

Rethinking Workplace Conflict Management in the Kenyan School Context: A Qualitative Study of Women Principals

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ABSTRACT: This study sought to explore how women principals utilised communication strategies to manage workplace conflicts at secondary school level Migori County, Kenya. The study was prompted by the fact that despite several conflicts experienced in secondary schools in Kenya, very minimal research has been conducted to investigate potential causes of unrests in schools related to inappropriate communication by school principals. The study focused on women principals because it is normally assumed that women have better communication strategies and that their schools experience less conflicts. However, a review of relevant literature shows this issue has not been established through research, especially, in the Kenyan context. The specific research questions were: 1. what communication strategies are utilised by women principals to manage workplace conflicts 2. How do the women principals utilize these strategies? This study was informed by relativist-interpretivist paradigm which is consistent with the qualitative approach and case study method, which were adopted. Forty research participants who were sampled purposively to take part in the study included women principals, the deputy principals, HoDs, Guidance and counselling leaders, the senior teachers as well as prefects from the study schools. Semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions and document analysis were used to generate data which were analysed thematically. All relevant ethical issues were addressed. Findings indicate that the women leaders have developed unique approaches of communication in managing workplace conflicts depending on their leadership predispositions as well as situations of conflict as follows: 1. Dialogic coaching collaborative communication 2. Nurturing counselling communication 3. Mongrel masculine-feminine communication 4. Machiavellian monologic competitive communication. In conclusion, the women principals, who were participants in this study, have shared their unique experiences and their actual practices on utilisation of communication strategies in managing workplace conflicts through research. Hence, this study has contributed to the body of knowledge in gender and communication literature while explicating the role of communication in workplace conflicts at grass root level.

KEYWORDS: Workplace Conflicts Management, Communication Strategies, Mongrel communication, Machiavellian communication

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conflict is understood in this study as disagreements due to inconsistency or incompatibility in relationships because the desire for a similar resource may be in short supply; or when people have selective behavioural preferences regarding their joint action; or when they have different needs, interests, attitudes, values, beliefs and skills (Rahim, 2017). Thus, workplace conflict is that interactive process that reveals itself in a place where people spend time for paid employment, such as school, based on disagreements because of incompatible ideas, principles, interests or needs (Mullins, 2010). Additionally, in this study, conflict management is understood as a communicative process of “handling grievances” by first understanding the type and the cause [nature] of conflict with a view to addressing the problem, preventing it from spreading and from becoming dysfunctional to the point of wasting resources (Rahim, 2017).

The study is founded on the premise that workplace conflicts, arising from interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts are becoming more prevalent in educational institutions with schools taking center stage (Msila, 2013). In Kenya, with the emergent innovations and changes in the constitution as well as the education sector, stakeholders are aware of their rights, thus, advocate for voice and fairness in handling of grievances (Msila, 2012). Therefore, there is need for school leaders, who are also mediators, to gain skills and competencies in identifying conflict cultures, take conflict audits and become conflict management coaches and leaders in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). However, scholars have noted that most school principals,

especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, rely on their intuition to calm disagreements while at the same time fail to employ interpersonal skills to avoid chaos in schools (Msila, 2012).

Critical to this study is the concern that most educational institutions lack strategies and processes as well as formal training on communication and conflict management. Hence, due to inadequate strategies, most institutions resolve workplace conflicts casually. This is a view that is echoed by Blundel, Ippolito and Donnarumma, (2013:2) when they say that most workplace disagreements are handled superficially as most organizations resort to quick fixes, hence, causing a 'fight' [using force] or 'flight' [avoiding the problem] which ends up interfering with the achievement of organizational goals. Yet, responding to issues using a quick fix means is a 'symptom concealment strategy' while the use of coercion and manipulation to prevent conflict from erupting is a short term means that is unsustainable (Bickmore, 1997:14).

Besides, the manner in which conflicts are handled in an organization will determine the productivity of individuals in that organization (Mayer, 2015). The premise is that poorly managed conflicts in the workplaces fuel the level and frequency of conflicts while damaging the image of an organization. Additionally, unmanaged conflicts may affect staff learning and performance; bruise the school culture, hurt relationships and sometimes cause high staff turnover (Blaydes, 2004; Brock & Grady, 2009 in Hener, 2010).

In contrast, this study explicates that developing a culture of peace and democracy in the school environment will require an open communication approach in managing conflicts. This is a view that is supported by Bickmore, (1997:14) while adding that "many important opportunities for long-term conflict management learning exist, not when people are hurt and angry (whether in wars or schoolyard scuffles), but in the everyday process of learning and living" in a school community. This explains why many scholars advocate for school leaders to institute strategies and processes of professional learning in their schools because that will assist them to manage tensions, handle a crisis, harmonize misunderstandings and deal with difficult conversations in the school community (Hener, 2010; Saeed et al 2014).

Additionally, in order to influence successful interactions, organizational leaders need in-house effective and sustainable workplace conflict management policies and processes that will assist in understanding people's beliefs, attitudes and perceptions. This is congruent to what Keltner (1987: in Grunig & Grunig, 1992) calls "managing struggles by rules (p.6)." Hence, it is important to manage conflicts because if effectively managed, conflicts have had a positive impact on the lives of people in many parts of the world. Today, functional conflict is viewed as an impetus that can help an organisation to find new solutions while giving people the opportunity to listen to and exchange different transformational views, hence, a learning organisation (Mitchel & Gamlem, 2015).

Research in communication has shown that managing conflicts require creative, diverse, inventive and often innovative communication practices that will build a culture of dialogue rather than violence (Blundel, Ippolito & Donnarumma, 2013). The reason being, that flexible and adequate forms of action create open and effective communication that necessitate interactions and respect of opinion between conflicting parties (Spaho, 2013).

Moreover, school leaders who embrace effective socio-communication skills as well as emotional intelligence such as their capacity to motivate, influence, empathize, develop relationships, being honest and sensitive to provide feedback, observer of functional and dysfunctional behaviours will have satisfied stakeholders, motivated staff with reduced tensions (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011). This is not different from Levine (2009), who argues that active listening forms the basic communication practice needed in conflict management. Additionally, effective communication requires one to address real concerns and get to the core of conflict by talking less and asking questions for clarity (ibid.). Furthermore, understanding verbal and non-verbal communication contributes towards successful conflict management. Hence, the conclusion that those leaders who keep their communication channels open benefit more from greater chances of understanding people's beliefs, values, needs for self-esteem as well as their interests and affiliations. Furthermore, increased understanding poses chances of greater conflict management and open negotiations (Spaho, 2013).

Successful conflict management will require effective communication strategies in the workplace. Mitchel and Gamlem, (2015) agree while adding that most workplace tensions and disagreements are as a result of poor and ineffective communication strategies which results in missed deadlines, missed opportunities and misunderstandings, boycotts, industrial actions or even resistance to change. However, effective communication can provide a means through which disagreements or differences are expressed and resolved. Therefore, to prevent dysfunctional conflicts, this study proposes that school leaders should learn to communicate conflict management constructively as it can contribute to stronger and deeper relationships. The premise, as put forward by Jiang and Buzzanell (2013), is that functional conflict can help address or bring about new changes in an organisation. Accordingly, effective interpersonal communication skills play a pivotal role in successful conflict management in the workplace (Mayer, 2015).

This study was prompted by the fact that despite several conflicts experienced in secondary schools in Kenya, very minimal research has been conducted to investigate potential causes of unrests in schools such as

inappropriate communication by school principals. Further, the study focused on female principals because it is normally assumed that women have better communication strategies and that their schools experience less conflicts. However, a review of relevant literature shows that this issue has not been established through research, especially in the Kenyan school context. Thus, the study purposed to explicitly empirically explore the utilization of communication strategies by women leaders in managing workplace conflicts with a view to ascertaining the actual practices by women leaders. Therefore, the study sought to contribute to this knowledge gap at public secondary school level in the Kenya context as discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

II. THE KENYAN CONTEXT

School leadership preparedness for conflict management in the Kenyan secondary school context has been under scrutiny (Republic of Kenya, 2008). Attention is drawn to unparalleled conflicts, loss of lives and extended history of violence together with excessive destruction of property-all on the heels of communication breakdown. For instance, between the year 1980 and 2008, the number of conflicts had increased from 22(0.9%) to 300(7.5%) in public secondary schools alone (Republic of Kenya, 2008). Specific cases are as follows: In the early 1990s, in Kenya, about 19 girls lost their lives when male students of a co-educational school raided girls' dormitory and raped over 70 girls. That was followed closely by the 1995 incident in which four prefects were locked up in their cubicles and burnt to death. Worst was in 2001 when 68 students were burnt to death injuring a number after their dormitory was set ablaze by two boys. It was again in 2006 when, in a mixed-school, 15 girls were raped in the night (Institute for Security Studies, Republic of Kenya, 2008). Still, between the month of May and August 2008, over 300 secondary schools went on strike destroying property worth millions of shillings (Republic of Kenya, 2008).

Between the year 2008 to date there are scores of strikes which have been witnessed in secondary schools in different parts of the country. Begging the question that: can grievances be handled with a view to preventing the conflicts from causing destructions of property and human life? The concern is more on the changing nature and increased number of organisational conflicts that have affected secondary schools as well as institutions of higher learning (Republic of Kenya, 2001). The major cause of unrest is blamed on high handedness together with closed communication channels on the part of educational managers (Kibui, Bradshaw & Kibera, 2014).

Following various waves of unrests in secondary schools as aforementioned, the government of Kenya decided to hold reactionary talks with stakeholders hence, the formation of Center for Conflict Resolution in Secondary Schools (CCROSS). The purpose of this centre was to work with school administrators so as to come up with effective conflict resolution strategies in Kenyan schools. Following the formation of CCROSS, various strategies were formed such as: teacher involvement in management of schools; open day for parents and parental involvement through BoM and PTA; formation of student councils, peace keeping programmes; suspension of ill-disciplined students among others. Even so, the aforesaid techniques have been employed with minimal success as educational institutions in Kenya have continued to report increased cases of conflicts (Republic of Kenya, 2008). Furthermore, teachers, students and parents still complain of being ignored and sometimes suppressed by the school authority with threats of suspension or even expulsion - making it possible for more cases of unrest (Kibui, Bradshaw & Kibera, 2014).

The foregoing implications underscore the challenging responsibility of a school leader in steering leadership and giving direction to their staff with a view to ensuring that there is tolerance among members of the school community, hence, the 'smooth' running of the school. However, tolerance can only be realized if the principal prioritizes effective communication strategies because failure to manage conflicts arising from poor working relationship amongst teachers, students and board members may greatly affect school performance (Omboko, 2010). Furthermore, unmanaged interpersonal conflicts may make one feel defeated and stressed and this may result in low self-esteem as well as intolerance. This is a view supported by Msila (2012) that prolonged interpersonal conflicts may result in deterioration of cooperation and team work which may reduce the strengths of personnel. Additionally, unmanaged conflicts may result in misuse of resources for lack of collegiality and integration among teachers, and by extension, the school community, which may ultimately spill over to the students (ibid.). Thus, as Omboko (2010) had earlier observed, conflicts not only threaten school functions, but may trigger a chain of other educational and social problems which include among others: abuse of office, disagreements, quarrels, hostility and violent fights, hence, poor leadership and management. Therefore, effective communication in the management of workplace conflicts is probably one of the most sought after skills by school managers (Msila, 2012). In addition, it is expected that principals vary their communication strategies so as to fit different situations of conflict. Moreover, an organization such as school need to appreciate the differences in communication style of both men and women, especially in conflict management, than to assume that women and men communicate in specific ways. Ahmad and Rethinam (2010) add that it is better to train the workforce on communication practices that suit particular situations with the aim

of helping people in understanding preferences and needs of communication instead of understanding communication practices from a stereotypical or essentialist view point.

This study proposes the need to desist from dichotomy thinking of gender differences in communication styles and instead, embrace the fact that, depending on circumstances, men and women have the capacity to “reaffirm, negotiate with, and challenge the parameters of permissible or socially sanctioned behaviour” (Mills, 2003:169). It is therefore hoped that by exploring different ways in which women principals communicate conflict management, the study will highlight some unique ways of communication that the women principals, who have participated in this study, have developed overtime in order to manage conflicts.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study embraced a relativist-interpretivist paradigm which is consistent with the qualitative approach and case study method. This paradigm was thought to be suitable for this study because the researchers needed to explore the women principals’ experiences in utilising communication strategies to manage workplace conflicts from an insider’s perspective. Hence, forty research participants were sampled purposively to take part in the study included women principals, the deputy principals, HoDs, Guidance and counselling leaders, the senior teachers as well as prefects from the study schools. Semi- structured interviews, focused group discussions and document analysis were used to generate data based on multiple realities (Mason, 2002), which were analysed thematically. All relevant ethical issues were addressed. Furthermore, the researcher visited the selected secondary schools headed by women principals in Migori County in person. The purpose of the visit was to talk to and listen to the participants as they recounted of their experiences and this helped in gaining an in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, the study adopted a case-study method. The purpose for choice of method was that case study provided information about ‘how’ and ‘why’ women principals utilised communication strategies in managing workplace conflicts the way they did in real life contexts (Yin, 2003).

This study also adopted purposive sampling technique. Punch (2005:187) describes this type of sampling as a “...a deliberate way, with some purposes or focus in mind.” Purposive sampling was the most appropriate for this study because the researcher needed to handpick the cases on the basis of their possession of certain characteristics that were relevant to the study (Mason, 2002). Furthermore, the researcher needed to gain access to participants that had specific knowledge based on their roles as well as their experiences in utilization of communication strategies in managing workplace conflicts (Klenke, 2016). However, as Creswell (2014) says, qualitative research purpose to understand a phenomenon from subjective reality of the participants. Hence, it was not possible to understand the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a phenomenon through large representative sample. Rather, as Creswell says, the study needed to reach people within the study area who had unique slices of reality that would help answer the research questions. Therefore, the sample size was small because the researcher purposed to conduct intensive interviews as well as focus group discussions.

To obtain information-rich sites for the study, the researcher identified the schools in Migori County through the office of the Ministry of Education as well as the Teachers Service Commission County Director’s office during a visit in the month of January, 2014. The purpose was to find out the secondary schools managed by female principals as well as those that had experienced unrest or otherwise. It became apparent that there were 50 schools managed by women principals in Migori County, Kenya. However, to obtain information rich research sites that would inform the study, the researcher reduced the number of schools from 50 to 10 schools. As the study progressed, new categories emerged that led the researcher to sample specific locale as well as particular dimensions in accordance with the purpose of the study (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973; Glaser, 1978 in Klenke, 2016). Following a pilot study in which the categories that emerged from the 10 schools formed the basis for spanning over four sub counties, specifically: Suna West, Suna East, Kuria West and Nyatike sub counties to identify the schools. Hence, schools were purposively selected from each sub-county. The reason for this selection was because it was believed that various sub-counties may have experienced conflicts differently while the ways in which the women leaders utilized communication strategies may have been determined by the region to the extent of informing this study.

Furthermore, tribes found within Migori County such as Kuria, Luo and Suba as were thought to be another important category to consider in selecting the study schools. This was to facilitate the understanding of women leaders’ ways of utilisation of communication strategies to manage workplace conflicts as well as the challenges experienced based on different sub-counties and with different tribes. Furthermore, another category that was considered was whether the school was situated in the urban areas or in the rural areas as this factor had development implications that would inform the study in terms of whether a school is well resourced or minimally resourced. This was because it was thought that the abundance of resources or lack of it would influence the nature of conflicts to the extent of informing this study. The sampling was further based on three categories: first, successful or unsuccessful schools were identified on the basis that conflict management or lack of it may have contributed to their success or failure in terms of performance. Second, 2-4 streamed schools

were identified because it was believed that a school of a very small population may not have engaged with conflict to the extent that it would inform this study. Third, some schools were chosen depending on their type, that is, single- sex or mixed school. Further, the schools were grouped under national, extra-county, county and sub-county schools. Finally, through informal conversations with the teachers of those schools, the researcher reduced the number of schools to four as: two single- sex schools and two co-educational or mixed schools. Two schools were thought to be technologically equipped, one being averagely equipped while another being technologically malnourished. Hence, in line with the contextual characteristics mentioned, four schools were purposively chosen for the study. According to Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), a researcher may choose to study cases with similar and sometimes different characteristics, for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the issue under study. This is a view supported scholars when they mention that the general rule of qualitative research is that researchers need to continue sampling until they no longer gain new insights (Richards, 2003; Creswell, 2014). Hence, in the 4 schools that were purposively chosen for the study as school A, B, C and D (pseudonyms)., the participants that were selected to participate in the study included 4 women principals, 4 deputy principals, 4 HoDs guidance and counselling, 4 senior teachers from the four schools and 24 school prefects - six from each school - giving a total of 40 research participants.

This study highlights participants' profile in order to explicate their roles and how they are referred to in this study through pseudonyms in order to increase confidentiality as is required of a qualitative study. The four principals that were chosen for the study included: Jessica, Naomi, Jackline and Nicole [pseudonyms]. Other research participants included four (4) deputies from each school as DP 1; DP 2; DP 3 and DP 4. Additionally, four (4) senior teachers one from each school as SNR 1; SNR 2; SNR 3 and SNR 4 participated in the study respectively. The study also involved four (4) guidance and counselling HoD as follows; GC1; GC2; GC3 and GC4. Finally, the study involved 24 school prefects in which six (6) were picked from different levels in each school to participate in the focus group discussions as FG 1; FG2; FG3 and FG4.

IV. FINDINGS

Findings of this study were based on the communication strategies utilised by women principals to manage workplace conflicts in school context; which will be discussed as sub-themes in the ensuing sub-sections.

Coaching Technique

Based on discussions held with various participants in this study, it emerged that coaching approach through dialogue and modeling of behaviour was one of the ways of utilizing communication strategies to manage workplace conflicts. The premise, according to one of the school leaders interviewed was that:

Where people live together and interact, there is bound to be divergent opinions... the perfect way of solving conflict in my opinion might be sit them together and to learn to listen to both parties... Many times I don't do it alone, I find another person so that the person can also see that the problem has been seen by another person...so together we see on a possible way to solve the issue without creating enmity between them (Principal, School A).

While on a focus group discussion with some of the prefects at school A, one of participant said:

Our principal has always told us that whenever there is a disagreement we must learn to sit the students together and discuss so on my side I try and explain to them what responsibility means, I tell them that they must learn to accept other people's opinion and to learn to listen... and learning entails many things even outside class (, FG 1, participant 6, School A).

Based on Jessica's sentiments, the implication is that probably the reason for face to face meetings as conducted in school A was to enable the conflicting parties to share their concerns with a view to solving the problem. Grunig and Grunig(1992) calls this a two-way symmetrical model where dialogue is embraced to enable the conflicting parties exchange information. Further, in this study the school leader made informed decisions based on her experience as well as her studies on personality when she mentioned:

... what teaches best is experience. There is also that personal character, knowing how to work with people, and then learning about people as they learn from you... you as a person must really be able to learn your people, to know what kind of people they are and their character and then to know how to talk to them and mentor correct behaviour. There is also reading, I like to read books about personality and in fact I am reading one about mentorship skills and it is about personality (Principal, school A).

While in a discussion with SNR 1, he concurred that the principal had mentored them in managing conflicts through dialogue and this was based on how she herself handled conflicts. Baxter (2012) has referred to coaching approach as the use of soft power. The author explains that the role of the leader is to discover a unifying factor among the competing values. Approaching conflicts through coaching discourages competition in conflict management while encouraging meaningful interactions. The idea is that coaching facilitates the need to compromise and collaborate in order to resolve conflicts because communication facilitates "...the discovery

of united-yet-competing values” and the unearthing of a connection between conflicting parties (Broom and Collier, 2012: 245).

Following discussions held with various participants in this study it also became apparent that dialogue was another form of strategy utilized to manage workplace conflicts during conflicts. The purpose of dialogue, and as Grunig and Grunig (1992) say, was to exchange information with those in conflict in order to reach an agreement. Furthermore, dialogue was conducted with an informed decision based on the school leaders’ ethical values as well as the requirement of public procurement act as witnessed in school C. Jackline vividly explained that:

When the political class approached us and promised that they would do everything and at the end of it give us the key, I believed them...however, shortly, they started bringing in the materials and started putting up a foundation with mad which we did not agree with and even requesting for a 700,000 cheque which I did not do so the political class incited the villagers against me...who now saw me as an enemy to development but you see there was no way I was going to sign a cheque without participating in the construction and also for accountability and there was no way mad would be used. I stood firm but ended up with conflict (Principal, school C)

Based on the discussions above, the researcher sought clarification from DP 3 who mentioned that the initial meetings held did not yield much because there were disagreements based on the materials to be used for constructing the laboratory. While in a discussion with the SNR 3 she added that through dialogue and with the intervention of the pastor and sponsors of the school, the community stopped interfering with school matters and were asked to give the principal a chance to negotiate with the political class on her own. From this discussion it is evident that Jackline’s aim of communication was to coach the political class and the community on ethical leadership. However I also sought further clarification on the reasons for her decisions as well as that of the political class when she mentioned:

I could say it is about disunity on core values and also lack of harmony from both parties that caused the conflict because they simply saw me as woman and not the principal. The MP thought a woman would be easy to manipulate. Well I used the core values that govern me (Principal, school C).

According to the GC 3 interviewed, her take was that:

the principal did the right thing because if she had yielded to the political class’demand the school would have remained at the mercy of politicians and they would manipulate and blackmail the principal to serve their interests any time they felt like(Guidance and Counseling, school C)

From these discussions, it can be concluded that Jackline’s way of communication in conflict management facilitated mutual trust and understanding. This made it possible for shared values and aspirations through integrative communication as well as dialogue.

Another interview with Jackline indicated that her communication practice took nurturing approach and this she did through meetings as mentioned previously. The purpose, as Grunig and Grunig (1992) say, was to influence those in conflict to take a stand that seemed beneficial to those in conflict as well as that of the organization. A case in point was when she managed a social conflict between a teacher and his spouse which was interfering with the accomplishment of school goals. Jackline recounted:

... I had this male teacher who was as a drunkard. I had met him before as a colleague in another school... was not a drunkard ... was always smartly dressed in a suit...however this time he had been posted in this school having been rejected in other schools because of his drunkenness.

Based on a discussion with the DP 3, he confirmed that drunkenness was another source of conflict when he mentioned that “the teacher began to miss classes and students and the community were up in arms for his transfer”.

In another interview Jackline revealed her ways of utilizing communication strategies to manage aforementioned conflict when she said:

I first talked to him and told him that I had always known him to be a very responsible and neat person. I shared with him a lot then he opened up and told me the problem of his heavy drinking started with his wife. So I brought the wife onboard and talked to her. I decided to give her some tender for bringing milk to school...so we became friends. She became cooperative even at home and the drinking of the teacher started slowly to go down then he became committed and the problem was less...now hes a very good teacher(Principal, school C).

Further discussion with the principal revealed that her experience as a widow informed her decision to manage conflicts the way she did when she said:

I looked at him and saw beyond him...his family... his wife and children would continue to suffer...again My being a widow also makes me very patient...I know what it means to lack when you are the only breadwinner with no support so I told the teachers wife all that and she understood (Principal, school C).

In another discussion I wanted to know if being female influenced the woman leaders’ decisions when one woman leader said: “Well as I have said the principal uses her Christian values and sometimes I think core

values too but also relying on the BOM policy and woman instinct''(DP 2). In another interview the principals mentioned:

This school is like my home and I am like their mother and the judgment I make I do it like a mother. This is because I want to facilitate peace between both parties and enhancing good relation and harmony between the community and the school, teachers and students and even between teachers and teachers (.Principal, school B).

The aforementioned is constant to Netshitangani and Msila's (2016) view that some women leaders tend to draw from their domestic experiences and roles as mothers while involving personal feelings to solve workplace disagreements. Netshitangani's (2014) study on socialization and communication of women school managers confirms that mostly women leaders tend to view workplaces like school as their homes- similar to the views of the principal at school B and C. While other studies contend what I refer to in this study as the 'nurturing technique' as a weakness in leadership with a view that women leaders should desist from it, in this study, the 'mothering technique' was a unique value that assisted the woman leader to manage workplace conflicts successfully. This is a view that is supported by Grunig and Grunig's (1992) that most female attributes like collaboration are vital skills in managing conflicts.

Counseling Technique

Another interview with Jessica indicated that her communication practice took a counseling approach and this she did through meetings as aforesaid. The purpose, as Grunig and Grunig (1992) say, was to influence those in conflict to see things differently, concede and change behaviour that would be beneficial to the individual as well as the organization. This was evident while in an interview where she recounted:

I had the power to dismiss the worker who had closed the valves and made the whole school suffer but I had a look at this man, he has three wives and the last(sic) wife is still very young and several kids. So I saw the need not to send him away because of those facts. I just advised him in a friendly manner to reflect on his family before he does anything. He eventually apologized

The aforesaid provoked the researcher to make clarifications as to what prompted the principal to reconsider dismissing the non-teacher staff when she mentioned:

Even when there is professionalism... remember that you are working with human beings who have attitude but now when this attitude hurts them as an employer there is a way you should rise above that and see how you can bring this person over to see differently because this person is not seeing beyond you like there is a family and a child to defend so only gets rid of such a person when it only becomes impossible...there is management and also counseling...(Principal, School A).

A talk with DP 1 reveals that counseling is a form of communication practice during conflict when she mentioned that:

For example maybe disagreements arise coz(sic) teachers not coming to the assembly, some are not reporting to work in good time and some are not meeting deadlines for their own reasons. In these cases the principal and her team talks to teachers at individual levels, so they are called and we sit down as teachers and share at individual level and sometimes as a staff (Senior Teacher, School A).

In another interview with Naomi it became apparent that her communication practice depended on a conflicting situation hence other than her masculine approach, she also applied femininity for the purpose, as Grunig and Grunig (1992) say, was to influence those in conflict to change their attitude in a manner that would benefit those in conflict as well as that of the organization. Her feminine qualities of mothering were evident in her actions. For instance when recounted

I decided to help the teacher who was a drunkard...I could go looking for him where he is (sic) drinking...sometimes he disappears for even a month. I could go and pick the teacher from the drinking place myself. I go with other male teachers and security men in the vehicle in case anything happens then there is a time I took him in for two days, he had stolen something from the school...It took time almost a year...at the end of the day and I thank God that today the teacher is saved and has stopped drinking (Principal, school B).

In another interview with DP2 findings reveal that while at other times the principal portrayed masculine qualities, it also became apparent that at other times she embraced her feminine characteristics of being empathetic counsellor and nurturing. This explains her reason to want to help the teacher at school B to overcome drunkenness. As home makers and caregivers, some scholars contend that women pose such attributes like nurturing, caring, being sensitive, empathetic counsellors and cooperative which makes women effective transformational leaders Morojele Chikoko and Ngcobo, 2013). Hence, as the authors have advised, women principals should desist from copying male dictatorship and continue with positive attributes of being collaborative, understanding and emotionally connected in order to achieve organizational goals. Furthermore, as it is the contention in this study, women should embrace the view that men and women possess unique communication styles especially when faced with difficult conversations and tensions.

According to Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) counselling is an effective communication tool in conflict management especially where those involved in interpersonal conflicts are affected in terms of their work and productivity. Furthermore, counselling is an effective communication strategy in conflict management because it allows those in conflict to understand the issues at hand and objectively develop different viewpoints regarding the issue at hand like it was witnessed in school A (Exforsys, 2009).

Collaborating Technique

Based on discussion held with various participants in this study, it emerged that Jackline embraced collaboration through meetings as mentioned previously. The purpose, as Grunig and Grunig (1992) say, was to influence those in conflict to agree on a give and take scenario that seemed beneficial to those in conflict as well as that of the organization. A case in point was when Jackline said:

...Where people live together and interact, there is bound to be divergent opinions. So the perfect way of solving conflicts ... might be to learn to listen to both parties and see on a possible way to solve the issue without creating enmity between them let them learn to give and also take.

A discussion with SNR reveals that, "When we had disagreement with students on time as per government directives we had to invite a mediator...so the education officers came here and explained to them, the BoM were involved, parents associations were equally involved..."

According to DP 1 the reason why the problem was resolved due to dialogue because:

... we had to have a common understanding...for example the students understood that we allowed them that anyone who is(sic) willing to extend can do that, if you are willing to wake up at the time that you want then you are free to do that....so as we speak students are waking up around five or four thirty and sometimes we come to teach them (Deputy Principal, school A).

Krauss and Morsella (2015) contend that collaborating through dialogue is a powerful communication tool in the management of conflicts because it allows one to gather information before making a decision that is mutually beneficial in addressing the concerns of conflicting parties. Isenhardt and Spangle (2000) further agree that in collaboration there is high degree of concern for self and others with a view to establishing a working relationship. Hence, the end of conflict signifies satisfied members of an organization with a sustainable problem solving approach. Viewed as the best strategy, collaboration requires that feelings, beliefs and ideas are openly and honestly discussed with an active listening or apathy listening as employed by Jessica (Hannon, 1999). However, strategies or styles employed in communicating conflict management will very much depend on situations. Hence, it is not expected that organizational leaders will employ the same style in every situation.

The researcher sought to explore Jackline's communication practice in managing structural conflict aforementioned. Following another interview with Jackline, it became apparent that by comprising Jackline's purposed to collaborate with the political class to fulfill the goal of constructing a laboratory for the school. According to Grunig and Grunig (1992) compromising and collaborating aims at exchanging ideas to benefit the two conflicting parties where no party is a loser. This was evident in the way she handled the issue with the community and the political class when she said:

...after realizing that things were becoming worse I chose to go together with the board and took a step and apologized to the MP who later on this year forwarded the name of the school and we were able to be given 1 million for the school. It all ended with apology which solved all the problem and conflict.

In another interview, SNR 3 confirmed the aforesaid when she mentioned that after sometime the differences were settled and the school received a grant to complete the project. This was congruent to the minutes analyzed which indicated how the school was to use the grant they had received to put a laboratory (see Appendix F 4). While on observation the researcher noticed that a foundation had already been laid and there was construction going on.

I sought audience with the deputy principal regarding some decisions that were made regarding conflicts experience is the school. According to DP3:

I think she kind of treat circumstances with humility and even sometimes bending low to avoid problems and issues...Like in the case where she had to go together with the board and staff and talk then come to one solution together with the area MP which even I tend to think as a male principals I would not go that direction. So she treats some situations with a lot of humility and understanding (Deputy Principal, school C).

Jackline's compromising technique is similar to Grunig's two-way symmetrical theory where the application of accommodating the political class and compromising her pride was an important technique especially where the school leader needed to negotiate and mediate with the political class at school C for the school laboratory to be constructed (Grunig and Grunig, 1992). The idea behind collaboration is that all parties are committed to spend their resources such as time and energy in solving the problem at hand (Conrad, 1985: 243). Collaboration is also based on the understanding that those in conflict must realize that completion is not among the options that they have. Thus, incompatibility can be negotiated by engaging in "a give and take interaction to reach a mutually acceptable solution (Wilson and Putman, 1990:375)."

Machiavellian Technique

Based on interviews with three participants in this study, findings indicate that some women school leaders utilized Machiavellian technique through notices, which were largely manipulative with a view to serving the school leader's interest. This was evident when one participant explained:

When the boss heard that the ministry official were on their way, and because she knew she had done something that was unlawful, she went and printed a notice and placed it on the notice board...in fact the officials were showed(sic) the notice board with the notice that read... 'TEACHERS SHOULD NOT BE IN THE SCHOOL COMPOUND DURING NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS' and this one she had cooked (sic) yet she is the one who asked the teachers to be present (HoD, guidance and counseling, school D).

In another interview, a talk with SNR 4 revealed that some school leaders utilised Machiavellian technique when she mentioned:

.... before the holidays began the BoM teachers received notice through a rumour that their services are no longer needed in the school and that their letters would be delivered to them. But there were some particular teachers who demanded to pick their letters but on arriving at the gate they got a notice that stated "NO ENTRY FOR BoM TEACHERS" (Senior Teacher, School D).

A discussion with the prefects during focus group discussion did not directly confirm if in deed there was such a notice as the students were reluctant to discuss the issue. However, one of them mentioned that there was a rumour that before the schools closed there was a notice stopping some teachers from entering the gate. Another participant mentioned that "it seemed the teachers were transferred to other schools against their will but they still wanted to continue teaching us." It is from these discussions that the researcher sought further clarifications concerning the use of notice at school D.

From the foregoing it can be concluded that the use of notices in school D served two purposes. First, it was to pass information that was false and manipulative to serve the school leaders' interest. Second, it was to stop the teachers employed by BoM from getting access to the school compound to seek audience and clarification on termination of service because probably allowing them would compel the school leader to pay the teachers their salary in lieu as per the regulations of termination of service.

This is similar to Grunig and Grunig's (1992) notion that when a public practitioner disseminates inaccurate information through monologue in order to persuade an individual towards making certain decisions their communication behaviour will neither aim at giving accurate information nor seek feedback or even analyze why people behave the way they do through research. Instead, the major aim is to use a propagandist technique to persuade people's thoughts in a certain way that is beneficial to the organization at the expense of the employees like it happened in school D. Hence, when participants in school D recount the use of notice as a means of communication which caused various conflicts in the school, they are probably referring to Grunig's one-way Press Agency model of communication.

Mongrel Technique

While on an interview with Naomi, findings indicate that her communication practice took a convoluted approach where, depending on situations, she applied masculinity and at some point she embraced femininity - referred to in this study as a mothering technique. The school leader applied a mixed approach through formal and informal meeting with stakeholders in school B. The purpose, according to the school leader, was to influence those in conflict to take a stand that was beneficial to those in conflict as well as the school. Further, Naomi's application of both masculinity and femininity to manage conflicts was because according to the school leader, "conflicts do not have a pattern," hence ways of communication will be convoluted. The ensuing paragraphs will explain femininity and masculinity as follows:.

Masculine Technique

A discussion with Naomi reveals her courage to employ both feminine and masculine qualities to manage workplace conflicts as woman leader. Her masculine qualities became evident when she recounted:

I live in a community where people still upholds their culture about women not making good leaders so I knew that was what was going on...after a short time I reported I stood firm and I told them you are not looking at a woman, me I became a man long time ago and am not a woman you will see that I am a man...I told them there is nothing they can do and in fact I told them that me I walk with a small sword if you want to fight I can also fight(Principal, School B).

The aforementioned was confirmed by SNR 2 who said:

The moment she landed here things changed Even the boys who had issues with the female teachers were now looking at the principal differently... and you see when they started misbehaving the first time boys realized that the principal was firm on misconduct and would send them home to call their parents, they changed their attitude.(Senior teacher, school B).

The discussion prompted the researcher to explore further what propelled the principal to apply masculinity when she said:

I think it was for the first time that they were seeing a woman principal in an urban mixed school and were wondering why they had brought a woman and it was like people had given up...so I had to change people's perception and general view concerning gender issues. Some people and communities look at women in a different way and that's why we have to come out and solve possible conflicts as any other person could do (Principal, school B).

While on a focus group discussion with prefects, one of the participants mentioned:

...once you go there, she doesn't want to listen and will tell you many things and if ask, she will also ask you those many things are they negative to the performance or positive? If they are positive and accept them no matter how many they are but we are moving forward (FG2, participant 6, school B).

Research has shown that sometimes women leaders, just like the one in school B, experience stereotypical view that because women are submissive and emotional they are not fit for leadership (Mestry and Schmidt, 2012). Hence, for women to be viewed as competent like it happened to Naomi in school B, women leaders are forced to behave like men by being authoritarian and dictatorial (Morojele, Chikoko & Ngcobo, 2013). This is similar to studies conducted in this area that masculine individuals adopt a dominating style (Portello & Long, 1994; Brewer et al., 2002). Based on conventional standards, it has been observed that men tend to elicit physical aggression in conflicting situations and their aggression is passed as more adequate than that of women (Eagley and Steffen, 1986; Brandt and Pierce, 2000). However, this was not the case with Naomi because her aggression was a result of the context and this explains the reason for Naomi to have categorically stated that she was a man and even behaved like one during conflict management.

Femininity Technique

In another interview with Naomi it became apparent that her communication practice depended on a conflicting situation hence other than her masculine approach, she also applied femininity for the purpose, as Grunig and Grunig (1992) say, was to influence those in conflict to change their attitude in a manner that would benefit those in conflict as well as that of the organization. Her feminine qualities of mothering were evident in her actions. For instance when recounted

I decided to help the teacher who was a drunkard...I could go looking for him where he is (sic) drinking...sometimes he disappears for even a month. I could go and pick the teacher from the drinking place myself. I go with other male teachers and security men in the vehicle in case anything happens then there is a time I took him in for two days, he had stolen something from the school...It took time almost a year...at the end of the day and I thank God that today the teacher is saved and has stopped drinking (Principal, school B).

In another interview with DP2 findings reveal that while at other times the principal portrayed masculine qualities, it also became apparent that at other times she embraced her feminine characteristics of being empathetic counsellor and nurturing. This explains her reason to want to help the teacher at school B to overcome drunkenness. As home makers and caregivers, some scholars contend that women pose such attributes like nurturing, caring, being sensitive, empathetic counsellors and cooperative which makes women effective transformational leaders (Morojele Chikoko & Ngcobo, 2013). Hence, women principals should desist from copying male dictatorship and continue with positive attributes of being collaborative, understanding and emotionally connected in order to achieve organizational goals. However, as it is the contention in this study, women should embrace the view that men and women possess unique communication styles especially when faced with difficult conversations and tensions. Thus, both qualities and communication styles should be embraced depending on situations of conflict.

V. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this study has revealed that the women leaders who participated in this study have developed convoluted ways of utilising communication strategies to manage workplace conflicts as follows: a mongrel communication, coaching collaborative communication, nurturing counselling communication and a Machiavellian communication.

To begin with, the term 'Mongrel' has been borrowed from the dog species to refer to a cross-breed dog with no known ancestry and which does not belong to one particular breed (Moriss, 2008). With this background therefore, mongrel communication, as used in this study, refers to utilization of various communication strategies to manage convoluted workplace conflicts. Utilisation of mongrel communication to manage workplace conflicts has not featured anywhere in communication studies literature. The nearest reference is strategic integrated communication by Barker (2013) which states that an organizational leader should be prepared to meet the unpredictable future through strategic integrated communication. Integrated communication lays emphasis on creativity, proactive thinking, reciprocity and genuine dialogue as the focus of

communication. Hence, initiation of dialogue and involvement of members in changing and developing the organization is taken seriously. However, as it has been realized in this study, it is not expected that all workplace conflicts will be managed in the same manner as situations of conflicts will be different depending on the type and nature of conflicts.

Moreover, while integrated workplace communication has been extensively conducted in corporate communication, very little has been researched in educational leadership communication. Thus, this study being in the leadership and management communication domain contributes to the area of study by bringing to the fore the actual practices of women principals in managing workplace conflicts at secondary school level using mongrel communication. Furthermore, what has not been established, and which this study brings to the fore, is the use of Mongrel communication where some woman principals employed both feminine and masculine approaches in managing workplace conflicts. This was evident in the way some school leaders were alive to the changing nature of conflicts, hence, utilized mixed-breed approaches in managing workplace conflicts. For instance in one occasion a woman principal utilised masculine communication when she said:

I live in a community where people still upholds their culture about women not making good leaders so I knew that was what was going on...after a short time I reported I stood firm and I told them you are not looking at a woman, me I became a man long time ago and am not a woman you will see that I am a man...I told them there is nothing they can do and in fact I told them that me I walk with a small sword if you want to fight I can also fight(Principal school B).

However, in another occasion the same woman leader utilized nurturing counselling communication to manage workplace conflicts. Thus, the term mongrel communication.

Additionally, findings reveal that apart from mongrel communication, some women leaders utilized communication strategies that were classified as either nurturing collaborative or competitive Machiavellian communication. Studies on conflict management strategies such as collaboration, competition as well as confrontation abound in organizational conflict literature (Rahim, 1983; Pinkley, 1990; Priem and Price, 1991; Jehn, 1995; Simons and Peterson, 2000). Moreover, there seems to be no study that fails to mention collaboration when it comes to conflict management strategies. Needless to say, what is not known about collaboration, nurturing, counselling communication technique is the actual practice of these models in a natural setting such as school using a gender and communication perspective. Consequently, the contribution that this study makes is that this study highlights how women leaders utilized collaboration together with other strategies while explaining why they utilized the strategies in the way they did from their own view and in their natural context. Hence, the voices of these women leaders give the reader the immediacy of being there - as the women leaders recount their experiences of utilising the strategies. To put this into perspective, in utilising collaborative nurturing communication strategy one woman leader said:

My being a widow also makes me very patient... This school is like my home and I am like their mother and the judgment I make I do it like a mother. This is because I want to facilitate peace (Principal, school C).

While collaboration proliferates as a strategy in conflict management, there is dearth literature in leadership communication studies on utilisation of nurturing counselling communication to manage workplace conflicts. The nearest reference is Netshitangani's (2014) study on earlier socialization and women school managers. Netshitangani states that because of their maternal roles, women school leaders tend to employ their mothering styles of leadership because they to view workplaces like their homes. While Netshitangani looked at the women leaders' mothering style as a leadership quality, her study did not look at how nurturing and counselling can be utilised as a communication strategy to manage workplace conflicts. Thus this study contributes to the body of knowledge in leadership and management communication while highlighting the actual practices of mothering approach in managing workplace conflicts.

Additionally, Machiavellian competitive communication was noted in the way one woman leader managed conflicts as follows:

When the boss heard that the ministry official were on their way, and because she knew she had done something that was unlawful, she went and printed a notice and placed it on the notice board...in fact the officials were showed(sic) the notice board with the notice that read... 'TEACHERS SHOULD NOT BE IN THE SCHOOL COMPOUND DURING NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS' and this one she had cooked (sic) yet she is the one who asked the teachers to be present (HoD, guidance and counseling, school D).

Machiavellian leaders' behaviours and perspectives are manipulative in nature for the purpose of fulfilling their own interest (Christie and Geis, 2013). Hence, this study adopted Machiavellian communication as utilized by some women leaders to manage workplace conflicts. While Machiavellianism studies has existed since the time of Nicolo Michiavelli to explore Machiavellian characteristics and styles of leadership, this characteristic has minimally been used as a communication strategy in workplace conflict management. Furthermore, studies that have looked at Machiavellianism have not explored actual practices in real life contexts as done in this study, hence, making a contribution to this effect.

Going forward and as suggested by the Ahmad and Rethinam (2010) is that it is better to train the workforce on communication strategies that suit particular situations with the aim of helping people in understanding preferences and communication needs instead of understanding communication practices from a stereotypical or essentialist view point. Furthermore, there is need to desist from dichotomy thinking in utilising communication strategies to manage workplace conflicts and instead, embrace the fact that, depending on circumstances, men and women have the capacity to “reaffirm, negotiate with, and challenge the parameters of permissible or socially sanctioned behaviour” (Mills, 2003:169). This is a view that is supported by Ogenga (2016) that while conflict, particularly with regard to terrorism, has been viewed as a male preserve with women playing victims, there is need to rethink gender violent extremism in Kenya. The implication is that both men and women are capable of utilizing both nurturing and Machiavellian behaviours in conflicts. Therefore, this study explicates the role of communication in managing workplace conflicts, specifically, educational institutions such as school from an interpretive point of view while analyzing different situations and contexts - referred to as convoluted mongrel communication thereby contributing to the body of knowledge in communication studies

VI. CONCLUSION

This study purposed to explore how women leaders utilised communication strategies in managing workplace conflicts at secondary school level. Findings have revealed that the women principals have developed unique ways of managing workplace conflicts, depending on their predispositions and situations of conflicts as follows: first, some women leaders tended to be dialogic with a coaching, nurturing and counselling communication. This was based on their perceptions of viewing a school as their own homes. Hence, their role was to counsel and nurture those in conflicts just like a mother would do to their children. Second, some women leaders employed a mongrel communication with a feminine/masculine approach. This was based on their view that management of conflicts depended on different situations. Hence, at some point they had to employ masculinity by being forceful in order to counteract the stereotype that women do not make good decisions in some conflicts. However, in some situations they employed their caring and nurturing attributes as is expected of a mother. Third, one woman leader utilized a Machiavellian communication through monologue. This was based on her belief that conflict is unnecessary and evil, hence, should be discouraged through punishment such as dismissal. On the whole, this study departs from the application of models in managing of organisational conflicts and has explored the interpretative view that is in tandem with qualitative studies. Thus, the women leaders, who were participants in this study, have been allowed to share their unique experiences, actual practice and needs of utilising communication strategies in managing workplace conflicts through research hence giving the women leaders a voice which will go a long way in informing schools and school leaders with similar characteristics to reflect and learn so as to improve on their own practices.

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