

## **Education and Dialogue in Kenya: A Means of Resolving Conflicts within Higher Educational Institutions**

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### **Abstract**

*Combative approach to solving issues in Kenyan public universities has been a method that students have used for decades. This method has been found to be costly, acrimonious and less humane. The need to embrace dialogue as a better approach of resolving conflicts should be encouraged towards a transformed society. This study investigates ways of promoting peace and conflict resolution in the university. The objective was to determine factors that hinder dialogue between students and the University administration. Data was collected from students of Moi University. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were adapted using questionnaires, interviews and focused group discussions (FGD). Data was analyzed using SPSS and through document analysis. Results indicated that some of the causes of combative approach to resolving conflicts were due to delayed response, fear of dialogue and insensitivity of the administration among others. The conclusion drawn was that lack of dialogue arose due to attitude that has developed over time regarding students' administration. Students have not been adequately educated to embrace the value of dialogue as a means of conflict resolution.*

**Keywords:** dialogue, indiscipline, conflict resolution, peace education

### ***1. Introduction***

Kenya boasts of twenty two (22) public universities fourteen (14) chartered and twelve (12) with a Letter of Interim Authority (LIA). There are seventeen (17) university colleges and nineteen (19) private universities (Wikipedia 2014). Virtually, all of these have experienced some form of violence over the last two decades (Standaet *al* 2000). Students and other innocent citizens have lost lives during such confrontations with law enforcers with some seriously injured. Female students have fallen victims of rape by their male counterparts, security or even villagers when there is a conflict. Property has been damaged as students go on rampage burning classrooms, dormitories, laboratories and vehicles. This has given institutions bad reputations and has also negatively affected graduating students as they enter the job market. To some extent, violent conflicts have reduced in universities but certain factors still fuel social conflicts.

Dialogue is a discussion to exchange proposals and ideas as a key means of resolving conflicts at various levels. Conflicts exist at individual level, wider level and in organizational level. Symmetrical conflict involves similar parties on an even level. Predisposing factors for conflict are basically jealousy and envy. Asymmetrical conflict occurs between dissimilar groups in which parties take on top-dog/underdog relation. This translates to minorities versus majorities, upper class and lower class. The upper class in a university set up is the university administration while the lower class is students. Conflicts occur due to frustration, individual differences, clash of values and priorities, insecurity, ideological (generational) differences, propaganda which is deliberate misinformation as a weapon which leads to distortion of perceptions, intentions and interest. It breeds enemy image that contributes to prejudices, hatred and hostility.

Conflict resolution involves peace building through dialogue promoting reconciliation and understanding the underdog voice. It tracks root causes and unfulfilled needs to transform perceptions and relationships with a view of preventing a recurrence. Resolving conflicts has various approaches such as negotiation, arbitration, mediation and forcing. Dialogue involves two parties and each party has to adjust their terms for them to reach an agreement (KIU 2010). The two parties must be agreeable before dialogue commences. For any successful dialogue, both parties must understand the purpose of dialogue, the different opinions/perspectives of each party, areas of disagreement, available information and what the possible hindrances are (Mullaeh 2007). In this paper it is represented by the students versus university administration.

Most students view the administration as being indifferent, unwilling to dialogue, and are out to “buy out” student leadership, force ideas on to them and are non-compromising. University administration on the other hand views students as always out to cause trouble (MOEST 2001, Standa et al 2000). The wrong view that students hold is that one cannot be termed a university student and graduate without throwing stones.

Peace education is both holistic in nature and comprehensive in scope in which the social purposes of peace education are oriented toward social change and transformation, in which transformation implies deep change affecting ways of thinking, worldviews, values, behaviors, relationships, and social structures (Jenkins 2008). To Johnson and Johnson (2006) Peace Education is aimed at teaching individuals the information, attitudes, values, and behavioral competencies needed to resolve conflicts without violence and to build and maintain mutually beneficial, harmonious relationships.

Peace education is education of humanity. It is the manifestation of an integral culture of body, vitality, mind, intellect and spirit. These elements constitute every man and woman without any discrimination of race, caste, creed, language, nationality and other differences (Prasad 2013).

In dialogue, both parties must prepare beforehand, know the subject of discussion, and plan for main areas/issues of contention, use appropriate language, avoid abusive language and force, must be systematic to understand the other party, be willing to negotiate, listen, and have goodwill and honesty in addressing real issues to avoid being compromised. Such skills are necessary for individuals involved in dialogue in order to reach an amicable compromise. Dialogue is a weapon that enables communication to progress with minimal interruptions. This is important because it will guard against manipulation and exploitation. Findings in this study are based on the concepts highlighted above. This paper seeks to determine factors that hinder dialogue between students and the University administration.

## ***2. Materials and Methods***

The study was limited to students of Moi University. A sample of 100 students with 50 males and 50 females was selected using snow ball sampling. The sample was also stratified into gender and schools of study. A questionnaire was administered to the 50 male and 50 female students. The questionnaire sought information about the level of knowledge of dialogue as a means of resolving conflicts. Interview was conducted on twenty (20) students and focused group discussion (FGD) was held with groups of between 8 to twelve members. The main objective was to determine factors that hindered dialogue between students and the University administration.

## ***3. Results and Discussions***

Eighty two (82) questionnaires were returned by 42 male and 40 female. The results discussed are based on the responses from these questionnaires, interviews and focused group discussion (FGD). The age of respondents ranged from 20 to 45 years of age.

### **3.1 Causes of Combative Approach**

#### **3.1.1 Lack of Awareness**

When asked if they were aware of dialogue as a method of negotiation, sixty (60%) percent of respondents agreed, 30% did not agree, 5% did not know and 5% were undecided. They stated that when they joined university, they were inducted by the senior students that university administration only understands language of riots. From the responses, younger people thought that the university administration was high handed and must be forced to do things rather than hold dialogue.

When asked if the university management allows dialogue to resolve issues, twenty two (22%) said that authority is authority so you cannot have a voice even when one has a valid opinion. Findings are shown in Table 1.

### **3.1.2 Mob Psychology**

When asked as to why they behave riotously, fifty four (54%) percent of students agreed that they it is due to mob psychology, 20% said they do not agree, 6% do not know. Twenty (20%) percent said it is fun. When students are governed by mob psychology, they are not guided by conventional norms nor rational behaviour. This is because a crowd gives liberty to individuals make any utterances which may not be said under normal circumstances. Twenty two (22%) percent said that at times they listened to a “comrade’s” suggestions and implement what they had been told. “At times one student may make utterances jokingly or for fun, for example, ‘let’s go and burn the library’ which is taken seriously. In no time someone goes looking for petrol and matches to carry out the command”. When students are in a crowd they feel they are lost in there and nobody can take responsibility. Students assume they are powerful because they are working as a group and therefore as individuals they are invisible. Students prefer such situations rather than dialogue. From the responses, it is evident that mob psychology contributes greatly to lack of dialogue as shown in table1.

### **3.1.3 Peer Pressure**

When asked if they were affected by peer pressure, seventy five (72%) percent agreed and were of the opinion that they wish to belong and therefore did not want to be the odd ones out, while twenty percent (20%) did not agree. They stated that peer pressure was not an influence and 5% did not know while 3% were not sure if it was peer pressure that made them behave in that manner and 3% did not respond. For those who did not agree, they said at times they were attacked and threatened if they did not participate so they were forced into it.

### **3.1.4 Delayed Response**

In response as to whether delayed responses contributes to combative approach to resolving conflicts, (80%) agreed that it did while fifteen (15%) percent did not agree and only five (5%) percent did not know. This was attributed to the underdog relationship whereby the university administration ignored information they had received through intelligence reports or even some informers with a hope of just wishing it away or treating the problem as a non-issue. Jambo (2011) suggests that managing “Generation Y” may be fruitful if you seek dialogue with them so that they learn.

### **3.1.5 Fear of Dialogue**

In response as to whether they feared dialogue, sixty (60%) percent agreed and felt they would be victimized if they requested to have dialogue, while 8% did not agree. Twenty (20%) percent did not know stated that they lacked skills to dialogue and so could not present their issues adequately while 12% were undecided.

From an FGD, this was the response:-“the University is the authority so regardless of how you put your case, administration will never listen because it is like they have fixed ideas and are not open to suggestions nor our point of view”. It was argued that those who participated in the dialogue were either blacklisted or they were “bought” by the administration and therefore did not articulate students’ issues adequately.

### **3.1.6 Lack of Dialogue**

Forty eight (48%) of respondents agreed that the university administration did not provide any forum for dialogue, while forty (40%) percent did not agree and six (6%) do not know and another six (6%) were undecided (Figure 6). The respondents argued that the university administration expected students to do as they were told. “Our opinion is never taken into account so why bother?” Students being “generation Y” saw the world differently and this was a source of conflict. According to Jambo (2011), Dr. Mwangi, CEO Equity Bank, posits that leaders should connect with youth for them to see their leaders’ point of view and value in order to connect. There is, therefore, need to engage our youth in dialogue in order to appreciate their point of view to alleviate problems and riots in tertiary institutions.

### **3.1.7 Not Dedicated to Duty**

When asked if staff were not dedicated to duty, thirty eight (38%) agreed while fifty six (56%) did not agree. They stated that the staff were committed except a few who did not listen, did not perform and when they complained, they were told the staff were on the payroll regardless of whether they taught or not, while only 3% said they did not and another three (3%) were undecided.

It was further argued that some lecturers did not turn up for lectures or came late and were not prepared for the lesson. Students feared complaining as in such cases they were “failed”, fears that need to be investigated. They also stated that lecturers re-schedule classes due to their own interests and this disorganized students’ plans. This was a source of disharmony since some students felt helpless and less important.

### **3.1.8 Insensitivity of Administration**

When asked if university administration was insensitive, sixty eight (68%) percent agreed and felt that the university administration was insensitive to their needs and did not care what happened while 25% felt it was sensitive to their needs. Seven (7%) said they did not know. They stated that some issues had been discussed over time with various promises being made yet nothing had been implemented after the discussion. This was attributed mostly to issues of lack of accommodation and lack of lecture halls and furniture. From the study it was apparent that students lacked information on the sources of funding for capital development. With the structural adjustment programmes, the World Bank reduced funding to institutions which led to stalled buildings (World Bank, 2006). Since this information had not been communicated to students, they were not aware of the situation and assumed the management was insensitive, yet these were issues beyond their control.

These were some of the responses during the FGD. “University management thinks we should live like rats.” “Why fight a rock which cannot move?” “It is pointless. They would not listen.”

### **Dialogue between Students and University Administration**

Respondents stated that they required freedom in the mode of dressing especially the \*\*\*“Tumbo Cuts” and dignity to be seen as individuals with own minds. They did not understand why the university administration was not modern and trendy and expected them to adopt dressing of two decades ago which does not fit in the current generation. This was attributed to the mode of dressing which at times was not appropriate. To them, freedom meant dressing scantily even when going for lectures as long as they were comfortable in that attire that is in vogue.

When asked if dialogue between students and management is promoted, twenty two (22%) agreed while seventy (70%) percent did not agree stating that both sides should be willing to listen and that there should be goodwill from both sides. They stated further that management is always domineering and there is no way students can be listened to. Eight percent (8%) stated that they had no opinion.

### **3.1.9 External Interference**

Students stated that influential personalities incited students against the university administration due to personal/tribal differences with a view to gaining political mileage during election campaigns. They claimed that such differences may arise due to non-consideration during recruitment of staff and lack of political support. This is in spite of the fact that educational procedures are professional in nature and require strict professional approach (MOEST, 2001). This has fueled conflict among competing candidates hence polarizing the student community (Mullaeh 2007). Politicians misuse the youth to influence voting outcomes, acts that lead to election malpractice and yet youth are paid peanuts or even alcohol and food as payment (BBC News, 2008). From the FGD, respondents stated that they were aware of sponsorship by politicians due to the ideologies propagated, expensive and colourful banners they made, and the amount of money that some students had during students’ elections seventy two percent (72%) while 10% felt that the campaign materials were provided by the university administration as their projects. Six percent (6%) said there is no external interference and twelve percent (12%) said they do not know.

## **4. Conclusion**

Majority of students were not aware that dialogue is one of the methods to resolve conflicts. Negative attitude had developed among students due to information that was normally inducted to them by senior students when they joined university as first years. The interviews also provided evidence that students have combative approach for various reasons. For some it was fun, while others had a false perception that one is never a university student unless he/she unleashes some form of violence like throwing stones. For others, it was a tradition of principal/student relationship where the students have to do as they are told and not what they perceive to be correct or acceptable. This created tension which they released through violence.

Ladies feared to talk due to, partly, cultural influences whereby women have no say on some matters, although their experiences were as immense as those of the male students.

Education helps shape attitudes, behavior and social structures, but could also be an underlying source of conflict (Tschirgi, 2011). Education is a space for nurturing cultures of peace or cultures of war. Similarly, it can also serve as a powerful instrument of peace building. There are many examples whereby the education sector has played a critical role in promoting peace by, for example, addressing inequalities, overcoming prejudices and fostering new values and institutions. Yet, beyond education's direct contributions to peace building, there is a compelling need to incorporate conflict sensitivity into the design and implementation of education programmes and projects in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

In practice, peace education is problem-solving education that attempts to build in every person the universal values and behaviors on which a culture of peace is predicated, including the development of non-violent conflict resolution skills and a commitment to working together to realize a shared and preferred future.

In conclusion, peace education as a practice aims to confront and resist violence to transform societies toward cultures of peace. Peace education addresses the knowledge, values, skills and behaviors needed to nurture a peace culture. The pedagogy used in peace education is cooperative, participatory and active, including case-studies, storytelling, role-plays, empathy activities, negotiation and mediation practice, journaling, reflection circles, and alternative futures exercises. The learning objective of peace education aims to transform conflict through dialogue and nonviolence, and particularly where peace education affects youth conflict is transformed across generations.

## **5. Recommendations**

From the research conducted, the recommendations derived include:-

1. Mainstream peace education and conflict resolution in curricular.
2. Inspire loyalty and commitment through debates for and against peace building.
3. Organize panels to allow for open discussion.
4. Organize Round tables for peace building.
5. Devise strategies to instill a culture of dialogue among students by involving police and local community in their discussion and in resolving their conflicts for a healthy co-existence.
6. Provide adequate communication from university administration and academic staff to students and also from Students Governing Council to students.

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**Table 1: Causes of Combative Approach to Resolving Problems**

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>AGREE (%)</b>	<b>DON'T AGREE (%)</b>	<b>DON'T KNOW (%)</b>	<b>UNDECIDED</b>
Lack of awareness	60	30	5	5
Mob Psychology	54	30	6	9
Peer Pressure	72	20	5	3
Delayed Response	80	15	5	
Fear of Dialogue	60	8	20	12
Lack of Dialogue	48	40	6	6
Dedication to Duty	38	56	3	3
Insensitivity of administration	68	27	5	
If dialogue is promoted between administration and students	22	70	8	
External Interference	72	10	6	

\*\* Tumbo Cut – slang for wear of low cut top (blouse), which exposes the tummy