



TRACING THE ROOTS OF STUDENT VIOLENCE

An Experiential Analysis of Occurrences of Student Unrest and Violence in Secondary Schools in Kenya



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The Republic of Kenya

- It is on the Eastern part of Africa (Land Area: 582,650 sq km).
- Its capital city is Nairobi (other large cities are Mombasa and Kisumu).
- GDP per capita: 1,245.53 (World Bank, 2013).
- Neighbouring Countries: Tanzania, Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, South Sudan
- Official Languages: Swahili, English (with upto 42 local languages).
- Was colonized by the British rule and attained its independence on 1st of June, 1963
- Its Education system is best described as the 8-4-4 system



I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.

Mahatma Gandhi

WELCOME

Background and Context

1960s AND 1970s

N/B: Student protest actions have a history as long as that of secondary Ed. in Kenya (1900- Divinity sch. protested HT refusal to offer instruction in Eng. AND in 1908-Maseno Boys (then pri) protesting manual labour assignments and demand for more reading and writing in their curr).

- The incidences of SU & V were few and less violent
- Took the form of protests, boycott of classes and mass walkouts
- No loss of life was reported/witnessed

1990s AND 2000s

- Witnessed an increase in both frequency and intensity (between 1980 and 1990 - increased from 22(0.9%) to 187 (7.2%) to 250 (9.6%) in 2001.
- They were/have been violent – destruction of school property, mass rapes, fire and loss of life

Glaring Examples

- Nyeri High Sch (March,1991) – Students lock 4 prefects in cubicle and burn them up with petrol
- St. Kizito Mixed (July, 1991) – Boys invade girls’ dorm-rape 70 girls leaving 19 dead
- Bombolulu girls (1998)- 57 students burnt in a dormitory – by fellow students
- Kyanguli Sec (March, 2001) – at least 65 burnt in a dormitory (fire suspected to be started by students)
- Kabuyefwe (2004) – students burnt Admin block and store protesting poor KCSE results
- More than 300 schools were closed in July 2008 following a wave of violent protests and burning down dorms and admin blocks
- Several sch protested cancelling of KCSE results of 5101 students due to cheating (70% cheating rate).

So what has been done?

- ◆ These occurrences capture a national attention as they dominate media houses as well as discourse among stakeholders
- ◆ MoE officials making public statements condemning student violence and indiscipline and juvenile hooliganism stating that the “wanton destruction of school property will not be tolerated”.
- ◆ The government, through MoE has occasionally appointed committees of inquiry/Task forces whenever the occurrences have reached peak levels, thus:
 - ① Dr. Lawrence Sagini Committee/TF (1991)
 - ② P.M. Macharia Committee/TF (1999/2000)
 - ③ Dr. N. Wangai Committee/TF (2001)
 - ④ D. Koeh Committee/TF (2008)

Observations

Despite all these efforts or recommendations of these task forces and the subsequent implementation of the same, albeit in part, student unrest and violence still continues to occur in Sec. schools in Kenya unabated.

□ Literature on the same reveals that:

- a. The committees have had to work under pressure of less time and more scope (3wks) due to dire need for quick-fix
- b. The committees have often adopted/used methodologies (mostly empirical) which “only scratch the surface of the problem of SU & V”
- c. Failure of earlier efforts to appreciate the partly inhibiting a clear understanding of this concept.
- d. Causes identified (by antecedent efforts), and even grievances, have remained fairly the same throughout the years and so are the recommendations made and ways of addressing them.
- e. Most efforts to mitigate student unrest and violence have been directed to these often identified general causes (triggers) and not the underlying/root causes
- f. Reflections in these efforts are done within theoretical frameworks that limit access to the underlying causes

So then...

Discourse in educational research and media reports continue calling for more serious and deeper reflections on the phenomenon of student unrest and violence with a view to establishing its ultimate causes and the subsequent remedies

And therefore,

This presentation seeks to share part of the findings of a study designed within the context of these considerations and which will focus on 2 main questions:

- What are the fundamental causes of student violence?
- Why has student violence persisted despite the antecedent efforts?

Theoretical Lenses and Underpinnings

- The study was conceptualized within the Existentialist mode of thinking which centers upon analysis of existence - focusing on the concrete human experiences within their environment
- The central notion in this mode is: **existence precedes essence** i.e. human beings first exist and then spend their lifetime constructing, defining and/or changing their identity
- Absurdity of human life (the world is unfair).
- Freedom, choice and responsibility
- Thus- people are continually searching to find out 'who' and 'what' they are in life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs and outlook (human nature as 'becoming').

NB: In this study therefore, sec. sch. students were viewed as conscious individuals always negotiating and producing their identities (essence) in relation to their encounters with school processes and practices (conditions of existence).

But which particular theory(ies)/theorist(s)?

- Two main theories both of which operate within the **existentialist mode of thinking**
 - The 2 theories guide in exploring aspects of humanity whose negation distorts the process of becoming fully human thus eliciting a violent response.
- a. **Frantz Fanon's therapeutic theory of violence**
 - The process of freeing oneself, physically/psychologically necessitates the use of force, physical/psychological injury, aggression, coercion, militancy e.t.c (manifestation of violence) thereby helping in cleansing the consciousness of the oppressed/aggrieved partly hence violence as a purifying agent
- b. **Paulo Freire's theory of dehumanization**
 - Violence is essentially dehumanization (any act that physically/mentally injures a human being, turns him/her into an object or puts an obstacle in one's path as they pursue self-determination)
 - dehumanization afflicts both the oppressed and the oppressor

Conceptual Framework

From the ideas of the theorists above and the wider existentialist treatise:

- Human beings have the potentials to reason, decide and act responsibly and these must be realized
- Sometimes human beings may fail to realize these potentials (self actualization) and hence become fully human.
- In other words, human beings are in a continuous process of humanization (or personization) and this forms their basic task (vocation) in this world.
- It is this human task that makes human beings move from initial experience, through understanding and judgment, to responsible action in search of their fulfilment within a human society.

Basic Assumptions

The investigations in this study were/are therefore premised on the assumptions that:

- (i) The task forces on the occurrences of student unrest have not fully explored the concept of violence in all its dimensions (including the experiences within which its real genesis can be located).
- (ii) Students (as human beings) have needs, rights or values that they strive to satisfy, achieve or uphold, either by using the system, acting on the fringes or acting as revolutionaries (or even reactionaries).

Research Design & Methodology

- Adopted a Descriptive Survey design and utilized the mixed methods
- Three main modes of philosophical inquiry were adopted thus: **conceptual** analysis, **phenomenological** analysis and **dialectical** method.
- **Document analysis**- which is a social science method - used to guide selection and review of existing documents to extract pieces of information relevant for study e.g. task Force and media reports on SU&V in sec. schs in Kenya, after all, philosophical reflections do not occur in a vacuum.
- **Phenomenological Analysis**: was necessitated by the position that the methodologies adopted by antecedent efforts have not delved deep enough into the incidents of student violence to get into the underlying causes
- **Purposively** selected schools from 5 out of the former 8 provinces of Kenya (Eastern, Central, Nyanza, Western and Coast giving a total of 31 schools) i.e. only schools where student violence had occurred.

Data collection and Analysis

- **Data sources** - MoE, Media Reports and students' live experiences from their live narratives in relation to SU & V alongside those of teachers and school administrators gathered from field dialogues (using dialogue schedules)
- **Analysis** began by identification of recurrent themes often given as 'causes of SV' and then subjected them to further analysis of the way in which they have been experienced and interpreted by students by focusing on their inner personal experiences (they include: exercise of power and authority including communication, the prefect system, school rules and regulations, punishment, rights and freedoms of students and KCSE examinations).
- The experiences were gathered from live narratives of students and other respondents and were voice-recorded, transcribed, edited and presented with pseudonyms for purposes of confidentiality thereby analyzing these in terms of experiences the incidences leading to or even during occurrences of SU & V took the students through.

Research Findings

- Antecedent efforts (including studies and taskforce reports) have often presented the following as the real causes:
 - a. Exercise of power and authority
 - b. Communication breakdown,
 - c. The prefect system,
 - d. School rules and regulations,
 - e. Harsh of punishment
 - f. Rights and freedoms of students and
 - g. KCSE (high stakes) examinations
- However, analysis of students' experiences coupled with critical reflections revealed that these were merely triggers and not the ultimate/underlying causes as shall be demonstrated.

Underlying/Ultimate causes

(1) Alienation of the students from their process of self-determination

- Alienation is the estrangement or separation of the subject from his/ her ontological vocation of active human participation in the world,
- This may take the forms: e.g. school administrators exercising power and authority in ways that students experience as oppressive e.g. denied opportunity formulation/review of school rules, communication breakdown, all through which they can pursue self-realization.

(2) The absurdity of the students' conditions of existence

- The notion of 'absurd' consists in the existentialist view that there is no order, value and purpose in human life in this world (the world is so unfair).
- Gathered data revealed that conditions of existence in some schools were perceived (by students) as absurd or constituting an absurdity e.g. cases of poor facilities such as toilet and lack of entertainment services, perceptions of a bleak future – due to the lack of job opportunities out there (esp. if they don't pass highly)-all of which they seek to transform, by acting as revolutionaries hence violence.
- KCSE results cancellation, failure or even the very possibility of it, introduces the students to the imminent absurd conditions of existence after school e.g. become a condemned lot as failures in life.

(3) Affront to students' values and freedom

- Existentialists argue that before birth, life is nothing and is up to us to give it the meaning we choose
- Human beings have freedom (as an inseparable tendency) to make these choices hence an affront to this is an affront to humanity thus dehumanization – bound to be resisted e.g.:
 - i. **Values** including: to be respected and not to be mishandled, to be afforded opportunities for self expression
 - ii. Corporal punishment- humiliating + compromised image
- the **affront to** things they consider as **rights and freedoms**, e.g. socializing freely with colleagues from other schools, going for educational trips, weekend off,...
- ***Negate of the students' sense of entitlement to all these promotes feelings of an affront to their ontological vocation of pursuing self-realization.

Researcher's Explanation of student violence

- Students' reactions to situations they perceive as those that compromise their humanity illustrates their awareness of the precarious nature of their present situation, a situation they must transform in search of their truer and fuller selves.
- It is an expression of some awareness of their 'less human' status as well as the space of possibilities that are at their disposal for actualizing themselves thereby completing their humanity.
- It is therefore reasonable to formalize all these considerations into one explanatory view to student violence and state it precisely, thus:

"Students act violently because they are not yet fully human"

NB: This is because:

- their actions depict an apparent deficiency in humanity (dehumanizing acts)
- their protracted quest to become complete with all the freedom, power and knowledge through continuous transformation of any limiting situation encountered
- Perennial occurrence of SV is partly due to the fact that their efforts to become complete are often frustrated by the school system.

So then, why has SU & V persisted?

From the foregoing analyses and reflections, it can be argued that it is because:

- Antecedent efforts have not been rigorous/critical enough (in terms of methodology and relevant theoretical underpinnings) in their designs and/of investigations of the ultimate nature and genesis of the phenomenon of student violence
- Targeting symptoms/triggers of violence (in their recommendations) rather than the ultimate foundations of such occurrences
- Failure to ground their investigations on an explicit conception of human nature

Concluding remarks

This study was conceptualized with a view to strengthening the existing efforts for addressing the phenomenon of SV in secondary schools in Kenya and therefore I wish to note the following:

- Since SV as dehumanization afflicts both the students and the school administrators (as victims and perpetrators or both), authentic policy guidelines must target both of these parties especially if we have to resolve the oppressor-oppressed contradictions that mainly afflict the students.
- Students' acts of violence are firmly rooted in their lived experiences of school procedures and practices hence efforts to address this problem must be based on or fundamentally seek to address these experiences.
- Authentic analyses of incidences of student unrest must be done within the framework of human nature if they have to get to the root causes.
- As pertains to the education system and exams in particular, it is clear that it is time for change. However, changes in the education system must start with a shift in the value system, expectation of rewards from alternative routes and a realistic understanding of the value of education.

...the end!

Thank you ALL for your Attention!

Arigato Gozaimasu!

