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Understanding Conflict in Secondary Schools in Malawi: A Reflection on Causes and Effects

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to understand conflict between students and staff in secondary schools in Malawi. To achieve this, the study examined major causes of the conflicts and their effects. This was after most schools registered conflict most of which ended in violence. Conducted in five secondary schools, the study employed a mixed approach design with a total sample of 103 participants who were identified using random sampling techniques for some and purposive sampling techniques for others. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data which were coded and then analysed using the statistical package for social science (SPSS). Interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and document analysis were used to collect qualitative data which were categorized into themes and general ideas for analysis. The study found that there were a number of causes of conflict between students and staff in secondary schools in Malawi which included poor management of schools. The study further found that while conflict had both positive and negative effects on secondary schools, the latter outweighed the former. Among other things, the study recommends that head teachers should improve students' engagement in the running of the schools.

Key words: causes of conflict; effects of conflict; secondary school; conflict management

INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this paper was to investigate causes of conflict between students and staff in secondary schools in Malawi in order to facilitate its management through recommendations to be made. This was after the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) had bemoaned the increased number of violent conflicts in secondary schools which had led to damage and destruction of school property, bodily injury and even death of a student in one case (MoEST, 2014). Such a situation could likely have a negative impact on the quality of education as observed by Okotoni & Okotoni (2003) that in Nigeria, unmanaged conflicts led to the decline of the quality of education. Similarly, Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education observed that the increase in strikes by students in Malawi would affect education standards (The Malawi News of 14 – 20 December, 2013). The study further analysed effects of the conflict for stakeholders to appreciate the urgent need to manage it.

Conflict is said to be important in an organisation because it challenges people to think harder, to be more creative, to develop greater understanding, and to search for alternative avenues that are more efficient, more effective and more productive (Scannell, 2010). To leap its positives, conflict is supposed to be managed well so that its negative effects are minimized (Robbins and Judge, 2013). However, Bannerman (2012) emphasizes that to manage a conflict properly, there is a need to understand it well by examining its causes first hence, this paper's focus on causes.

Conceptualising conflict

Conflict is defined as the difference of opinion resulting from the availability of two or more possible courses of action (Everard, Morris and Wilson, 2014). According to Zhang and Zhang (2012), there are two types of conflicts namely; affective conflict and substantive conflict. Also called relational or psychological conflict, affective conflict pertains to relationship oriented disagreements while substantive conflict, which is also called task or issue conflict, orients from disagreements arising from incompatibilities in a job task being performed (Zhang & Zhang, 2012). According to Johdi and Apitree (2012), both affective and substantive conflicts can occur in schools.

Rahim (2001) says there are two types of organizational conflict namely; intra-organizational conflict which takes place within an organization and inter-organizational conflict which is between two or more organizations. Both categories of conflict can occur in schools as well (Ghaffar, 2009). Henkin and Holliman (2009 in Saiti, 2015) observe that conflict in a living' organization is inevitable and that in a school, it may occur among students, school leaders and/or educators, as well as between the school itself and other social parties of the school such as local authorities or parents.

Objectives of the study

Successful conflict management requires that causes be known first before any measures are taken. As such, the main objective of the study was to identify the major causes of conflict between students and staff in secondary schools in Malawi. The other objective was to analyse effects of unmanaged conflict so that stakeholders could appreciate the urgent need to manage it.

Review of related literature

Northouse (2015) defines conflict as a struggle between two or more individuals over perceived differences regarding substantive or relational issues. Bannerman (2012) compares conflict with an iceberg such that what people see including violence, withdraw and low productivity are signs above the water. Doucey (2011) warns that with the large student population, schools are more prone to violence because violent actions are reinforced by massive mobilization such that the larger the group involved, the more legitimate violence appears to be.

Literature revealed that there were different causes of conflict in secondary schools. The first one was unfair treatment of students or favouritism by teachers and school administration. Tumwesigye and Basheka (2008) noted that in Uganda, students had resentments towards unfair treatment which at times forced them to strike. Similarly, Ramani and Zhimin (2010) found that in Kenya, favouritism in the way students were treated was a major cause of conflict. Other studies have shown that dictatorship by teachers and school administrators is also a major cause of conflict in secondary schools. In Nairobi, Ramani and Zhimin (2010) found that a lot of conflict arose due to dictatorial tendencies by teachers.

Poor communication is also a cause of conflict in secondary schools. In Botswana, Morake, Monobe and Dingwe (2011) found that communication breakdown in schools led to antagonism which finally gave rise to conflict. Studies in Zimbabwe by Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2012), in Ondo State in Nigeria by Adeyami (2009) and in Thailand by Johdi and Apitree (2012) also found that poor communication caused conflict in secondary schools.

Food was noted to be another cause of conflict in secondary schools. Abaasa (2005) reports that at Nabumali High School in Uganda, students rioted and destroyed school property because food was bad. Similarly, in Uganda, being fed with posho (maize meal) and beans throughout a term without a change or being given beans infested with weevils was reason enough for students to strike (Tumwesigye and Basheka, 2008).

Tumwesigye and Basheka (2008) also found that in Uganda, at times, students went on rampage because of lack of entertainment opportunities especially dance with the opposite sex. Abaasa (2005) further observes that at Kisubi High School in Uganda, students went on rampage destroying property worth millions of shillings a day before the school broke off for a holiday just because they were denied an end of term disco.

Students in Uganda indicated that while they were ready to be punished, heavy and unfair punishments were a cause of conflict (Tumwesigye & Basheka, 2008). Similarly, students' anger against punishments was a major cause of conflict in Islamic Secondary Schools in Thailand (Johdi and Apitree, 2012) while in South Africa, ill-treatment of students by teachers was a cause of conflict too (Mncube and Harber, 2013).

Instigation or sympathy is also noted to be a cause of violence by students. Tumwesigye and Basheka (2008) found that in Uganda, students who had been withdrawn from school due to poor performance could instigate others to strike. In Malawi, Ntcheu Secondary School students set ablaze school property and damaged some staff houses in sympathy for their colleagues who had been expelled from school (The Nyasa Times of September 28, 2014).

A study conducted in Osun State in Nigeria by Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) found that conflicts in schools were due to lack of knowledge in conflict management by school administrators. Studies conducted in South Africa by Majola (2013) and Msila (2012), in Kenya by Kipyego (2013) and in Botswana by Morake et al. (2011) also found that lack of conflict management skills by school principals was a major cause of conflict in secondary schools.

Mncube and Harber (2013), Majola (2013) and Msila (2012) found that in South Africa, competition for insufficient resources was also a cause of conflict in secondary schools. The studies observed that when resources were not sufficient, students got discontented and opted for strikes. This was also noted in Botswana by Morake et al. (2011), in Zimbabwe by Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2012) and in Nigeria by Adeyami (2009).

Ageng'e and Simatwa (2011 in Kipkemboi & Kipruto, 2013) say students' indiscipline was among the many causes of conflict in secondary schools in Kenya. Johdi and Apitree (2012) observe that when students are punished by teachers because of indiscipline, they get angry hence conflict surfaces. Other causes of conflicts that have been discussed by different authors are rivalry between students and teachers over girlfriends and teachers' negligence of duty (Adeyami, 2009).

Cognizant of the fact that causes of conflict could differ from one country to the other or from one school to the other, the study investigated causes of conflict between staff and students in secondary schools in Malawi and their effects on education.

Theoretical framework

The study was guided by the human needs theory which argues that conflicts occur when certain individuals or groups do not see any other way to meet their needs (Kok, 2007). It is further contended that if such needs are satisfied, people will be less conflictive and societies will be more stable (Herrera, 2013). In his contribution, Doucey (2011) says while the basic needs might be physical such as food, water and shelter, essential needs cover the psychological sphere as well. Looking at conflict from this perspective, Kelman (2009 in Doucey, 2011) advises that conflict should be considered as a process driven by collective needs and fears. The theory was understood in the context of the managed conflict view which contends that conflict is

important as leads to creativity, constructive action and organisational renewal but it must be managed in order to minimize its negative effects (Robbins and Judge, 2013). With such a theoretical underpinning, the study appreciated the existence of conflict in the secondary schools and the need to manage them so as minimize their negative effects.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach

The study employed a mixed methods research approach to allow for complementarity as one method could compensate the weaknesses or blind spot of the other while maintaining the autonomy of each of them (Flick, 2006 in Gray, 2009). Thus, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected.

Data collection

Quantitative data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires which were administered to teachers. The semi-structured questionnaires allowed for a deeper probe into issues including options that may not have been included (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews with head teachers, parents, education officials and a few teachers. More qualitative data were collected using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students and through document analysis.

Sampling of participants

The study was conducted in the Central West Education Division (CWED) in Malawi and 5 secondary schools were purposively sampled on the basis that they had been involved in violent conflict in the previous two years. A total of 103 participants were sampled. Out of these, 42 participants (teachers) were sampled systematically while 61 participants were sampled purposively because they were information-rich participants who would provide the needed information (Kumar, 2011). Of these, 5 were head teachers whose schools had been sampled, 42 were students who could articulate issues, 6 were education officials who were involved in the management of secondary schools and 8 were parents who were active members of Parents and Teachers' Association (PTA).

Data analysis

Quantitative data were first coded after which they were analysed using the statistical package for social science (SPSS). The analysis included frequencies, percentages, and where possible cross tabulations. Analysis of qualitative data started with reading and re-reading of transcripts in order to obtain a general sense about the whole content. For each transcript, significant statements pertaining to the phenomenon under study were extracted and then recorded. After that, meanings were formulated and then sorted into categories, and themes. Where necessary, participants were reengaged to validate the findings.

RESULTS

The results are presented according to the two main themes which were identified namely; (1) causes of conflict in secondary schools and (2) effects of unmanaged conflict on secondary schools which is divided into two sub themes namely; positive effects and negative effects.

Theme 1: causes of conflict in Secondary Schools in Malawi

The study examined causes of conflict between students and staff in secondary schools in Malawi. To achieve this, participants were asked to give their views on what the causes were and the findings were as presented here below.

Poor communication

Of the participants who responded to questionnaires, 20% indicated that the major cause of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi was poor or lack of communication. This was well collaborated by findings from interviews and FGDs. Head teachers indicated that poor communication was a recipe for violent conflict because in such a situation, students worked on speculation and in the end, they reacted negatively. Students said there were times when they were kept in the dark on critical issues. An example given was failure by the school to inform them of change in the menu. In such cases, students got shocked while in the cafeteria and reacted violently.

Education officials observed that students translated poor or lack of communication as a deliberate move to exploit them and hence, reacted negatively. Parents too observed that when not communicated to, students became unruly and that if there was proper communication, some of the violent conflicts would be reduced. These views were shared by teachers as well. This is what some of the participants said.

Head Teacher (HT) 5: *Some of these conflicts are caused by our own failure to communicate issues to students. Usually, we, head teachers like to do things in secret forgetting that in the days of democracy, students know that they have the right to know what is going on. In the end they become violent.*

FGD 4: *Another cause of conflict is poor communication. For example, on Wednesday we eat meat but because of other reasons meat may not be there but there is no communication. We get shocked to go to the cafeteria expecting to find meat just to find beans. In the end, the school gets vandalized. If communication is made, we cannot go on rampage.*

Education Official (EDO) 3: *Most heads do not realize that this time around, students have to be recognized. This calls for effective communication between the two parties. Otherwise, failure to do so is a recipe for trouble and schools have been damaged because of that.*

Misunderstanding of human rights

Of the respondents who completed questionnaires, 28.6% said misunderstanding of human rights was the major causes of conflict. Interviews and FGDs collaborated with this. Head teachers noted that students always talked about their rights without any mention of their responsibilities. In the end, they did a lot of harm to schools and even to the communities. Teachers noted that students abused human rights just because they were not aware of their responsibilities. These views were shared by students as well. Education officials observed that students valued rights more than responsibilities and in the end; they usually crossed paths with staff. Parents observed that students abused human rights mostly under the influence of drug and substance abuse which they considered to be a right as well. This is what some of the participants said.

HT 4: *Most conflicts are a result of students' misunderstanding of human rights. In their view, it is only them who have rights and no other person. To them, rights imply a license to do whatever they want. It is for this reason that they can vandalise property without any feeling of remorse.*

TR 4: *Some of these conflicts are due to students' misunderstanding of human rights. In anything they do, they talk about rights. There is a need that they learn about responsibilities otherwise, they create hell in the name of rights.*

PT 5: *Students misunderstand human rights more especially under the influence of drug and substance abuse. Unfortunately, they consider drug and substance abuse itself as a right. In the end, they become unruly.*

Poor diet

While only 5.7% of the teachers who responded to questionnaires said the major cause of conflict in secondary schools was poor diet, interviews and FGDs featured it highly. Head teachers observed that due to financial challenges, the food schools provided was generally not enough and of low quality. In the end, head teachers were accused of abusing school resources such that in most cases, when violence erupted, head teachers were targeted. Teachers added that children from well to do families were not happy with the food they were given and usually resorted to violence. Students observed that when the diet was poor for so long, at times they got fed up and became ungovernable. As for education officials, the major challenge was that schools could not offer good meals due to limited financial resources while parents observed that lack of transparency by schools on how money was used worsened the situation. This is what some of the participants said.

HT 1: *The issue of diet is very sensitive such that students don't hesitate to go on rampage if the food is of poor quality. Unfortunately, the fees which they pay are far too low for schools to provide descent meals. However, students take it that we abuse finances such that when there is a conflict, we are the target.*

FGD 1: *When the food is bad and prefects communicate to them the need to improve it but they do not do anything, we become tired. In the end, we break the school so that they do something about it. And indeed, when violence has taken place, things improve.*

EDO 3: *If a school does not handle the issues of diet tactfully, it becomes a time bomb. Unfortunately, schools do not have the capacity to improve meals because the fees students pay are far too little.*

Misunderstanding of school rules and regulations

Misunderstanding of school rules and regulations also featured as one of the causes of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi. 17.1% of the teachers who responded to questionnaires mentioned it as the major causes. Students said with their emphasis on rights, they looked at school rules and regulations as instruments for oppression. Thus, head teachers who enforced school rules and regulations were seen to be harsh and in most cases, students rose against them. Parents observed that where rules were not being enforced and a new head teacher did so; he/she was seen as being oppressive. Teachers said although students were aware of rules and regulations, they were usually resentful in following them such that serious enforcement resulted in riots. This is what some participants said.

FGD 3: *Some conflicts are a result of misunderstanding of school rules and regulations. Usually, due to the feeling that we have rights, rules and regulations are seen as an infringement on our rights. For example, rules such as banning possession of cell phones are not fully accepted and if a school enforces total adherence, we usually protest and cause havoc.*

PT4: *Some conflicts are a result of students' unwillingness to accept rules and regulations. This usually happens when the rules are not enforced and a new head teacher tries to do so. Such a head teacher is considered to be oppressive and if he insists on adherence, hell is created.*

TR1: *Students hate head teachers who seriously enforce school rules and regulations. In most cases, they will riot so that the head teacher is posted away.*

Unfair treatment of students by staff

11.4% of the teachers who completed questionnaires were of the view that unfair treatment was the major cause of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi. Interviews and FGDs revealed that unfair treatment could take the form of inconsistency in the administration of punishments, favouritism or harshness. Head teachers observed that inconsistencies in the way punishments were administered usually led to riots. The view was shared by students who said unfair treatment usually manifested itself through preferential treatment and/or harsh punishment. Parents observed that harsh punishment

usually attracted sympathy from other students who in turn revolted against staff in order to show solidarity with their counterparts. This is what some of the participants said.

HT 1: *Punishing students differently for the same offence results in riots most of the time. There are rumours that certain teachers give lighter punishments to students with whom they come from the same district while punishing the others severely. Such a conduct is provocative to students.*

FGD 1: *Some teachers treat students like slaves. They administer very harsh punishments and they make sure you get tortured but when students get tired, violence ensues.*

PT 2: *Harsh punishments provoke anger in students as they look at it as unfair treatment. As such, they usually become violent.*

Poor management of schools

The study established that some conflicts in secondary schools in Malawi were a result of poor management of schools by head teachers. 5.7% of the participants who completed questionnaires were of this view. Head teachers conceded that some conflicts were indeed a result of their own delays in addressing students concerns. Students observed that there were times when they took issues to management but they just sat on them or they referred them to prefects. In such a situation, students concluded that management could only listen if pushed hence a resort to riots. Parents observed that some schools were run without any rules and regulations and students were unruly. Education officials observed that some conflicts were due to head teachers' lack of conflict management skills such that there were cases when they angered students by not attending to their grievances or by attending to them late. This is what some participants said.

HT 2: *One of the major causes of conflict in secondary schools is head teachers' failure to address students' concerns. For example, if students complain about poor diet and the head teacher knows that there is nothing he can do because the school does not have enough money due to the low school fees but he/she chooses to remain silent, students get angered and in the end, they riot.*

FGD 3: *Some of the conflicts are due to the schools' failure to address our concerns. At times, when we present issues to management, we are referred to prefects. They forget that by taking issues to them, it means prefects have failed. In such cases, we just go on rampage after which they usually act.*

EDO 6: *Some head teachers lack conflict management skills. In the end, they just worsen the situation because they do not know how to handle it.*

Instigation of students by teachers and/or parents

It also transpired that some conflicts were a result of instigation of students by either teachers or parents. Head teachers observed that there were instances when students revolted against management after being instigated by either teachers or parents. They noted that usually, teachers who had overstayed at a school, did not like change such that when a (new) head teacher introduced an innovation, they could instigate students to rise against him/her. Head teachers also noted that at times, parents could tell students that the school was exploiting them and that if it was during their time, they could rise for improvement.

Education officials observed that some teachers who stayed at a school so long resisted change and usually, instigated students to revolt against any change. The officials also noted that communities which liked to micromanage schools could instigate students to rise against a head teacher who was too strong to be manipulated so that he was moved to another school since the general trend was that when students vandalised a school, the head teacher was removed. Parents too shared the view. Here are comments by some participants.

EDO 6: *When the community wishes to take total control of a school, they do everything possible to get rid of a strong head teacher who is seen as an obstacle to their aspirations. In such cases, they instigate students to riot against him/her. Unfortunately, when such a thing happens, we (EDOs) usually post the head teacher away thereby rewarding their moves.*

PT 4: *In some schools, conflict is a result of instigation by teachers. Usually, teachers who have over stayed at a school resist new policies. As a result, they instigate students to go on rampage so that the head teacher fails and gets posted away.*

Students' indiscipline

Another major cause of conflict that came out was students' indiscipline, a view that was shared by 8.6% of participants who responded to questionnaires. Head teachers too observed that there were times when students engaged in violence just because of lack of discipline which was exacerbated by misunderstanding of human rights. Teachers who were interviewed noted that enforcing discipline met a lot of resistance from students who in most cases ended up rioting. This is what some participants said.

HT 4: *Lack of discipline contributes a lot to violence. Schools get vandalized because students are not happy that some of their colleagues have been suspended on discipline charges such as beer drinking. At times, students go on rampage just because boy-girl relationships are not tolerated.*

TR 2: *A lot of conflicts in our secondary schools are due to indiscipline. Because discipline has gone down, students behave in the way they want such that violence has become a norm.*

Lack of students' involvement in decisions that concerned them

The study also learnt that some conflicts were a result of lack of students' involvement in decisions that concerned them. Education officials observed that this was mainly due to lack of transparency which they said resulted in students being suspicious of several things. Teachers collaborated with the

education officials, saying involving students in decisions affecting them would ensure peaceful implementation of the same. This is what some participants said.

EDO 2: *Most conflicts in schools are a result of lack of transparency by school management more especially on issues of money. When the diet is poor and the school is not transparent in the way it handles finances, students take it that the head teacher is misusing their money and they riot.*

TR 6: *Some times, we provoke students' anger by not involving them in decision making. A good example is the issue of diet. After experiencing different challenges, this school asked students, parents and some teachers to sit down and draw a menu using the fess which they were paying. After the meeting, they advised the school to remove some food items on the menu and recommended fees hike. Today things have improved.*

Peer pressure

The study also learnt that in other instances, students engaged in violence just because of peer pressure. One head teacher observed that sometimes students engaged in violence just because their colleagues elsewhere had gone on rampage. Education officials shared the view and further noted that because of peer pressure, schools experienced violence in a sequence; one school after the other. Parents noted that peer pressure was sometimes mounted by rejects who had been expelled from another school and were admitted in another one. They noted that such students were so influential that they could organize riots for very petty reasons. Head teachers concurred with the parents on this. This is what some participants.

HT 4: *At times students vandalise schools just because their colleagues elsewhere have done so. That is why most of the times; schools are vandalized in a succession; one after the other.*

EDO 1: *There are times when students go on rampage just because elsewhere, their friends have done so. That is why you hear of cases of students' riots one after the other. They just want to show that they too can cause chaos at a school.*

PT 4: *Some conflicts are a result of influence by students who are transferred from other schools due to bad behaviour. The Ministry of Education has a tendency of transferring students expelled from one school for vandalism to another school. Unfortunately, upon joining the new school, they do exactly that.*

Other causes

Other causes of conflict that were mentioned were lack of teaching resources which students said angered them more especially if management showed no interest to improve the situation. The view was shared by one of the teachers who responded to questionnaires who observed that the major cause of conflict was poor teaching due to lack of teaching resources or other factors like unpreparedness of teachers. Students observed that lazy prefects were also a cause of conflict such that they could incite riots just to disrupt learning. For parents, teachers' failure to maintain social distance with girls was a major cause of conflict as it created competition between boys and the teachers. In such a situation, students considered violence as a weapon with which to defeat the competitors. This is what some participants said.

FGD 3: *We get dismayed when there are no teaching resources or there are no teachers. So to show that we are not happy, we riot. Fortunately, when that happens, the problem gets solved. If it was a problem of teachers, some teachers get posted to the school immediately.*

PT 1: *At times students resort to violence because of competition for girls with teachers. Since the teachers have a socioeconomic advantage over the boys, the latter resort to conflict as the only weapon with which to defeat the opponent. The competition worsens with the boys' wish to show the girls that they are courageous and they can do anything.*

Theme 2: Effects of conflict on secondary schools

The findings of the study revealed that conflict had both positive and negative effects on secondary schools in Malawi. The findings were as presented here below.

Positive effects of conflict on secondary schools

The study found that conflicts had four positive effects on secondary schools in Malawi namely; (1) an opportunity to learn and improve the running of schools, (2) improvement of infrastructure, (3) an opportunity for students to air out their concerns and (4) a means to deter would be offenders.

A learning opportunity

Almost all participants mentioned that conflict was a learning opportunity in the running of secondary schools such that by the end of the day, things improved. 82.9% of participants who responded to questionnaires shared this view. In agreement, head teachers said although conflict ended in violence and damage to school property, it offered school management an opportunity to reflect and improve the running of the schools. Students observed that the only benefit of conflict to the schools was that it was an opportunity to improve the way schools were run in that upon managing the conflict, parties came to their senses and began to recognise and respect each other. Education officials observed that conflict served as a learning point for head teachers as it gave them an opportunity for self-reflection so as to avoid a repeat of the ugly scenes. Parents too observed that conflict created an opportunity for re-correction to both staff and students. Teachers who were interviewed shared the sentiment saying conflict allowed parties to do some soul searching and in the end, things improved. This is what some participants said.

HT 2: *Conflicts provide a moment for reflection to both staff and students. Through conflicts, both parties realize that there is diversity in views; something which shall always be there. Upon reflecting on this, things improve.*

FGD 3: *Conflict teaches both students and staff the need to respect each other. As a result, relationships improve. The school begins to pay attention to students concerns and students recognise the place of teachers.*

EDO 4: *Conflict is a learning point and an opportunity for correction. When something similar happens again, chances of handling it well are very high as people act from experience.*

Improvement of infrastructure

The study also found that conflict resulted in the improvement of infrastructure. This was shared by 14% of the teachers who responded to questionnaires. Head teachers too said after conflict, infrastructure in schools improved because students involved in the rampage were forced to pay for the damages which in most cases included even things which were already damaged. Education officials and parents too observed that when a school had been vandalized, the damage caused was assessed, costed and paid for by the students thereby improving the infrastructure. This is what some participants said.

HT 1: *Conflict offers a window for infrastructural improvement at the school. When students damage school property during violence, they are asked to pay for the damages. In most cases, they pay more than the amount required to repair the damages and in the end, things improve.*

EDO 1: *When assessing damages, schools usually include facilities which were already in bad shape. As such, after violence, school condition improves.*

PT 2: *The only advantage of conflict is the repairing of facilities which happens after students have paid for the damages.*

An opportunity for students to air out their concerns and be heard

The study found that conflict offered students an opportunity to have their concerns heard and acted upon. Head teachers observed that schools did not accommodate contrary views of students and that conflict was the only opportunity for such views to be heard and acted upon. Similarly, education officials observed that it was only when students had become violent that schools paid attention to their concerns. Students themselves observed that in most schools, their concerns were not given much attention until when they had become violent. The view was shared by 2.9 % of participants who completed questionnaires. This is what some participants said.

HT 2: *Head teachers and teachers need to open up to contrary views by students. As of now, such views are usually heard when there is a conflict.*

EDO 5: *Most times, schools get grievances from students but they do not act. It is only when students become volatile that they act.*

FGD 3: *Usually, schools pay a blind eye on our concerns but when we become violent, schools do everything possible to address the issues.*

A deterrence to would be offenders

Education officials further observed that conflict assisted in deterring would be offenders from doing the same. They noted that when a conflict occurred and some students were suspended or expelled from school, the message sent was that violence would not be tolerated. As a result, would be offenders were deterred from doing the same. This is what one participant said.

EDO 1: *When a conflict occurs and some students are expelled or suspended, would be offenders wake up and they are deterred from doing the same.*

Negative effects of conflict on secondary schools

The study also solicited views from participants on what they thought were the negative effects of conflict on secondary schools. Four major effects were mentioned namely; (1) it disturbs teaching and learning, (2) it causes damage to school property, (3) it derails development and (4) it puts people's lives in danger.

A disturbance to teaching and learning

Of the participants who completed questionnaires, 62.9% observed that conflict disturbed teaching and learning. Head teachers observed that when conflict occurred, schools usually got closed thereby disturbing teaching and learning. In agreement, both teachers and students noted that because of strained relationship, students and the teachers themselves could not give out the best of their ability. Students went further to say when a school got closed, some students, especially girls, dropped out of school due to marriages. Education officials observed that conflict greatly disturbed teaching and learning over and above damaging the reputation of both the school and the head teacher. Parents too observed that conflict disturbed teaching and learning as focus of both teachers and students switched to the conflict. This is what some respondents said.

HT 5: *When there is a conflict, it becomes difficult to cover the syllabus. I remember when this school was closed for almost three months, it was not easy to cover the syllabus.*

TR 5: *When there is a conflict, teachers and students cannot give out the best of themselves because their relationship is strained and their energy is directed towards the conflict and not teaching and learning.*

FGD 1: *Conflict breeds hatred between students and teachers thereby affecting teaching and learning. In some instances it leads to closure of schools and in the process, some students more especially girls, drop out of school due to marriages.*

Damage of property

Of the participants who responded to questionnaires, 31.4% indicated that conflict resulted in damage to school property. The view was shared by head teachers, education officials, parents, students and teachers. They all noted that conflict in secondary schools in Malawi was always associated with vandalism and damage to school property or even setting a school on fire with assorted property burnt to ashes. This is what some participants said.

HT4: *Conflict results in damage of school property. At this school, for example, students burnt computers and damaged teachers' houses and the situation was bad. It was a big a loss not only to the school but to the students as well.*

FGD 3: *During conflict, school property is damaged and when such a thing happens, parents are given a burden to pay for the damages. If parents fail to pay for the damages, students are withdrawn from school.*

Derails development

The study also found that conflict derailed development. Students observed that when there was a conflict, people's energy, time, finances and even attention all got redirected to the maintenance of the damage caused. Teachers complained that even when students paid for damages, there were cases of structures not repaired well after the payments had been made. The sentiments were shared by 5.7% of participants who responded to questionnaires. This is what some participants said.

FGD 3: *When there is a conflict, students rush at breaking school property. In the end, the school spends a lot of money and time on repairs instead of new development.*

TR 2: *Violence in schools is retrogressive as it derails development. There are schools which were damaged, students paid for the damages but no repairs have been. Government will have to provide finances for the repairs.*

Puts lives in danger

Another effect of conflict that was mentioned was that it puts lives of both teachers and students in danger. Head teachers pointed out that when charged, students could do anything such that there were times when people got injured or lives got lost. The sentiments were shared by students who noted that whenever a conflict turned violent, it became a hit and run affair and anything could be done such that lives had ever been lost. This is what participants said.

HT 5: *Conflict puts lives of both members of staff and students in danger. When students are charged, they can do anything. At this school, a student was killed when there was a fight with a neighbouring.*

FGD 3: *Conflicts put students' lives in danger. You can easily get injured or even killed if you are not careful because it becomes a hit and run affair.*

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Two themes guided the study namely; causes of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi and effects of conflict on education. Discussion of the findings is guided by these two themes.

Theme 1: Causes of Conflict in Secondary Schools in Malawi

The study identified four primary causes of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi and are each discussed together with the secondary causes under it.

Primary Cause Number 1: Poor management of schools

The first primary cause of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi was poor management of schools. The study revealed that in most cases, students become violent for reasons which if well managed would end amicably. The study established that head teachers were not trained in conflict manage and that the only training they had was some 20 or more years before when they were in the university. Such a situation was a recipe for disaster because the effectiveness of any conflict management strategy in schools depends on the performance of school principals (Saiti, 2015). For this reason, the head teachers observed that they needed a reorientation in conflict management.

Different studies agree with Saiti (2015) that poor management is a cause of conflict in secondary schools. Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) says in Nigeria, administrative incompetence by school principals caused conflicts. Similarly, Gyan and Tandoh-Offin (2014) found that in Ghana, ineffective school management contributed a lot to conflicts.

The first secondary cause under poor management of schools was failure to involve students in decisions that concerned them. It transpired that when students were not involved in decisions concerning them, they usually acted irrationally and caused a lot of havoc. Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) also found that in Nigeria, failure to involve students in school affairs was a cause of conflict. This may be the case because people have an undeniable need to participate in decisions that affect them (Fisher, 1997 in Ghaffar, 2009). However, the study revealed that with the traditional thinking that youths are supposed to listen to elders, schools hardly engage students.

Poor diet was also found to be a cause of conflict that emanated from poor school management. It transpired that students usually went on strike if food was of poor quality or insufficient. However, the major problem was that schools did not involve students in drawing the menu thereby forcing them to speculate that head teachers were misappropriating money although the fees were too low to afford schools better meals. It also transpired that schools

did not communicate to students whenever there was a change in menu. As result, students acted emotionally when they realized on the table that the food provided was not what was on the menu.

According to Rothman (2014), the issue of diet is a resource based conflict which might be addressed through expansion (provision) of the resources. Unfortunately, secondary schools could not offer better meals because the fees which students were paying were too low. The study learnt that the MoEST appreciated that the fees were very low such that at a certain point, it proposed an increase but Members of Parliament (MPs) shot the proposal down arguing that most Malawians could not afford to pay such fees.

The study established that the issue of diet was a problem in different countries. For example, Abaasa (2005) says at Nabumali High School in Uganda, students destroyed school property because food was bad and there was no milk in their porridge. The issue of diet is very critical since food is a basic human need (Kok, 2007) which if denied, might be a recipe for disaster. However, if schools were properly managed with students involved in drawing the menu and change of menu properly and timely communicated, the situation could be under control.

Poor communication was another cause of conflict under poor management of schools. It was learnt that in so many instances, students acted violently just because they did not have appropriate or sufficient information on an issue. Similarly, in Botswana, Morake, Monobe and Dingwe (2011) found that communication breakdown in schools was a cause for antagonism. Abaasa (2005) says failure to communicate sends the message that students do not matter and it generally triggers anger.

The final secondary cause of conflict in secondary schools under poor school management was unfair treatment of students. The study established that preferential treatment or harsh punishments were perceived to be unfair and they usually triggered anger among students. In Uganda, Tumwesigye and Basheka (2008) found that students expressed resentments to unfair treatment and in other instances, they went on strike. Mncube and Harber (2013) also found that in South Africa, some violent conflicts were a result of ill-treatment of students by teachers.

Primary Cause Number 2: Misunderstanding of human rights

The second primary cause of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi was misunderstanding of human rights. It was learnt that students emphasised on their rights such that they could damage property or cause harm to lives in the name of rights. Malenya (2016) also established that in Kenya, students fondly invoked a popular expression “haki yetu” (our right) whenever they fought for what they considered to be their right even if they infringed on other people’s rights.

Under misunderstanding of human rights, two secondary causes of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi were identified namely; students’ indiscipline and misunderstanding of school rules and regulations. It transpired that efforts to enforce discipline in secondary schools met a lot of resistance as students took it that they were free to behavior in any way they wanted in the name of human rights. In Kenya, Ageng’e and Simatwa (2011 in Kipkemboi & Kipruto, 2013) also found that indiscipline was one of the major causes of conflict in secondary schools.

Misunderstanding of school rules and regulations was yet another cause of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi which resulted from misunderstanding of human rights. It transpired that although students and their parents read the rules and regulations and signed and co-signed them respectively, students considered them an infringement on their rights. As a result, their enforcement generally met resistance. Ramani and Zhimin (2010) & Malenya (2016) observe that in Kenya, at times conflict in schools arose due to students’ failure to adhere to school rules and regulations. For this reason, Adeyami (2009) says to enhance adherence to school rules and regulations, students should be involved in their formulation and execution.

Primary Cause Number 3: Instigation of students

The third primary cause of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi was instigation of students by either teachers or parents or lazy prefects or other students. The study found that due to lack of cooperation between a head teacher and teachers, the latter would instigate students to revolt against the former. It was also established that parents too would instigate students just to frustrate the head teacher more especially if they did not want him/her. It transpired that whenever parents wanted to micromanage a school but the head teacher was too strong to be manipulated, the parents could instigate students to riot against him/her so that the MoEST should post him/her away from the school as per the trend.

It was also established that students admitted into a school after being expelled from other schools did a lot of instigation as they generally lacked interest in education. However, the study established that admission of students had been stopped such that this was no longer an issue.

The study further learnt that instigation could also be done by other students through peer pressure. It transpired that students at times engaged in violence not because there was anything wrong but because their colleagues elsewhere had gone on rampage. For this reason, schools mostly experienced violence in a sequence; one after the other. It also transpired that due to lack of interest in education, lazy prefects could also instigate students to riot just to disturb learning. For this reason, in most schools, a student could be appointed a prefect only if he had shown interest in school. For this reason, most prefects were serious with school and in most cases, they made it to university. Instigation is also an issue elsewhere. For example, Tumwesigye and Basheka (2008) say in Uganda, at times, students who had been withdrawn from school instigated others to strike.

Primary Cause Number 4: Professional challenges in schools

Conflict in secondary schools in Malawi was also a result of professional challenges. The study revealed that there were times when schools did not have resources as required by the teaching profession. Such a situation, generally, angered students more especially if management was not doing enough to improve it and in the end, conflict arose. This is also observed by Mapolisa and Tshabalala, (2012) who note that in Zimbabwe, a lot of conflicts in secondary schools arose as a result of insufficient teaching resources.

The study further revealed that if a teacher was not doing his or her work properly, students could get frustrated and engage in violence in order to influence him or her to change or to influence education officials to remove him or her from the school. The findings agree with Adeyami (2009) who says in Nigeria, some conflicts between teachers and students arose because of teachers' underperformance.

Teachers' failure to maintain social distance with girls was another unprofessional behaviour that caused conflicts in secondary schools in Malawi. Boys considered teachers who fell in love with girls as competitors. Because of their weak socioeconomic status, the boys resorted to violence as an additional weapon with which to defeat the enemy. These findings agree with Adeyami (2009) who observes that rivalry between students and teachers over girlfriends is a serious cause of conflict in schools.

Theme 2: Effects of conflict on secondary schools

The study established that conflict had both positive and negative effects on secondary schools in Malawi. These effects are discussed here below.

Positive effects of conflict on secondary schools

The study revealed four positive effects of conflict on secondary schools in Malawi. The first one was that it offered schools an opportunity to learn where things were not well and improve on them. It transpired that after a conflict, parties were able to assess themselves and understand others better thereby improving the situation. These findings are in total agreement with Kaiser (2003 in Sarpkaya, 2014) who says the clash of thesis with antithesis can result in synthesis. However, it was surprising to learn that some schools were registering violent conflicts almost on yearly basis which meant that no lessons were learnt.

The second positive effect that conflict had on secondary schools was improvement of infrastructure. It transpired that after a violence, damage was assessed and costed and students paid for it. As such, schools were able to maintain infrastructure and replace broken equipment. However, the study established that there were schools which had not been maintained even after damages had been paid for. Possible reasons for this were inflation or because payment by students could not meet the cost of the damaged property which was too high. It was also established that materials used for maintenance were generally of poor quality such that infrastructure ended up losing value. In addition, it was learnt that the repayment system lacked fairness as students who were not involved in the violence were at times forced to pay for damages just because the system could not identify the culprits.

The third positive effect was that it offered students an opportunity to air out their concerns and have them acted upon. It was learnt that ordinarily, students could not be given an opportunity to air out their concerns. However, the recurrence of conflict in secondary schools might imply that students' concerns were heard and acted upon soon after the conflict after which the status quo remained. Unfortunately, denying people the opportunity to air out their concerns means denying them the opportunity to ventilate emotions in safe increments thereby building pressure of emotions which can explode into violence (Mayer, 2001).

The last positive effect was that it assisted in deterring would be offenders from doing the same. It was learnt that after a conflict, if some students were suspended or expelled from school, the message sent was that violence would not be tolerated. As a result, students who wanted to be violent would think twice before doing so.

Negative effects of conflict on secondary schools

The study revealed that conflict negatively affected secondary schools in Malawi in three different ways. The first way was that it disturbed teaching and learning. The study established that conflict led to closure of schools thereby bringing teaching and learning to a halt. In other cases, conflict resulted in the suspension or expulsion of students from school thereby disturbing their learning. Over and above that, it was established that conflict strained relationships between students and teachers thereby diverting their time, energy and attention away from teaching and learning. This view is supported by Gamage and Pang (2003) who observe that conflict diverts energy from the task at hand, destroys morale and in the end decreases productivity.

The second negative effect was that conflict caused damage to school property. One good example was Ntcheu Secondary School where students set ablaze school property including thirty computers and other property worth millions of kwachas (*The Nyasa Times* of September 28, 2014). In agreement, Abaasa (2005) says at Kisubi High School in Uganda, students went on rampage destroying property worth millions of shillings. Although it was noted that conflict resulted in improvement of infrastructure, the general feeling of participants was that the damage caused was in most cases irreparable.

The last negative effect was that conflict endangered people's lives. It was learnt that some years before, a student lost life during a violence at one of the schools. As a result, it transpired that whenever a conflict arose, stakeholders were never at peace as parents feared for the lives of their children, head teachers and teachers feared for their own lives while education officials feared for the lives of teachers, students and their own lives too especially when they went to the scenes to manage the situation. Although on the offensive, students too feared for their lives. Elsewhere, Abaasa (2005) says in Uganda, a student was burnt to death when fellow students burnt a dormitory.

Conclusion

The study has shown that there are different causes of conflict in secondary schools in Malawi. The study has further shown that conflicts have very negative effects on education as they among other things, disturb teaching and learning, lead to damage of property and worse still, put lives in danger. It is therefore, very important for stakeholders to join hands in their management.

Recommendations

In view of the observations by Bannerman (2012) that to manage conflict well, there is a need to understand its causes first, the study makes a number of recommendations aimed at managing them in line with the causes discussed. First, it is recommended that the MoEST should make sure that head teachers, teachers and even education officials themselves are trained in conflict management so that they are able to manage conflict successfully. It is further recommended that schools should be involving students in decision making and such other processes like development and implementation of school rules and regulations and drawing of school menu. By so doing, students will own the rules and regulation and appreciate the budgetary challenges which affect diet negatively. It is also recommended that schools should enhance communication so that students do not act on speculation. On misunderstanding of human rights, it is recommended that students should not just be taught about rights but about responsibilities as well so that they enjoy their rights responsibly. The other recommendation is that the MoEST should stop the tendency of posting a head teacher away when a school has been vandalized as it fuels violence against some good head teachers who cross paths with communities, teachers or students just because they cannot be manipulated. Finally, it is recommended that schools should make sure that teachers adhere to the professional ethics of their job by among other things teaching effectively and maintain social distance.

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