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The Effect of Inter-tribal Post Election Violence Conflict Trauma on Academic Performance among Secondary School Students in Mt. Elgon District, Kenya

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Abstract

Inter-tribal conflict in Kenya has persisted for a long time and intensifies during elections. The inter-tribal conflict in 2007-2008 in Mt. Elgon District was apparently over land dispute between the Soy and Ndorobo clans of the Sabaot tribe. This research aimed at establishing the effect of trauma as a result of inter-ethnic conflicts on academic performance among secondary school students in Mt Elgon District, Kenya. The ex-post facto research design was used. Two questionnaires, one for students and another one for teacher-counsellors were used to collect data. The sample of study comprised of 90 randomly selected students and six teacher-counsellors from six purposively sampled schools from a population of 22 secondary schools. Five (83%) out of the six sampled schools registered a negative performance

index in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE) for the year 2008. In addition, 98% of the respondents recorded a negative performance index in their internal examination results. More girls (70%) registered a negative drop than boys (32%). The findings showed that 70 (78%) of the student-respondents sought counselling services while 20 (22%) did not. It was recommended that trauma counselling should be entrenched in the school system.

Key words: trauma, academic performance, gender and violence.

Introduction

Inter-tribal conflict has persisted over the years in Kenya and usually escalates every five years whenever there are parliamentary and presidential elections. The conflicts are more concentrated in some parts of the country such as the Rift Valley and Mt.Elgon District where this study was carried out. Mt. Elgon District is mainly inhabited by members of the Sabaot Community. The Sabaot community is comprised of two major clans – the Soy and Ndorobo. Other members inhabiting the district include the Ogiek, Bukusu, Teso and various Kalenjin subgroups (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Fighting between the Soy and Ndorobo clans in Mt. Elgon District over land issues dates back to 1965. The conflict has been as a result of government attempts to resettle landless members of the two clans in Mt. Elgon over the years (Ngetich & Kwalia, 2007; Siringi, 2007). According to Siringi, the conflict which intensified in 2006 claimed over 600 lives and displaced more than 66,000 people. The escalation of the conflict in 2006 can be attributed to the country's general elections that were to be conducted towards the end of 2007. This conflict adversely affected all human activities, education being one of them.

During the 2008 post election violence, education was largely disrupted as insecurity intensified. Teachers and pupils had to flee from their homes following the clashes. Calm returned after the government send the army and administration police in March, 2008 to restore peace in Mt. Elgon between the warring clans. Following the operation, about 1,037 suspects were arrested and charged, 41 AK-47 rifles and 1,027 assorted bullets were recovered (Siringi, 2007).

Trauma resulting from conflict over resources such as land is common in East Africa. Political conflict is common in a number of African Countries, Kenya included. Such conflicts tend to rise during elections. Trauma

following these conflicts and violence disrupts people's daily activities, including learning in schools. The traumatic effect of these conflicts on academic performance has not been conclusively addressed. It is therefore against this background that the current study was envisaged. The study attempted to provide answers to the following research questions:

- i. Does trauma resulting from inter-tribal conflict affect academic performance in secondary schools?
- ii. Are there gender differences in academic performance as a result of inter-tribal conflict?
- iii. Are students who were affected by the inter-tribal conflict likely to seek assistance in counselling?

Literature review

Trauma is any experience or event that threatens a child's sense of safety and security to such an extent that it is perceived to be unmanageable (Walton & Irvin, 1997). Although all traumas inherently include a multiple of losses, not all loss is traumatic. This means that some children may be affected by traumatizing experiences while others may not. Hence the need to document the traumatic effect of the post election violence on academic performance. Among the conceptual models used in the measurement of symptomatic trauma include multi-dimensional approaches, psychometrics and questionnaires among others. In this study, the researchers used a questionnaire to assess trauma among the research subjects. Trauma causes shock and organ shutdown (Feltham, 2003) which if not healed may disturb the victim's mental and emotional equilibrium.

According to a study by Jamila and Stevens (2009), children exposed to traumatic events suffer from academic struggles and adjustment, but when provided with treatment, display improvement in academic performance. The research study was conducted on elementary school children. The findings suggested that academic problems may be related to exposure to traumatic events. The results further implied that treatment for children exposed to traumatic events can be applied in a school setting.

According to Deykin (1999), available data suggest that the symptoms of PTSD can diminish adolescents' perception of self-efficacy as well as their academic performance. Deykin cites some work by Saigh and others which found that traumatized adolescents who developed PTSD had lower scores on various measures of perceived self-efficacy, compared either with

adolescents who had experienced serious trauma but did not develop PTSD, or with normal comparison subjects. The same findings were noted in a subsequent study which examined the academic performance of three groups of Lebanese teenagers.

Giaconia, Reinherz, Silverman, Bilge, Frost and Cohen (1995) spent years tracking a group of adolescents from the time they were 5 until 18 years of age. This large amount of time led to a tracking record of significance. By the time students reach high school, enough time has passed for seemingly random events to occur. Certain adolescents are completely changed for the worst as a result. In this study by Giaconia and others on the 165 adolescents who experienced trauma, 14.5% were categorized as having lifetime symptoms of PTSD. Students who were identified as meeting the criteria for PTSD had a difficult time in high school. They held low grade-point averages, suffered major depression, and tended to act out in school settings.

PTSD has a tendency to develop mostly within adolescents of “low-income, urban environments,” because of the increased risk of being exposed to violent crimes (DeSocio & Hootman, 2004). Academic performance decreases severely for girls from the urban locations; behavioral problems form from depression, which steers them down the path of school suspensions and failing a grade.

Tolin and Foa (2006), in a Meta-analysis of review of 25 years of quantitative research, studies yielding sex-specific risk of potentially traumatic events (PTEs) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which indicated that female participants were more likely than male participants to meet criteria for PTSD. In the analyses, female participants exhibited greater PTSD. This implies that females are more likely to be affected by traumatizing experiences like war or ethnic violence. Tolin and Foa argued that in the aftermath of a traumatic event, women are more likely to have feelings of anxiety and depression, while men are more likely to express distress and depression in terms of irritability, anger and increased alcohol consumption.

According to Brady (2001), a number of epidemiologic survey studies have shown that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is twice as common in women as in men. In addition, there are gender differences in the type of trauma exposure and presentation of illness. Some of these differences are clearly societal and nonbiologically based, but it is also clear that the biologic systems altered in PTSD may modulate or be modulated by sex hormones. In

the current study, it was expected that the academic performance of female students will be more affected by the trauma resulting from the post election violence than boys.

The psychosocial theory of Erikson (Parke & Locke, 1999) assumes that developmental crises may result in dysfunctional outcomes. Secondary school students are in the stage of identity versus role confusion which occurs between 12 and 18 years. During this stage the students learn to develop a sense of identity. Failure to do so leads to role confusion. This is the time the students are supposed to nurture their abilities by fully concentrating on their academic work. Any distraction that may cause mental anguish like trauma resulting from land clashes and election related violence is likely to divert their attention in school and therefore affect their development and potential (Katie & Sullivan, 1995).

Bahavioural theorists argue that behavior whether adaptive or maladaptive is learned, shaped and maintained through stimulant responses. Behaviorists see maladjusted behavior as a result of trauma that occurs as we encounter disturbing experiences within our environment such as the post election violence that occurred in early 2008.

From the point of view of the classical conditioning theory, an event like unanticipated ethnic violence will trigger certain responses like fear, uncertainty and hopelessness which with time will cause post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). On the other hand, threats and fear of eviction and attack reinforce traumatic feelings in the victims of the violence as the operant conditioning theory by Skinner would explain (Parke & Locke, 1999).

Research methodology

This study applied the *ex-post facto* design which involves studying the relationship between variables that cannot be manipulated by the researcher because their manifestation have already occurred (Franknel & Warren, 2000). The researchers endeavoured to investigate the effect of trauma as a result of inter-tribal conflict on academic performance among secondary school students in Mt. Elgon district.

The purposive sampling technique was used to select six secondary schools that were mostly affected by the conflict out of a population of 22 public secondary schools in the Mt. Elgon District. The six comprised of two girls' schools, two boys' schools and two mixed schools selected from the two administrative divisions within the district. The respondents who participated

in the study included 90 students (15 randomly selected from each of the six schools) and six teacher counselors one from each of the six schools.

Data was collected using two self-administered questionnaires, one for the students and the other one for the heads of counselling department. The questionnaires sought information about the effect of trauma resulting from inter-tribal conflict on academic performance. Student's classroom performance and the schools' performance in the final secondary examination results were used as a measure of academic performance. A reliability coefficient of 0.79 and 0.77 was obtained for the students' and teacher counsellors' questionnaires respectively.

Results and discussions

The first research question sought to establish the effect of trauma resulting from inter-tribal conflict on academic performance in secondary schools. An analysis of academic performance in the school leaving Kenya Certificate Secondary Examination (KCSE) prior and after the conflict revealed that 83% of the sampled schools recorded a drop in performance. The results are shown in table 1.

The negative performance index in the 2008 KCSE results compared to those of 2007 was largely attributed to the conflict that rocked the location of the study in early 2008. Most of the respondents (98%) reported that the conflict resulted to a drop in their academic performance in classroom based examinations. In addition, a total of 75 (83%) student-respondents admitted that they were from time to time traumatized by the conflict while 15 (17%) were not. This implied that most of the students suffered from post traumatic stress disorder as a result of the post election violence. Thirty (53%) of the 76 traumatized student-respondents recorded a negative performance index in their internal examinations. The results also showed that 43% of the respondents were physically injured during the violence. Physical injury and witnessing of the conflict was emotionally traumatizing to most of the respondents. These results were corroborated by all the six student-counsellors who participated in this study.

Katie and Sullivan (1995) argue that when children undergo through traumatic experiences, their sense of the world order and safety becomes shattered. This will definitely affect their concentration in school and their academic performance. Sixty students lost a family member or a close relative during the conflict. The results also showed that 88 (98%) of the student-respondents lost their property during the clashes. All this must have

traumatized the respondents because grief causes shock and organ shut down which if not corrected can have serious health consequences including death (Feltham, 2003).

The second research question sought to establish whether there were gender differences in academic performance as a result of inter-tribal conflict. The results showed that, 28 (70%) females registered a negative drop in their academic performance as compared to 16 (32%) of the male participants. Out of the 75 (83%) respondents who admitted that they were from time to time traumatized by the conflict, 40 (44%) were girls while 35 (39%) were boys. These results help to explain why more girls (75%) sought for trauma counselling services as compared to 25% boys who did so. According to Geldard & Geldard (2003), research has shown that the way in which individuals respond to traumatic experiences differ depending on their gender and partly their culture. Osabutey (1990) argues that family institutions are highly infested by patriarchal impurities and tendencies that favour male supremacy and the insubordination of women right from the school system to financial institutions. The gender disparities could be strengthened by the fact that girls and women experienced more traumatizing ordeals like rape and abductions during the clashes. These findings may not be conclusive because the researchers did not control other factors that may contribute to trauma among female students.

The findings are in agreement with the observation by Brady (2001) that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is twice as common in women as in men. This explains why more girls registered a negative drop in their academic performance than boys.

The third research question sought to establish whether students who were affected by the inter-tribal conflict were likely to seek assistance in counselling. The findings showed that 70 (78%) of the student respondents visited their teacher counsellors for assistance while 20 (22%) did not. Out of the 70 who were counselled, 42 (60%) were comfortable discussing their issues with their teacher counsellors. A total of 28 (40%) were not comfortable in confiding their issues in their teacher counsellors. Guidance and counselling help students to develop coping skills in the face of social and psychological problems (Mutie & Ndambuki, 1999). Guidance and counselling programmes in the areas affected by the post election violence needed trauma counselling to cope with the problems they encountered.

Conclusion

The following conclusions were made from the study:

- i. Psychological trauma has a negative effect on academic performance in secondary schools.
- ii. The academic performance of female students is more likely to be affected by psychological trauma than that of male students.
- iii. The level of awareness of counselling services in secondary schools is fairly high because a reasonably big number of students sought counselling.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

- i. There is need for trauma counselling to be offered to victims of the post election violence
- ii. The government of Kenya needs to seriously address the problem of land disputes to avoid recurrence of ethnic violence in various parts of the country
- iii. There is need for more research to document the effects of the post election violence

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Table 1: Kenya Certificate Secondary Examination (KCSE) Analyses for the Year 2007 and 2008

<u>School</u>	<u>Entry</u>	<u>2008(Mean score)</u>	<u>2007(Mean score)</u>	<u>Deviation</u>
Kibuk	78	5.871	6.000	-0.129
Kapsokwony	85	5.694	6.517	-0.823
Cheptais	78	5.500	6.121	-0.621
Chepkateny	70	4.400	4.619	-0.219
Kimabole	47	3.894	3.261	+0.651
Kimobo	43	3.651	4.250	-0.599