

Influence of Collaboration as a Conflict Management Style on Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in Makueni Sub-County, Makueni County, Kenya

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Abstract

The study sought to explore the impact of collaboration as a conflict management style on academic performance in secondary schools in Makueni Sub-county of Makueni County. It was guided by the poor performance of secondary schools students in their KCSE in Makueni sub-county despite the high marks the students scored in their KCPE. The population includes 18 principals and 54 teachers in the named sub-county.

A random sample of 18 schools out of the 46 schools in the sub-county was selected for the study, that is, 18 schools where the 18 principals of the selected schools and 3 teachers from each of the 18 schools to make a total of 54 teachers. This was achieved through probability and purposive sampling respectively. The study employed the use of questionnaires to collect information on the impact of collaboration as a conflict management style on Academic performance. The findings indicated that most of the principals advanced their conflict management strategy by collaborating with others to make the performance of their schools a success since collaboration as a conflict management style significantly influences students' performance in secondary schools. This is because as the study indicated, there is no statistically significant difference between the mean responses of the respondents on the influence of collaborating as a conflict resolution style and students' performance. The study recommends that principals in Makueni sub-county should embrace collaboration as a method of solving conflicts in their schools in order to achieve good performance.

Key words: Conflict, Conflict management style, Academic performance, Secondary school.

Introduction

Secondary schools play an important role in providing knowledge for further education as well as contributing to the country by providing work force to the community, (Ghaffar, Amir, & Naz, 2012). The series of problems which the school system faces lies in the hand of the leadership and conflict management style the school principal uses to carry out his or her day to day running of the school. If an individual is perceived to manage conflict in an appropriate and effective manner within an organizational setting, that individual is also perceived to be more competent in general (Gross & Guerrero, 2000).

Conflict is a situation where there is a disagreement between parties. It connotes a stressful, unhappy, distressing, depressing, annoying and frustrating state of affairs (Sagimo, 2002). Rue and Byarrs (1992) agree with Sagimo that conflicts occur because individuals have different perceptions, beliefs and goals while Bateman and Zeithaml (1993) argue that conflict is inevitable when managers are making important decisions as they would face opposing pressures from different sources.

In Kenya, student-student, student-teacher, student-administration conflict are common and have more often than not culminated into unrests. The conflicts have ranged from sit in to violent destruction of property and loss of life.

In the Kenyan education system, various legislations serve as guidelines for management and administration of educational institutions. However, it appears that most educational institutions have been less successful in management of conflicts (Ministry of Education, 2002). This report indicated that in spite of the government policies put in place, Kenyan educational institutions have continued to report increased cases of conflicts in schools. When conflicts in schools are not managed appropriately, the consequences could be dire especially on students' performance in their final examinations. The academic achievement of many educational institutions is influenced by the leadership and conflict management styles of the administration and management team (Telty-Enyo, 1997)

Schein (2010) argues that a normal human condition is always present to some degree and students of organizations see unresolved conflict rather than conflict itself as a deterrent to organizational outcome. It is the responsibility of the school principal to ensure that he/she uses the best methods and styles possible to resolve conflicts as soon as they arise. Eshiwani (1983), identified the following policy-related factors that may cause poor academic performance; school plant and resources (textbooks, library, and laboratory facilities), leadership and conflict management styles of the principal (school administration and management), teacher characteristics (training, teacher certification, professional commitment, experience and transfer index) and students behavior (early childhood education, primary education and social characteristics).

Leithwood and Louis (2012) in a landmark research established the link between conflict management in schools and the students' performance. They established that conflict management plays a critical role in improving academic performance through conflict management strategies. One of the strategies is to develop staff by collaborating with the teachers and the others in the system with the support and training needed to succeed. The specific practices in this strategy include building a consensus with one another, providing individualized support and consideration of each other's ideas offering intellectual dialogue and modeling appropriate values and practices.

The collaborative style views conflicts as problems to be solved and finding creative solutions that satisfy all the parties 'concerned. Collaboration takes time and if the relationship among the parties is not important, then it may not be worth the time and energy to create a win-win solution. However, collaboration fosters respect, trust, and builds relationships. To make an environment more collaborative, address the conflict directly and in a way that expresses willingness for all parties to get what they need. The collaborating style is when the concern is to satisfy both sides. It is highly assertive and highly cooperative; the goal is to find a "win-win" solution. Appropriate uses for the collaborating style include integrating solutions, learning, merging perspectives, gaining commitment, and improving relationships. According to Burrell (2001), using this style can support open discussion of issues, task proficiency, and equal distribution of work amongst the team members, better brainstorming, and development of creative problem solving. This style is appropriate to use frequently in a team environment and very ideal for good performance and therefore its underuse can result in using quick fix solutions, lack of commitment by other team members , disempowerment, and loss of innovation and morale hence poor performance. Baumgardner (2012) adds that Collaboration is the way to achieve the best outcome on important issues as well as build good relationships since it takes into account all of the parties' underlying interests.

Methodology

The target population for the study included all the principals and teachers in the 46 secondary schools in Makueni sub-county. Probability and purposive sampling procedures were used in selecting the required sample for the study. After the population was figured out, probability sampling design was followed where every school had an equal chance of being chosen. Purposive sampling design was used in sampling the 18 principals and 54 teachers. This ensured that schools were selected across categories and school types.

The background information of the teachers was obtained using a designed questionnaire. The respondents provided information on their age, gender and academic qualification. Background information of the principals was also obtained using a questionnaire where they provided information on gender, age, academic qualification and their school performance.

Distribution of Respondents by Gender

The information on gender distribution helped the researcher to ascertain the real representation in the study in terms of the gender. The results on gender for principals and teachers are shown in Table 1

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender

	Head teachers		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Male	10	55.6	33	61.1
Female	8	44.4	21	38.9
Total	18	100.0	54	100.0

Table 1 above shows that majority (55.6% and (61.1%) of the principals and teachers respectively of the respondents are male while (44.45% and 38.9%) are females. This shows that most schools were headed by more male principals than female principals. This agrees with Onderi and Makori (2013) and Khewu (2012) who argued that there is considerable evidence that women are greatly under-represented in management positions. This shows that there is inconsistency with Kenya National Policy on Gender and Development (NPGD) (2000) which spells out a policy approach of gender mainstreaming and empowerment of women.

Distribution of Respondents by Age

The age characteristic shows the physical maturity of a principal or teacher. The respondents were requested to indicate their age and the results are shown in table 2

Table 2: Distribution of Principals and Class Teachers by age

	Principals		Teachers		
	Age in years	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
A	36- 40	2	11.0	11	20.4
	41-45	3	16.7	23	42.6
	46-50	6	33.3	13	24.1
	51-60	7	39.0	7	12.9
Total	18	100.0	54	100.0	

Table 2 above shows that, majority (39%) of principals were aged 51 – 60 years while majority (42.6%) of teachers were aged 41 - 45 years. It was also observed that, the principals aged between 36 - 40 years were 11.0%. This shows that as people advance in age they are given leadership positions owing to experience gained as they advance in age as seen in the principals' data.

Distribution of respondents by academic qualification

Academic qualification of principals determines the professional development of a teacher. The principals were required to indicate their highest academic qualification. The results are as shown in Table 3

Table 3: Distribution of principals and teachers by Academic qualification

	Principals		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Diploma	1	5.5	8	14.8
SI	2	11.0	10	18.5
B.ED/PGDE	12	66.8	26	48.1
Masters	3	16.7	6	11.1
Ph.D	0	0.0	4	7.4
Total	18	100.0	54	100

Table 3 shows that majority of principals (66.8%) and teachers (48.1%) had B.ED/PGDE as their highest qualification. It was also established that the principals with masters' degree were more than teachers each with 16.7% and 11.1% respectively.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire to the selected respondents. The questionnaire used a five-point range likert scale to assess how principals deal with conflict in their schools. The questionnaires were written in English because all the respondents were qualified teachers teaching in secondary schools. The five-point range likert scale sought to measure the frequency at which the principals use the collaborating management skill to deal with conflicts in their schools.

The questionnaires were issued to principals and teachers of the selected schools. The questions asked were designed to evaluate the different opinions, attitudes, values, interests and beliefs of the respondents. They also evaluated prejudices and dissatisfaction of roles.

The findings of the study

For the main purpose of exploring the impact of collaboration as a conflict management style on academic performance in secondary schools in Makueni sub-county, the respondents were issued with a five-part questionnaire. The teachers provided information on how their principals use collaboration as a conflict management style to deal with conflicts in their schools. The principals on the other hand, gave information on how they use collaboration as a conflict management style to manage conflict in their schools.

The information given was coded in SPSS and subjected to analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the mean responses for principals and teachers on the collaboration style.

The findings of the study were presented in the five-point likert scale with; N=Never, R=Rarely, OC=Occasionally, OF=Often and A=Always.

The findings were presented in the table below;

Table 4: Teachers' Responses on Principals' use of Collaboration Style

Statements		A	OF	OC	R	N	Total
Principal listens to others before making any conclusion about any conflict in the school	F	13	26	12	3	0	54
	%	24.1	48.1	22.2	5.6	0	100
Principal avoids hard feelings by keeping his/her disagreements with others to himself/herself	F	12	18	17	7	0	54
	%	22.2	33.3	31.5	13	0	100
Principal accepts the recommendations of other teachers	F	5	31	13	5	0	54
	%	9.5	57.4	24.0	9.3	0	100
Principal accommodates the wishes of other stake holders when handling conflict	F	9	20	21	4	0	54
	%	16.7	37.0	38.9	7.4	0	100
Principal gives up some points in exchange for others	F	6	13	29	6	0	54
	%	11.1	24.1	53.7	11.1	0	100
Principal puts aside any controversial aspects of any issue	F	4	18	24	8	0	54
	%	7.4	33.3	44.4	14.8	0	100

Principal treats all staff members as his equals	F	5	11	6	17	15	54
	%	19.3	20.4	11.1	31.4	27.8	100
Principal is willing to make changes	F	7	23	13	10	1	54
	%	13.0	42.6	24.1	18.5	1.8	100
Principal makes all staff members to feel at ease when talking to them	F	12	21	8	10	3	54
	%	22.2	38.9	14.8	18.5	5.6	100
Principal is slow to accept new ideas	F	1	6	19	17	11	54
	%	1.8	11.1	35.2	31.5	20.4	100
Principal is free, supportive and have respect for differences	F	15	16	16	3	4	54
	%	27.8	29.6	29.6	5.6	7.4	100

Table 5: Principal's Responses on Collaborating Style

Statements		A	OF	OC	R	N	Total
I listen to others before making any conclusion about any conflict in the school	F	8	8	1	1	0	18
	%	44.4	44.4	5.6	5.6	0	100
I avoid hard feelings by keeping my disagreements with others to myself	F	2	4	8	4	0	18
	%	11.1	22.2	44.4	22.2	0	100
I accept the recommendations of other teachers	F	3	11	4	0	0	18
	%	16.7	61.1	22.2	0	0	100
I accommodate the wishes of other stake holders when handling conflict	F	2	11	5	0	0	18
	%	11.1	61.1	27.8	0	0	100
I give up some points in exchange for others	F	0	8	9	1	0	18
	%	0	44.4	50.0	5.6	0	100

I put aside any controversial aspects of any issue	F	1	5	9	3	0	18
	%	5.6	27.8	50.0	16.7	0	100
I treat all staff members as equals	F	13	4	1	0	0	18
	%	72.2	22.2	5.6	0	0	100
I am willing to make changes	F	7	9	2	0	0	18
	%	38.9	50.0	11.1	0	0	100
I make all staff members to feel at ease when talking to them	F	13	5	0	0	0	18
	%	72.2	27.8	0	0	0	100
I accept other parties new ideas	F	5	11	2	0	0	18
	%	27.8	61.1	11.1	0	0	100
I am free, supportive and have respect for differences	F	13	4	1	0	0	18
	%	72.2	22.2	5.6	0	0	100

The findings in table 4 and 5 reveal that majority 72.2% of the principals indicated that they always made all staff members to feel at ease when talking to them. The study also revealed that (61.1%) of principals and 57.1% of teachers indicated that, often principal accepts the recommendations of other teachers. The study also revealed that, 44.4% of principals and 24.1% of teachers indicated that always principals listen to others before making any conclusion about any conflict in the school.

These results concur with the findings of Burrell (2001) who argued that using collaborative style can support open discussion of issues, task proficiency, and equal distribution of work amongst the team members, better brainstorming, and development of creative problem solving. He further argued that, this style is appropriate to use frequently in a team environment and very ideal for good performance and therefore its underuse can result in using quick fix solutions, lack of commitment by other team members, disempowerment, and loss of innovation and morale hence poor performance. Baumgardner (2012) adds that collaboration is the way to achieve the best outcome on important issues as well as build good relationships since it takes into account all of the parties' underlying interests.

The researcher further used Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to compare the mean responses from Table 6. The researcher tested the hypothesis (H_{02}); that there is no statistically significant

difference between the mean responses of the respondents on the influence of collaborating as a conflict resolution style and students performance.

The results were presented in Table 6

Table 6: ANOVA on Mean Responses for Principals and Teachers on Collaboration as a conflict management style

	Sum Squares	of Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.247	1	2.247	7.170	.068
Within Groups	2.506	71	.313		
Total	4.753	72			

Results in Table 6 above show that $F(1,72) = 7.170$ and the P-value = 0.068. This is more than the significant level of 0.05. On this basis, we do not accept the hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference between the mean responses of the respondents on the influence of collaborating as a conflict resolution style and students performance. This shows that collaborating as a conflict resolution style significantly influences students' performance in secondary school

Discussion

The above findings indicate that the principals in Makueni sub-county who under use collaboration as a conflict management style have their schools score below average in their performance, that is, mean score between 2-4 and between 4-6. The few schools whose principals apply the use of collaboration style always have their mean score between 6-8 and 8-10 as shown above.

This study agrees with Burrell (2001) and Baumgardner (2012) who noted that collaboration style is appropriate to use frequently in a team environment and very ideal for good performance and therefore, its underuse can result in using quick fix solutions, lack of commitment by other team members disempowerment and loss of innovation and morale hence poor performance. According to these authors, collaboration is the way to achieve the best outcome on important issues like academic performance, as well as build good relationship since it takes into account all of the parties' underlying interests.

Burrell adds that collaboration style can support open discussion of issues, task proficiency, and equal distribution of work amongst the team members, better brainstorming, and development of creative problem solving. Teacher leadership positions by themselves do not automatically translate into effective conflict management strategy. As Salisbury and McGregor (2012) observe, conflict management is affected by the leader's personal qualities, attitudes and practices on the significant others. This concurs with Greenlee (2007) who asserts that conflict management is not about empowering principals by centralizing decision making authority but rather to increase the participation of others in decision making, free access to resources and information and expertise in order to influence school change geared towards good performance. Therefore, a further implication is that effective principals conflict management style should focus on empowering the principal leader as a way of mediating their impact on leadership and improving the quality of education in their schools hence good performance.

Collaboration takes time and if the relationship among the parties is not important then it may not be worth the time and energy to create a win-win solution. The principals indicated that they advance their conflict management style by collaborating with others to make the performance a success. The principal conflict management style and Academic performance relate directly to student learning and achievement. Leithwood and others (2012) established that collaborative conflict management by principals leads to good academic performance. This strategy helps them in reviewing the syllabus coverage by each subject teaching. This implies that collaborative conflict management and principals' leadership experiences have the potential to promote good performance in secondary schools. The conflict management skills are critical given that conflict management by principals and quality education are reciprocal (UNESCO, 2014).

Recommendations

Principals in Kenya face a daunting challenge in conflict management and therefore conflict management education is essential to guarantee schools good academic performance under the umbrella of mutual understanding amongst key players. Availing effective program on conflict management constitutes a great starting point in the leadership development system. The government should professionalize conflict management in schools by enacting comprehensive policies that make the principals acquire training in conflict management a mandatory for inspiring and serving principals and therefore this study recommends that secondary school principals should attend conflict management courses to sharpen their skills on how to resolve conflicts in schools whenever they arise.

The principals need to be participating in field activities so as to make themselves familiar with the conflict management skills which need to be adopted in the institutions. The school administrator should be aware of the timely recognition of conflicts and that he should promptly respond to the misunderstanding among his subordinates, educators and the students too. The study also

recommends that principals participate in field activities and do exchange programmes with other principals of other schools in order to make themselves familiar with the best conflict management to be adopted in case there is a conflict.

Finally, the study recommends the development of leadership capacity of the whole school community by having the teachers in the school also attend conflict management courses to promote continuity and a new vision of conflict management practices that link mutual understanding and school performance.

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