupils from a Nairobi primary school protested after a passenger vehicle (*Matatu*) knocked down one of their colleagues. The pupils stoned vehicles, burnt a *Matatu*, looted people's property and even drunk beer from one of the vehicles. It is evident that small provocation often leads to immeasurable aggression and wanton destruction of property and injury to or loss of human lives.

There are numerous norms that have been put in place prescribing how students should behave in particular situations in their institutions of learning. Any behaviour that violates these norms is an act of deviance. Violence is an outcome of deviant behaviour where there may be destruction of property and injury to or loss of human life. Among secondary school students, such violence has been directed towards fellow students, head teachers, other teachers, members of support staff, and even members of public. For example, in the St. Kizito secondary school incident, 19 girls died, 71 were raped, and over 80 injured following a rampage on girls' dormitories by boys (Review, July 19, 1991). The 281 girls in St. Kizito secondary school were trying to escape the frenzied wrath of most of their 306 male colleagues in the school who had decided to start a strike, which the girls had refused to join. This incident also shows how there is a breakdown of discipline in Kenya's secondary schools where violent strikes and riots leading to destruction of property and injury of people have become common occurrences.

Student violence in secondary schools has been on the increase especially since 1997 (Nation, August 7 & August 23, 1999; Standard, June 26, 2000). In May 1999, an incident occurred in Nyeri high school in Central Province in Kenya, which was perhaps a shock to most Kenyans and all the stakeholders in the education sector. In this incident, students set ablaze school property and burnt their fellow students especially prefects under circumstances that were not quickly understood and explained (Standard, May 25, 1999). Such acts have been blamed on indiscipline on the part of students in our schools. In the Nyeri high school incident, four school prefects lost their lives after sustaining between 60% and 90% burns (Standard, May 26, 1999; Nation, June 23, 1999). This episode puts into question the role of and powers vested upon secondary school prefects and the general administration of schools in Kenya.

Broom and Selznick (1968) argue that young adults and students are potentially the most volatile elements in society. These elements have little to lose and often find shelter in culturally supported forgiveness of youthful misconduct. These two scholars further argue that youth is often a period of moratorium and that life at school for many is the first release from parental control. This implies that the students are away from home and therefore their freedom is maximized. Gathered together in age-graded groups, available to participation in mass rituals and entertainment, counterpoised to an often vulnerable academic authority, set down in strange communities to which they have no commitment, all these conditions create a potential for collective action and self-expression (Broom and Selznick, 1968). Student activism and expressiveness should not be dismissed as a youthful aberration. The issues that agitate students may reflect legitimate and prolonged grievances than just the immediate student concerns. Traditionally, teachers and school administrators have a

large stake in continuity and stability in schools. They are closely bound into the educational system, which can exert social control at many points.

Purpose of the study

The main objective of this study was to find out whether some selected school social environment factors determine students' participation in violence in secondary schools.

Methodology

A sample of 251 students was chosen randomly from five secondary schools in Njoro Division of Nakuru. The students were selected using a combination of stratified random sampling and the systematic sampling techniques, which are probability sampling procedures. Simple survey questionnaires with standardized open-ended and closed-ended questions were used to collect primary data for this study. With the questionnaire method, the researcher was able to collect both qualitative and quantitative data through the open-ended and closed-ended questions respectively. Data collected were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer programme (Norusis, 1988).

Inferential statistics were used to facilitate the process of induction. They were used in this study to infer properties of the population on the basis of the known sample findings (Blalock, 1972). The inferential statistics used in this study included the cross tabulations and the chi-square [χ^2]. Cross tabulations are the simplest and most frequently used tools in demonstrating the presence or absence of a relationship between two or more variables. Also known as contingency tables, they provide a way of determining whether two variables are in fact related as hypothesized; that is whether a bivariate relationship exists between two variables (Bohrstedt and Knoke, 1988). The chi-square [χ^2] is a type of statistical test for significance, which helps us to determine whether a systematic relationship exists between two variables (Nie et al., 1975). To establish whether a relationship existed between the cross tabulated variables (independent variables and dependent variable); the chi-square test for significance was used in this study. This test is achieved by setting the confidence level at either 99% or 95% with appropriate degrees of freedom, which are calculated from the contingency table (see Sommer and Sommer, 1991). In this study the 95% confidence level was set as the minimum of rejecting the null hypotheses.

Results and Discussion

a). Response from the School Administration

The findings indicate that 19.4% of the students who reported that their school administrators proved friendly when consulted participated in violence in their schools. Majority (38.5%) of those students who had consulted their school administrators and reported that the administrators were unfriendly participated in violence. These findings are statistically significant at 97% confidence level. When students have problems in secondary schools, they definitely consult their teachers who include the school administrators. When such students report that the school administrators are unfriendly when consulted, it implies that the students do not get any meaningful assistance from the said administrators.

Poor relationships between students and school administrators have often been blamed for student unrest in most secondary schools in Kenya. This has to do with the school management skills and tactics that are used by the school administrators in managing both the institutions in general and the students in particular. Most of the secondary school administrators have been blamed for high handedness in the

management of student affairs in their respective schools (Griffin, 1996, Siringi, 2000a). Sometimes the students may want to have meetings with the head teachers which the latter might not call or attend. In case of unrest in such circumstances, the students direct their anger to the head teachers and their property, and/or school property (Review, July 19, 1991).

When secondary school students are dissatisfied with assistance from the school administrators, they tend to raise issue by way of unrest so that their grievances can be known and be addressed. The fact that students express their grievances violently is an indication of deep-seated frustration on the part of the students (Kinyanjui, 1976). In fact violence/rioting is the language of those to whom nobody listens. A management style which is flexible, transparent, and easily accessible appears to have fewer disturbances than a highly structured, bureaucratic management style in public universities (Kenya, 2000b). This is definitely applicable to secondary schools.

In light of the findings of this study, the null hypothesis that response from the school administration to those students who have problems in their schools does not determine the students' involvement in violence in secondary schools is rejected and instead the alternative hypothesis is maintained. Responses from the school administrators to those students who have problems in their schools determine the students' involvement in violence in secondary schools. If the response is friendly, students will be satisfied and if it is unfriendly, they are dissatisfied and will definitely have to show some kind of resentment, which is likely to be in form of violence.

It is common sense that the head teachers' unfriendliness is related to lack of communication, which plays a major role in the dissatisfaction and frustration of students in secondary schools. Zanden (1993) argues that communication is the process by which people transmit information, ideas, attitudes, and mental states to one another. It includes verbal and nonverbal processes by which we send and receive messages. When there is lack of communication between the students and the school administration, it means that there is no understanding of each party's intentions and actions. This will definitely lead to suspicion and possibly to disorder in form of resentment on the side of the students. Siringi (2000a, 2000b) on the other hand also argues that dialogue and freedom are the best ways of reducing tension among students that lead to strikes. Openness to discussing issues freely with students makes the students feel free to air their views. Delayed response to student grievances and poor communication with students have also been cited as resulting in frustration and anger which have more often than not caused riots (Kenya, 2000b).

Kinyanjui (1977) argues that the structure of authority and machinery of solving students' grievances within secondary schools featured in the student strikes in 1974. He argues that Kenya inherited a tradition of discipline within her educational institutions, which was in place during colonial times. The school authority, which is constituted through prefects, teachers, and head teachers, is a continuation of the colonial tradition in Kenya. According to Kinyanjui (1977), this kind of authority creates unidirectional flow of orders and communication that provides no corresponding channels for students to communicate with their teachers and head teachers. This leads to frustration on the part of the students, which eventually leads to student unrest in secondary schools.

Kinyanjui (1977) further argues that student protests have their origins in specific situations within each school. These are related to the leadership style, commitment, and the ability of the head teacher and the relationship between teaching staff and the students. All these have to do with the communication, and interaction which exists between the teaching staff (and head teachers), and the maturity shown by the students when dealing with issues that directly affect them. School administration sometimes acts contrary to the expectations of the students and communicates the same to the affected students when it is too late. For instance, Kangaru High School in Embu was affected by a strike when the school administration cancelled the tradition school half term without consulting the students (Nation, June 13, 1999). The result was the massive destruction of school property and closure of the school.

b). Students' Free Expression in Secondary Schools

Majority of the students who reported that they were not free to express their problems to their teachers in their schools participated in violence (28%). A few students (13.4%) who reported that they were free to express their problems freely to their teachers in their schools also participated in violence. These findings are closely related to others in this study whereby the response from the school administration to students who had problems in their schools determined the students' participation in violence in secondary schools. Teachers in general are supposed to guide their students in their schools, which demands that they should be friendly and free to the students as far as their academic and socio-psychological life in school is concerned.

In schools where students are not free to express their problems to their teachers, there is unfriendliness and the students may feel not taken care of. The students may not be able to be assisted even academically. To them the situation becomes volatile and they may resort to other ways of expressing themselves which include unrest or violence so that they may be listened to. The school administrators are supposed to cultivate democratic and participatory environment in their schools and encourage regular meetings with students where teachers and students are encouraged to express their views, suggestions and grievances and where the school administration can get an opportunity to expound on policies (Kenya, 2001).

In the light of these findings, the null hypothesis that students' expression of their problems to their teachers in school is not related to the students' participation in violence in secondary schools is rejected at 97% confidence level. The alternative hypothesis that students' expression of their problems to their teachers in school is related to the students' participation in violence in secondary schools is accepted. Where there is no free expression of problems by students, there is a likelihood of student unrest than where there is free expression of problems by students.

c). Secondary School Prefects

The findings show that 37.1% of those students who reported that their school prefects were unfriendly and 17.7% of the students who reported that their prefects were friendly participated in violence in secondary schools. The large percentage difference shows that there is a relationship between prefects being friendly or unfriendly and the students' participation in violence in secondary schools.

The chi-square test for significance shows that the relationship between the prefects' friendliness and the students' participation in violence in secondary schools is significant at

99% confidence level. The chi-square statistic, therefore, confirms that there is a true relationship between the prefects' friendliness and the students' participation in violence in secondary schools. This means that the null hypothesis, which states that the friendliness of the school prefects does not determine the students' participation in violence in secondary schools, is rejected at 99% confidence level. This implies that students who reported that their school prefects were unfriendly were more likely to participate in violence in secondary schools than those who reported that their school prefects were friendly.

The unfriendliness of the school prefects many stem from many angles. According to the Report of the Taskforce of the Ministry of Education on student unrest in secondary schools (Kenya, 2001), school prefects are not supposed to prescribe the nature of punishment meted out to other students but can only supervise the punishments. Those prefects who have the powers to prescribe the punishments therefore are likely to be unfriendly to the other students, which is a factor that determines student unrest in secondary schools.

Griffin (1996) argues that schools where prefects are given special treatment like special uniforms, certain privileges and even special diet are likely to experience student unrest. School prefects should be treated equally just as the other students in the same school. According special treatment to school prefects may even endanger their lives if the Nyeri High School incident where four school prefects were burnt to death by fellow students is anything to go by (Standard, May 25/26, 1999; Nation, May 25, 1999). The Nyeri High School prefects are reported to have been vested with massive powers of disciplining their fellow students and even deciding on which student should be suspended from school without the school administration altering the decision so made by the school prefects. The end result was student unrest characterized by loss of lives and destruction of school property.

The Report of the Taskforce on student discipline and unrest in secondary schools in Kenya (Kenya, 2001) further stipulates the criteria of choosing or appointing school prefects which should be known to all concerned. For a student to be appointed a school prefect, he/she must be academically above average, honest, fair, obedient, firm and consistent, active in co-curricular activities and exhibit leadership qualities. Prefects' duties on the other hand should be clearly spelt out to avoid duplication and avoid incidents where they usurp the authority of the administration. This is likely to be a check on performance of their duties to avoid situations where they wield so much powers than even some teachers. This can make them answerable for their deeds and therefore a check on their friendliness to students for the sake of tranquility in secondary schools. Prefects should not be given unnecessary privileges over the other students in the same school as already observed. This will make them unfriendly to the rest of the students which is detrimental to peace in their schools.

Conclusion

It is true that the problem of student violence is prevalent in secondary schools in Kenya. Many secondary schools are experiencing student unrest whose causes are varied. Perhaps this is due to the quantitative expansion of secondary schools and enrolment in the schools. With current free primary education in Kenya, then we should expect more student violence in the next few years. However, most of the factors considered as determinants of students' participation in violence in secondary schools are arguably school-based and therefore

easy to solve if there are concerted effort from the school administrators and the entire teaching fraternity. These problems are school-based in the sense that there are conditions in secondary schools that make it possible for students to organize and execute student unrest/violence.

The secondary school administration and the entire teaching fraternity can easily learn of eminent student unrest well in advance and put in place appropriate measures to contain the situation before any property or life is lost. But when the school administration and the teaching staff are part of the students' grievances, it is unlikely that the situation can be contained. There is need therefore for the stakeholders in the education sector in this country to chart the way forward and look for amicable long-lasting solutions to this phenomenon. The students have to be encouraged to talk openly of their problems and somebody has to listen to their grievances. This essentially calls for genuine communication, understanding and dialogue.

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