

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF AN ARSON ATTACK IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY OF KENYA

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Abstract: This paper examines the current issue of arson in Kenyan High schools through a review of similar cases in the recent past to shed some light on why it is a very crucial debate. Presently, there appears to be a 'silent war' between the Ministry of education and the different educational institutions over some of the new rules imposed in the educational sector which are argued as being the cause of the rising unrest in schools. The main objective of the paper is to give a brief synopsis of the conflict that is bound to arise out of this situation. The information in this paper would be vital in providing future information in how to resolve conflicts in Kenyan secondary schools.

Keywords: Education, Democracy, Human Rights and Curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is related to every walk of life and it affects every section of society (Zhian & Swanson, 1987). Education offers a route to social mobility for all individuals of all background (Davidson, 1996; Sole, 1994). It is mainly conceptualised as integral part in achieving the economic parity and geographical dispersal that is presumed in integrating diverse citizens (Davidson, 1996). A creative individual is motivated by liberalization of education through democratic rights (Njoroge & Otiende, 2001). It is on the basis of these democratic rights that arson in secondary schools in Kenya has been very common recently. Kenya has been experiencing for the past three months a great wave of arson in secondary schools whereby by 30th July 2016, 118 schools had been burnt in a wave of arson attacks (Daily News, 2016).

The pursuit of education in Kenya has been an arduous task that students embark on from an early age. The Government of Kenya has invested heavily in the education. On 6th Jan, 2013 the government launched a Free Primary Education programme which is still running currently. There have been proposals to start a free secondary Education programme in 2019. With time, the hours and effort put in by these young ones have increased seeing many students spend up to 18 hours each day pursuing their education. However, over the past few weeks, there has been a sharp rise in student unrest in the country raising concern because of the associated destruction of property and arson. The spike in unrest and subsequent torching of buildings in many secondary schools across the country is presenting a new unprecedented scenario (Karega, 2016).

Similar incidence was experienced in Indonesia where between 1987 and 1991 there was an average of three strikes per year in high schools. The same number increased by 1993 to thirty cases (Kammen, D, 1995). What was the reason behind Indonesian strike? According to Kammen (1995) Several reasons could have contributed to Indonesian strike which some may be similar to Kenyan scenario are: Ban on school regulations on hair length, corruption, protest on quality of education in school, fee increment, reassignment of teachers as well as firing of principals.

According to Ogutu (2016), the management of schools according to the CS, Matiang'i have been hijacked by local politics. This has further contributed to the unrest of perpetrators of this crime.

This crime has been on rise recently despite the education ministry attempt to stamp out the trend (Babisho, 2016) and 99 percent of these incidences occurred in public schools (Ogutu, 2016).

1.1 The Problem:

Conflict refers to a situation whereby two or more parties have varying ideologies or views on particular issues. In a conflict, one party may feel that their views do not match those of another or are more superior creating tension and thus ending up in conflict. The Kenyan education sector has been characterized by very many reforms in the recent past which includes the introduction of new rules that many actors are not too happy with. The reforms especially affect the public secondary schools which require very many policies to be adopted by the administration for uniformity. Some of the actors in this case include the Ministry of Education, Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT), Institutions- the schools, and parents among others.

Briefly, some of the new reforms in the education system include: shortening of the school holidays, abolition of traditions such as visiting and prayer days as a way to curb cheating in the national exams. The number of schools torched down as of 28th July had hit 115 and still counting. The main issue is that this was done sporadically and without any consultations with the key stake holders. For this reason, the students feel targeted and the teachers feel isolated explaining the rigidness in adopting to the new rules

The ministry of education together with a few other actors have and continue to seek solutions to the fast spreading wave of arson. The opposition government for example had proposed that all public and government national schools be closed down until the situation had cooled down while the ministry of education and KNUT insist that all schools remain opened as they plan to get a final and fitting resolution the conflict.

The arson situation is not new in the Kenyan scene and the government has always found an amicable way of solving the situation and this is normally through mediation, both sides of the conflicting parties come together and through a mediator are able to address the issue. The issue can be resolved when the stake holders such as the church, government and the students come together and find a compromise to the situation. There was for example a stake holders meeting held to resolve the wave of school fires. The Church clergy mediated by suggesting that a chaplaincy office be formed so as to offer spiritual guidance to the students. This goes to show how there is some concern and commitment by major state actors to end the arson.

There has also been a move towards conciliation where the key stakeholders have proposed that a joint committee be formed to conclude investigations on the fires and also propose measures for the same. There has also been an agreement that a national conference be held in September 23rd be held to provide a solution to the conflict. If well addressed, recommendations from reconciling the two parties could be a huge step in providing a common solution to the issue at hand.

Even with all this proposals on how to resolve the issue being explored, the burning question is why does the issue still come back? Looking at the history of arson cases in the country, there was the Kyanguli case in 2001 and the Bombolulu case in 1998 it is evident that a permanent solution to arson has not yet been found. Had it been found then it is highly unlikely that this cases would reoccur. Commissions of inquiry have been formed, affected parents given cash rewards for the pain but there is really no clear resolution mechanism. For this reason therefore, there is a high chance that these cases may continue to reoccur. This gap creates the need to further look at arson issues, based on what has been gathered before so as to see what key aspect may have been left out to help address this.

2. EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

Academic difficulties experienced by students in schools is due to cultural differences during interactions as well learning styles (Davidson, 1996). Verbal and non-verbal communication patterns are culturally learned patterns that generate conflict expectations between persons of different culture. Culture differences produce systematic and recurrent miscommunication in the classroom that overtime escalates into academic trouble and failure. Mostly cultural explanations do not occur to teachers but it negatively attributed to students as laziness. Drug abuse, (Babisho, 2016) low expectations, bitter teachers and the seductive offers by more acculturated peers to join the street culture. Education and culture as cited by Davidson(Gitonga, 1987) constitutes one of the most fundamental foundations of democracy.

For democracy to flourish, there must be a politically literate and active citizenly who are able to take a direct, personal responsibility in the working of society. Harber (1989) as cited by Njoroge and Otiende (2001) noted, despite the assumption that education for democracy and human rights bears fruit, the organization that has been put forward by most of the western education is authoritarian in nature which takes a form of dominant mode of organization.

The values that are imposed in schools are those that are efficient in enforcing bureaucratic organization and the maintenance of social order which include obedience, tolerance, abiding by the rules of schools, respect for authority, regular attendance, punctuality, quietness and working under strict timetable. This colonial rule form of education has been criticised by a number of scholars due to its bureaucratic nature of it. Shipman(1972) as cited by Njoroge and Otiende (2001) noted the western education that has been adopted by Africans seems to change people from agrarian to industrialization whereby the authority is definitely unquestionable (Dudley, 1973) as cited by Otiende.

With regard to discipline a military type of discipline was considered a necessary aspect of training Africans(Njoroge &Otiende, 2001). In 1970s the government of Nigeria got concerned about the strikes which were rampant in most of the countries. Soldiers were posted in all secondary schools to help teachers as well as parents in maintaining discipline and General Obasanjo gave an example of what was expected by canning a student in school who appeared disrespectful in answering questions. (Njoroge &otiede, 2001). One may be tempted to ask, were students safe under such military intervention? The answer could be yes or no. Undemocratically, the use of force was used in Mali, where security officers injured ten students after students protested for their rights. During 1970s in United States of America, a couple of students were shot dead by security forces after they demonstrated the intervention of American war in Vietnam. No wonder the education system in many countries in Africa, operates in a way that the best way to educate African is to reduce them in a level of docility (Njoroge and Otiende, 2001).

As many scholars and education stakeholders lay their blames on the rising indiscipline in the students, corporal punishment has been seen as a good option to bring sanity back to high schools and parents should not spare the rod too(Abuya &Muhia,2016). In disagreement with different scholars the use of physical punishment on kids is infringement of their rights and therefore should be condemned up to the highest level. However as an African saying goes, spare the rod spoil the child, Other mechanisms of enforcing discipline should be encouraged as long they do not interfere with children's right.

This form of physical discipline was later abolished in Kenya in 2000 and since then the rate of arson in high schools has been escalating at higher rate. As Kimani(2016 argues society need to be blamed for lack of disciplining kids .Despite the ban of mock exams in Kenya, arson attack that has been experienced this years is quite devastating. The emphasize in most African education institution on blind obedience to school authority as constituted through teachers, prefects is colonial based. This form of education system creates a unilateral flow of communication from the head teacher to students and creates no channel for the student to communicate with the authority (Njoroge &Otiende,2001).The existence of prefect system in secondary schools has been criticized heavily. As Njoroge and Otiende further noted, if a prefect is appointed by the head teacher, he/she will naturally get orders from the above rather than negotiating for student's problems.

The basic role of the prefect is to report misbehaviour of students to the higher authority in schools. Prefects also act as a general agent of social control and generally acting as messengers of the teachers. Harber (1989) argues as further cited by Njoroge and Otiende,the names of these distinguished prefects are often distinguished by a difference in their uniform.

According to John Dewey theory on education, the adoption of democracy in schools would allow students to pursue their education aided and guided by teacher through mutual cooperation. Dewey theory aims at integrating school and society with actual problems of life by application of democracy and principles in schools for better education.

3. SCHOOL CURRICULUM AND DEMOCRACY

It is worth remembering that that John Dewey's concern was how human capacity can work with others in order to shape the World us(Abowitz, Boyte& Meier, 2016).Drawing form Njoroge and Otiende's research,primary education had expanded further in 1970s than secondary schools and therefore some of those who graduated from primary schools had minimal access to secondary school. This challenge led to development of 8-4-4 system of education. The new curriculum was designed to serve the need of majority (Njoroge &Otiende). Similarly according to Prof George, the main objective was to establish the extent to which the current Secondary school education curriculum has addressed the needs of the Kenyan society. The 8-4-4 system was introduced in 1984,implimented in 1995,revised in 1992 and 2002. However, some of these implementing costs have been shouldered by parents(Njoroge &Otiende). With the increase of poverty rate in the country,this means some parents cannot afford the cost,therefore increasing the number of illiteracy in the country which is threat to sustain democratic values in our societies.

Secondary schools continue to be differentiated in terms of National, District, Divisional and Harambee. The category of boarding schools, day schools, public and private schools further divides students where children do not experience the same curriculum (Njoroge). Similarly remembering John Dewey's views, as highlighted by Abowitz et al, education that is privatised narrows views that has radically been shrinking meaning of democracy and education.

Another aspect of curriculum that is against democracy is the wide-based curriculum. Noting from Prof. George, one of the issues addressed during 2002 revision of 8-4-4 curriculum was the curriculum overload. Though some reviews have been made in business studies syllabus, (Njoroge) the coverage is still too wide. As Njoroge and Otiende further noted, coupled with oriented nature of the school system, children mostly lose opportunity through competition that has created a clear path to failure in school. This competition has forced schools to further force students to learn in order to pass exams. However the curriculum should prepare student to prepare for life meaningfully outside school.

For Kenyan schools to adopt democratic curriculum, the 8-4-4 system need to be revised in order to accommodate talents as well. In agreement Benta argues that students should be taught life skills as they are at a point in their lives where they are experiencing such physical and emotional changes that if they are not harnessed, they are channelled out in destructive activities (B. Abuya; N. Muhia, 2016). Emphasis should be made on ensuring schools address the complete aspect of the well-being of an individual and not just the academic aspect of the student.

4. CONCLUSION

This form of bureaucratic form of organization in secondary schools has further divided students in certain classes if no one luckily gets a chance of getting a leadership position in high schools. The existence of prefect system in high school seems to satisfy the higher office in schools than satisfying the student constituency. This form of undemocratic nature of governing school as Njoroge and Otiende argues, perceives nothing but undemocratic way of selecting prefects.

According to John Dewey Theory, children are not only helped but are hindered and hurt by elders who take control over them and therefore their voices are silenced, oppressed and ignored. However through setting a school council as has been adopted in Britain could be a safest way where students participate actively in the governance of schools. In this kind of set up a head teacher or representative of staffs listens to the grievances of students and a problem solving approach is definitely adopted (Njoroge & Otiende, 2001). This form of democratic approach can be very fundamental in management of secondary schools in Kenya where strikes are escalating every minute.

As Kammen (1995) further argues, It should not come as a surprise as students witness workers going on strike on their way to and from school. School kids have also realised they not accept intolerable treatment but also fight for their rights. Most schools as Njoroge and Otiende, noted, tend towards a model of authoritarian bureaucracy with decisions being made from a higher office and then executed down the chain of command. On the other hand, lessons are very teacher-centred rather than teacher-student centred, with little students participation. The overall results encourages dependency as well as student's positivity.

The essence of the problem lies in poor communications triggering strikes in schools which reflects a deeper feeling of malaise and frustrations. As Njoroge and Otiende, predicted, complaints of students are met with high handed authoritarianism and resentments which grow until in the end whereby a small incidence sparks off violence and leads to destruction of properties. Incidences of strikes and school burning have been experienced throughout the country recently resulting to destruction of properties due to failure of student's grievances being ignored.

There is need to reform the decision making structures and social environment of secondary schools. In Kenyan schools Board Members in collaboration with Parent Teachers Associations (PTA) are given arbitrary powers to suspend or even expel student from schools without even giving them a chance to be heard. In this scenario students are not allowed to question anything as they might lose a limited opportunity in secondary schools (Njoroge & Otiende, 2001).

The current regulations governing school in Kenya need to be reformed. Suspension of students from secondary schools do not solve any problem but rather escalates more problems. Students are not given an opportunity to be heard or even appeal against the decision that has been made by Board of Directors. Board of Directors and PTA members prosecute and judge at the same time in all matters pertaining students strike (Njoroge). This is the most basic means of conflict resolution that involves back-and-forth communication between the conflicting parties in search of a favourable outcome for both parties. Eventually, the conflict is resolved after the aim of harmonizing all the different parties is achieved. There is emphasis on recuperation and reinsertion of the errant member back to his original position in the society. Negotiation allows both parties to participate directly in making the decisions that affect them as they both lay their need and concern on the table for the consideration of the other party.

Why Negotiation? This is a conflict resolution mechanism used by a majority of people in their day to day lives. Negotiation is the first method of choice for conflict resolution. If no favourable outcome is reached, one may pursue other options of resolving the conflict. It is evident that using threats and sanctions as a first resort against the students is not working. The desired result of threatening and deterring delinquent behaviour amongst students is not being achieved. What is also emerging clearly is that these students have no respect whatsoever for their teachers and the government officials (B. Abuya; N. Muhia, 2016).

This is a different generation that sees no connection with the government or government orders. This generation identifies with 'celebrities' and 'superstars'. Thus, one of the ways of driving change in this current generation of students is to appeal to their emotions through characters or individuals that they "listen" to. These young people have little or no emotional attachment to school heads and government officials.

The Government can employ Chaplains who will act as a link between students and teacher. Chaplains will also give spiritual guidance to students and help them make better decision. Chaplains will be better audience as opposed to teachers and other staff who may be busy. Research has shown that the contribution of chaplains to school welfare was different from that of other staff in schools in several ways. Chaplains have been working hard to build relationships with students as the basis for enhancing students' wellbeing, rather than simply responding to problems that arose.

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