Conflict Resolution among Secondary School Students in Terms of Gender, Age and Class: A Case of Eldoret East District, Kenya

Jeniffer Kiprono
Kisii University, Department of Guidance and counseling
Email: genibak@gmail.com

Abstract

One of the most widely held beliefs is that peer groups control the behaviour of children, sometimes more than parents and teachers particularly the case with teenagers. Peers are prime candidates for promoting imitation in children; for instance if a child sees one of their peers playing aggressively they play aggressively. Therefore, peers may reinforce certain behaviours. From this evidence it is clear that peer counsellors can play a key role in peer behaviour modification. This paper seeks to establish the differences in conflict resolution based on gender, age and class of students. Eldoret East District in Rift Valley Province was the study area having a population of 3745; the number of boys is 1862 while that of girls is 1883. The sample size was obtained through purposive sampling considering those schools which had conflict resolution programmes ongoing. From the study, Gender, age and class differences in conflict resolution have been found to exist.

Keywords: conflict resolution, secondary school students, gender, age, class

1. Introduction

Many studies show that boys have much higher physical activity levels, aggression levels, and classroom behaviour than the girls. Girls and boys aggression patterns differ. Boys are more likely to retaliate when attacked, and they are more likely to attack than girls. Boys are more physically confrontational, and they are also more likely to approve of aggression. Girls on the other hand use damaging relationships. They may attempt to exclude peers from group participation, besmirch another's reputation and gossip about another's negative attributes (Cole & Dodge, 1988).There is therefore need to investigate the influence peer counseling and gender can have on conflict resolution among students.

Black (1994) in her article which examined gender difference in adolescents` behaviour during conflict resolution tasks with best friends noted that there was gender difference. On conflict resolution tasks, females were rated lower in withdrawal and higher in communication skills and support - validation than males. Miller, Danaher and Forbes (1986) reported that during free play sessions males were more likely to use physical force or threat to resolve conflicts whereas females were more likely to use a mitigating strategy, such as clarifying the other child's feelings, changing the topic, proposing a compromise or leaving the situation.

Hang and Asher (1996) and Rose and Asher (1999) found that in hypothetical conflicts with peers (like a classmate refuses to return a puzzle piece that the subject needs to finish the puzzle), females were more likely to recommend pro-social strategies and males were more likely to recommend hostile or coercive strategies.

Males have been shown to exhibit more direct, physical aggression while females have been shown to inflict indirect, mental discomfort on others. Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz and Kaukianen (1992) suggest that a possible reason for these findings is that females usually develop more quickly than males. This developmental difference often involves verbal and social skills, which are needed for the utilization of indirect aggression. Bjorkqvist (1994) reported that girls tended to make use of dyadic constructive conflict resolution and third party interventions than males. In contrast, one study found that adolescent females used more overt anger tactics combined with compromise when resolving conflicts, while males had a higher rate of distraction (Feldman & Gowen, 1998).

A study in Australia found anger to be the same between sexes, but the females used more obliging, avoidance, and compromise methods. This may indicate that females are more peaceful and constructive when resolving conflicts (Owens, Daly and Slee, 2005). The gender findings for withdrawal as a conflict resolution strategy have been mixed (Bjorkqvist *et al.,* 1992; Lindeman *et al.,* 1997). Muite and Ndambuki (1999), observe that counseling helps boys and girls to cope with problems encountered in life and eventually to thrive in adulthood. There was need to investigate the influence of gender on conflict resolution among secondary school students.

Bluestein (1999) notes that conflict is a natural part of any functional class. In fact, it is not necessarily a sign that there are problems with the classroom management or with the health of the classroom community. But it

does often lead to unhappiness, discomfort, and or the need for members of the class to emotionally withdraw or attack. Therefore making sense of conflict and providing students with the skills, knowledge and dispositions to process it effectively is essential to creating a functional democratic classroom. Bluestein further states that conflict originates from many sources, and it takes many forms. Sometimes it is brought into the class from the outside, and sometimes it is created within the class. Either way, when it is examined with a sufficient amount of awareness, it can be a useful means to personal and collective growth. The duty of teachers is to help students see that conflict can be an opportunity, rather than just a source of grief. Peer mediation programmes should be put in place to offer students in secondary schools knowledge and skills on how to recognize existence of conflict, causes and how to resolve them amicably.

When it comes to communication, Nasibi (2003) observes that the youth have similar tastes in activities and language of communications so this makes it easier for them to reach their peers. There is no age-group gap between them as would be with teacher – counsellors. Through developing on social support, peers can gain knowledge and skills to assist in integration. They can more easily relate and communicate with someone with whom they can identify, they can gain a sense of hope and inspiration through interactions with peer counselors, this makes it possible to utilize peer counseling in secondary schools to empower students resolve conflict amicably by talking it out rather than resorting to violent ways like fighting or bullying to get even.

Peer mediation helps students appreciate diversity. Students of different races, classes, ages and religions communicate and work together to resolve important problems in mediation. For example, at the conclusion of one peer mediation training, a tenth-grade girl in America explained that when she first saw girls of a different race on the training team, she thought to herself: "I am going to beat those girls up." After the training, she understood how "stupid" this was, and how one "should not judge people by the way they look." Students also learn how to give and accept criticism (Cohen1995). They appreciate the necessity of taking risks and making mistakes to learn something new. They understand the power of helping people help themselves. Taken together, this explains why experienced student mediators display an uncommon level of maturity and poise.

Peer mediation offers a "gender-balancing" method of conflict resolution to schools. Recent research suggests that males and females conduct their lives in reference to a different moral center. Males seem to decide what is morally appropriate in reference to what has been called "fairness"--abstract concepts of rights, rules, or laws. Women appear to use a standard based more upon "caring"--one's relationship with and responsibility to others. Whereas men might explain that stealing is wrong because people have a right to their possessions, women might explain that stealing is wrong because it harms another person.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was carried out in Eldoret East District in Rift Valley Province, Kenya. The district has 41 secondary schools, both public, private, day, boarding, girls boarding, boys boarding ,mixed day schools, rural and urban secondary schools. This study used causal comparative (Ex-post facto) design as the author did not wish to manipulate any variable. The study population was 3745 students represented by 1862 boys and 1883 girls of form one to four. The study sample consisted of 265 students. Questinnaires were used in data collection.

3. Results

The author determined the proportions of males and females pertaining the levels of conflict resolution. Levels of conflict resolution between male and female students in secondary schools are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of conflict resolution in secondary schools between male and female

Conflict resolution	Male	Female
Low	64.4	52.1
High	35.6	47.9
Total	100	100

To test for statistical significance of independence between male and females in conflict resolution Independent t-test was carried out. The results of the t-test are shown in the table below.

Table 2: Independent t-test for levels of conflict resolution in secondary schools between male and female

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Levels for existence of conflict resolution	3.908	.049	-3.962	263	.000	-1.060	.268	-1.587	-.533

From the results it was established that there is a significant difference between male and female students on conflict resolution. The mean score difference for the conflict resolution computed from the raw scores was 1.060. The computed critical values for the two tailed test at level of significance ǎ=0.05 (95% confidence interval) were +0.533 and -0.533. This means that the mean score difference for the conflict resolution 1.06 lies in the critical region. Therefore the hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference in levels of conflict resolution between male and female students of different gender was rejected and the alternative hypothesis, which indicated a significant differences in conflict resolution between male and female adopted.

The author also computed the differences in level of conflict resolution among students of different age groups as presented in Table 3. This was based in a null hypothesis stating that there are no significant differences in levels of conflict resolution among students of different age groups.

Table 3: Differences in response concerning the levels of conflict resolution among students of different ages

Levels of conflict resolution	Age bracket			
	13-14	15-16	17-18	19-20
Low	58.3	47.7	59.3	88.9
High	41.7	52.3	40.7	11.1
Total	100	100	100	100

 Results from the table above may be attributed to the fact that adolescence between age 13-18 depend on peer help as they look up to model peers to emulate and they may have social skills to resolve conflict constructively. This is consistent with the view of Johnson and Johnson (1995) who noted that cooperation in the classroom helps disputants recognize that their long term relationship is more important than the result of any short term conflict. Students learn social interaction skills that contribute to mutually resolving the conflict. Students are taught how to negotiate and mediate, gain enough experience so that they develop considerable expertise in resolving inter personal conflicts constructively, hence giving students skills to regulate their behaviour.

Table 4: Levels of conflict resolution in secondary schools between male and female

		Levels for conflict resolution		Total
Age	Distribution	High	Low	
Age	13-14 yrs	7	4	11
	15-16 yrs	80	74	154
	17-18 yrs	58	33	91
	19-20 yrs	8	1	9
Total		**153**	**112**	**265**

In table 4, the students between ages 15-18 years showed high conflict resolution among themselves. This may be because they have received adequate conflict resolution skills from their peers through peer mediation or they may have matured in age.

Table 5: Chi-square statistics

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-square	5.338[b]	1	.002		
Continuity Correction[a]	2.901	1	.006		
Likelihood ratio	3.348	1	.004		
Fishers Exact Test				.008	.004
N of Valid cases	**265**				

[a.] Computed only for a 2x2 table

[b.] 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 56.

From the statistical test above, it was established that there are significant age difference (p<0.05) in response concerning the level of conflict resolution among students of different age brackets in secondary schools. Therefore the hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference in levels of conflict among students of different age is rejected.

4. Discussions

4.1 Differences in conflict resolution among students of different gender, age and class among secondary school students

Attempts to determine the levels of conflict resolution among student of different gender, age brackets and class yielded similar observations, where each gender believed that the levels of conflict resolution was low even though it was worse for males than females after performing a statistical test using independent t-test (table 4). In normal circumstances, the society treats females as the weaker sex and is considered to be more exposed to the societal evils. This notion is extended to the school and in the process many school authority treat female students with more care and understanding than they treat the males who are considered more adaptive to the situation. As such many schools may have had more specialized conflict resolution mechanisms for females than males.

Similarly, for students with different age groups, it was established that the levels of conflict resolution was low for majority of the students. However for students aged between 19-20 years a high proportion of students have low levels of conflict resolution than other students who were much younger. Despite this, statistical test showed that age and conflict resolution bear no relationship. This therefore could imply age difference between form two and form three students does not warrant smartness in resolving conflicts that do occur in the school. A form two student can exercise his or her skill more effectively than a form three student. In any case students have different experiences as they come from different households and the way in which they previously resolve conflicts differed.

On the other hand it is expected that an ideal age of many students in Form 2 and Form 3 should be between 15 to 17 years and therefore it is probable that most of the students aged 19-20 years had repeated classes or are slow learners. It is thus probable also that many of the programmes in conflict resolution are targeting younger students than older students who are deemed to be clever and more obedient.

It was also noted that the levels of conflict resolution differed between students of Form 2 and Form 3 with more of students in Form 2 stating that conflict resolution was higher in quality than those of Form 3. This should not however be construed to mean that most students in Form 2 or Form 3 liked the quality of conflict resolution. It only implies that many students in Form 2 are more comfortable with the levels of conflict resolution than their Form 3 counterparts. The differences in levels of perception of conflict resolution between Form 2 and form 3 were attributed to the length of stay in the schools and levels of care required by the students. Many school administrators including headmaster and teachers believe that Form 3 have stayed more in the schools and know the normal regulations and rules governing the school and are not in any position to cause any unrest that would render them in need of conflict resolution mechanism (Jones 2005). On the other hand Form 2's are known to be very unstable and very destructive and are yet to get down to serious study. To compound this, many are just from Form one where they were regarded as inferior to the rest of the students (Dudley *et al*., 2005). To

countenance this inferiority, they tend to express some degree of dependence by engaging in unruly behaviors. Thus many school head teachers and other management in the school usually give more priority to counselling of form two students to avoid conflicts.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

There were statistically significant differences in levels of conflict resolution among students of different gender where females are found to have more resolution strategies than their male counterparts.

Conflict resolution levels also differ significantly among students of different age with the older students believing that there is low level of conflict resolution. However no significant relationship existed between age and conflict resolution among secondary school students.

There were significant differences among students of different class concerning the levels of conflict resolution with those of Form 2 believing that the levels of conflict resolution was high than those from Form 3. However there was no association between students class and conflict resolution.

5.2 Recommendations

1. School head teachers should evaluate students and categorize them relative to their conflict resolution levels and foster a more appropriate approach in enhancing conflict resolution among them.
2. Special counseling methods for students with low levels of conflict which are in harmony with the basic principles of education, to be developed to ensure their issues are solved.

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