

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Examining Challenges Faced by Secondary School Students in Kakamega County, Kenya in Their Application of Life Skills for Conflict Management among Themselves

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Abstract:

Life Skills Education (LSE) is internationally recognized for equipping people with abilities to adapt to daily challenges. Students face heightened peer group interaction making interpersonal conflicts rampant as they try to assert themselves while also seeking cooperation. Life skills become prerequisite for conflict management. It is disturbing that despite mainstreaming LSE in Kenya's school curriculum in 2003, students continue to experience heightened relationship-based conflicts with insurmountable consequences that jeopardize learning as revealed in a survey of schools in Kakamega County, Kenya. This paper examined the challenges faced by secondary school students in Kakamega County in their application of life skills for conflict management among themselves with the intention of providing insight into what can make LSE more proactive in conflict management. The research was a Descriptive Survey that employed the Ex Post Facto Design. Interviews, questionnaires, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and observation checklists were used to collect primary data. Probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used to select the 456 respondents including students, school administrators and sponsors, LSE and Guidance and Counselling (G & C) teachers from four Sub Counties in Kakamega County. Study findings confirmed that LSE can indeed equip students with life skills for conflict management. An examination of the students' conflict management styles to determine whether they precipitated conflict or contributed to conflict resolution revealed two key factors that are determinants of the choices made by the students; the desire to be with and like peers and the fear of solitude. This made students avoid compromise, collaborate or be accommodative. It also determined their decision to refrain from competitive tendencies. While students thought they used these techniques for conflict management, the administrators and LSE teachers viewed it differently; they viewed it as collusion by peers to get away with mischief. The views of the administrators and LSE teachers were that students mainly used avoidance and competition techniques because most of them were inept in the face of conflict. Many students confessed that when faced with conflict they did not know what to do and conflict situations left them stressed/embarrassed/lonely/useless or angry. This revelation enshrines the course of LSE for secondary school students. The research recommends that teachers and sponsors should monitor challenges that students face so that they play an advisory role to the students in a free and friendly environment that builds the student's trust in them. Students need to brainstorm on areas of conflict and challenges they face in conflict management so that they together take a stance on ways of handling these conflicts with the involvement of their teachers. Parents who are a key source of life skills should build self awareness, self esteem and self confidence in their children.

Keywords: Challenges, application, life skills, conflict management

1. Introduction

KIE (2008), states that education is a means by which individuals are equipped with knowledge, skills and values that enable them to become productive citizens. UNESCO (2000), cites that the learning potential of many children and youth in the world is compromised by drug and alcohol abuse, violence and injury, early and unintended pregnancy, infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections; yet these conditions and behaviours can be improved by life skills-based education. Life skills-based health education has been known to make significant contributions to the healthy development of children and adolescents. Mutie and Ndambuki (2001), note that young people grow up in an environment where they have to interact with others. This predisposes them to conflict. Challenges facing the adolescents are compounded by various factors such as complex developmental changes during adolescence, lack of positive role models, negative mass media influence and

inadequate and unreliable sources of information especially on human sexuality. In order to function effectively in these different settings; they need to acquire social skills that can facilitate interpersonal relationships within a community.

In traditional African society, proper structures and strategies which have now died had been put in place to help the children and youth develop and grow as responsible productive members of the society. Kenya Institute of Education, (KIE,2008) notes that throughout the Eastern and South African region (ESAR), there has been a growing awareness that LSE for children and adolescents have for a long time been neglected. A lot of emphasis is laid on imparting academic knowledge while leaving out acquisition of psychological skills which is an inadequate way of preparing young people for the complex challenges that exist in the world. There is need for the youth to be enabled to develop positive values, attitudes, skills and healthy behaviour in order to help them effectively deal with the challenges of everyday life. The Ministry of Education realized that these challenges can be overcome through LSE. This need to focus on life skills is deemed to be a critical response to challenges facing young people today as highlighted in a number of international recommendations. The 1990 Jomtien, Thailand World Conference on Education for All (EFA) includes Universal Primary Education (UPE) of which LSE is a component in the six goals that were to be achieved by the year 2015. UPE was later expected to speed up progress towards achievement of the other Millennium Development Goals (UNICEF, 2002).

Kenya's Vision 2030 identifies three key pillars that will enhance development namely, social, economic and political. The social pillar which enshrines LSE views Kenya's journey towards prosperity as involving the building of a just and cohesive society that enjoys equitable social development in a clean secure environment. This quest is the basis of transformation in eight key social sectors namely, education and training, health, water and sanitation, environment, housing and urbanization, gender, youth, sports and culture (Republic of Kenya, 2007). Kenya recognizes that education and training of all Kenyans is fundamental to the success of the Vision 2030. Education equips citizens with understanding and knowledge that enables them to make informed choices about their lives and those facing the Kenyan society. It will help address gender imbalance, youth related problems and obstacles facing vulnerable groups by equipping them with life skills that will enable them to live more productive and satisfying lives in an expanding diverse economy.

As a signatory to the United Nations the Kenyan government chose to implement LSE through the Ministry of Education as a remedy to psychosocial challenges. KIE laid down various strategies, the first initiative was to establish the HIV and AIDS Education programme in schools; this was expected to impart life skills that would help prevent the spread of the disease among the youth in and out of school through behaviour change as it was recommended by the Koech Report (Republic of Kenya, 1999). Resultantly, the Kenyan education curriculum was reviewed in the year 2003; Life Skills Education was integrated and infused into various subjects. Teaching and learning materials were developed and disseminated, HIV and AIDS Education content was infused into the existing curriculum in schools. Education stakeholders were sensitized, training facilitated and teachers in serviced. Guidance and counseling service was emphasized and a Guidance and Counselling Teachers Handbook developed to equip teachers with knowledge and basic skills in Guidance and Counselling.

1.2. Challenges Faced by Students in the Application of LSE for Conflict Management

The ages of students in secondary school mainly range between 13 and 20 years, a period during which one is in the adolescent stage. Serfert and Hoffnung (1987), explain that these adolescent years present new and unique challenges for children. The physiological changes include changes in both primary and secondary sex characteristics. Girls grow breasts, they widen hips, while boys' shoulders broaden and they break their voices among other changes. There are those who will mature early and those who may mature late. They must come to terms with their bodies as they suddenly experience the growth spurt. The growth spurt brings in challenges related to self awareness, self concept and self esteem. There are those who will love their new self and receive accolades from their family and peers while others may meet demeaning remarks that will drive them to self hate. Students who enjoy self acceptance and acceptance by others amidst the changes in physiological growth are bound to be better placed in managing conflicts that arise unlike those who do not enjoy it. For the ones who can handle challenging situations, self belief is what will make them be able to resolve conflicts. Bagaas et al (1997), state that "They are able because they think they are able"; the meaning here is that students who have high self esteem will feel that they have abilities, they are happy, they are capable, likeable and can excel. This high self confidence will make them try to resolve challenges that they meet. In the face of conflict, it will not be easy for them to suffer embarrassment, stress or humiliation. The positive attitude that they maintain will give them an upper hand during conflicts.

On the contrary students who probably feel they are ugly, too big, too small, unlikeable, unwanted or that they are poor at anything because of the developmental changes or otherwise, will suffer low self esteem and subsequently low self confidence. This negative self concept will heighten their level of difficulty when handling conflict. They are bound to suffer anxiety, stress, fear, embarrassment, bouts of anger and hatred. They may be prone to feeling lonely, discriminated, useless and unwanted. These feelings will make them hate themselves and they will also feel that others hate them. When angry with themselves such students will easily displace their anger on others. This scenario opens room to heightening of conflicts among students in secondary schools.

Mutie and Ndambuki (2001), explain that anxiety and stress prevent concentration and effective work and depicts itself through sleeplessness, crying for no good reason, withdrawal, silence and general desperation that can lead to drug abuse or even suicide. The poor self concept therefore presents a continuum of two extremities; self destructive tendencies such as suicide at one end and those tendencies that are destructive and conflict-causing to others at the other end, such as

displaced aggression. The entire continuum superimposes the need for LSE to help students in secondary schools; and this is why this study sought to examine the skills that the students in secondary schools in Kakamega County have received in LSE to help them deal with conflicts resulting from poor self concept.

During the adolescent stage, the hormonal changes of puberty trigger the development of full sexual maturity often resulting into a high level of curiosity surrounding the mystery of sexuality among secondary school students. Many wishes to not only make friends with the opposite sex but also seek for information on issues such as petting and intercourse. Thornburg's study (1975), in America indicates that a high percentage of such information is got from peers. More reliable sources of information such as parents and schools contribute little here because they are hesitant to discuss sexual behaviour despite their interest and concern (Spear, 1985).

These youth in this scenario are confronted with challenges that include fear of association with the opposite sex versus fear of loneliness and fear of belonging with peers versus fear of discrimination. They find themselves in embarrassing states when their relationships are condemned by fellow peers, their parents, teachers and even their religious faith. They do not know how much to give to a relationship, hence the conflict of intimacy versus isolation arises. This inner struggle that students face in secondary schools is what gives birth to conflicts between students. The students find themselves in conflict as they face the challenge between asserting one's individuality and at the same time desiring cooperation with peers. This necessitates the teaching of LSE so as to help the students to form healthy relationships that allow for proper management of stress and multiple conflicts. It is against this backdrop that the researcher deemed it necessary to find out why students in Kakamega County Secondary Schools continue to face challenges in handling friendships while LSE has been taught in schools for over 10 years.

Decision making ability is critical in conflict management. Bagaas et al, (1987), state that decisions are influenced by family, values, needs and wants, friends and resources. The decision that students make in the face of conflicts determine whether the conflicts they face can be resolved amicably or whether they get escalated. Students often use conflict management styles that they believe can help them in handling conflict best. Knowledge of conflict management styles in this study is very essential since the manner in which students manage conflicts that they encounter reveals how well one is equipped with life skills or one's level of inadequacy. The style chosen for handling a particular conflict also determines whether the issue degenerates further and whether it can be managed or not. In order to understand and appreciate the challenges that students face in application of LSE for conflict management it is very necessary to delve into conflict management styles that are commonly used. It is how well one responds to or resolves conflict that determines the degree of challenge that one is exposed to. Response and resolution involve choice of a conflict management style. The choice made is governed by the inherent life skills.

1.3. Conflict Management Styles

Zartman (1989), considers conflict management to be the elimination and neutralization of conflict from erupting into crisis or to cool a crisis in an eruption. This definition implies that one ought to have inherent abilities such as good communication skills, friendship formation and sustenance skills and good negotiation skills so as to be able to eliminate the occurrence of conflict. In order to neutralize conflict effectively, one should possess good negotiation skills, problem solving skills and be able to come up with creative solutions that would solve the conflict at hand. In all these, a positive self image adds strength to the conflict management abilities.

Otite, Onigu and Albert (1999), report that conflict management is more of a long-term arrangement involving institutionalized provisions and regulative procedures for dealing with conflicts wherever they occur. This view justifies the need to teach LSE through the school system so as develop inbuilt capacities in the learners to assist them in handling interpersonal conflicts. The views presented emphasize the fact that conflicts ought to be resolved and this happens successfully when one has learnt skills of conflict resolution. This study aimed at finding out if indeed the students in secondary schools in Kakamega County are equipped with conflict management skills and the challenges they face in their application of these skills.

Hugget (1998), points out that people prefer any one of five options when faced with conflict. Their choice is determined by two main factors; whether they are goal-oriented than relationship-centred or whether the relationships mean more to them than achieving goals. Thomas and Kilman (2007), too, identify these five main conflict management styles. They argue that no one strategy is better than another and that certain strategies will be more ideal in different situations and cultures (Blake and Mouton, 1964, Holt and Devore 2005). These five styles vacillate between high and low levels of cooperation and high and low levels of assertiveness, where cooperation indicates great tendencies to show concern for others while assertiveness indicates great tendencies to be more interested in the self to the disregard of others. Thomas and Kilman (2007), define assertiveness as the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his/her own concerns; this equates Hugget's goal orientation while they view cooperativeness as the extent to which an individual attempt to satisfy another person's concerns this depicts the relationship-centred approach of Hugget (1998). The researcher sought to understand how students in secondary schools in Kakamega County struck a balance between the value for the self and value for others while selecting their conflict management style and the challenges that came with it.

Thomas and Kilman (2007) identify these five main styles of conflict management as follows: accommodation, avoidance, collaboration, competition and compromising. Accommodation is a style that is both unassertive and cooperative.

One overlooks personal concerns for concerns of others. One cooperates to a high-degree, it may be at one's own expense and actually works against personal goals, objectives, and desired outcomes as one strives to show more concern for others than the self. Augsberger (1982), notes that, accommodators almost always give in to the person they are in conflict with. One strives to preserve relational harmony by accommodating the other's desires. This approach is effective when the other party is the expert or has a better solution. It can also be effective for preserving future relations with the other party.

Avoiding is where one prefers to evade the issue. It is a style that is unassertive and uncooperative. Low concern for the self and low concern for others leads to the avoiding style. This is a non-confrontational style that involves withdrawing from the situation and avoiding the other party. One is neither helping the other party reach their goals nor is he/she assertively pursuing personal goals. Hugget (1998), explains that avoiders have little or no concern for goals and relationships. When conflict arises, they withdraw and abdicate all responsibility. In the face of conflict, they remain helpless, passive and non-assertive. They cannot cope, they opt to quit. Fear prompts avoiders to flee robbing them the benefits of conflict. Avoidance works when the issue is trivial or when you have no chance of winning. It can also be effective when the issue would be very costly. It is also very effective when the atmosphere is emotionally charged and one needs to create some space. Sometimes issues will resolve themselves, but "hope is not a strategy", and, in general, avoiding is not a good long-term strategy.

Collaborating involves partnering or pairing up with the other party to achieve both of your goals. The style is both assertive and cooperative. This is how one breaks free of the "win-lose" paradigm and seeks the "win-win." There is a high level of concern for self and high concern for others. Both parties at conflict engage in solving the problem and the needs for both parties are met. Hugget (1998), emphasizes that for collaborators, goals and relationships are both rated highly. They view conflict as opportunity hence they seek a solution that will enable them and other people to achieve their goals. They believe conflict enriches relationship. This can be effective for complex scenarios where you need to find a novel solution. This can also mean re-framing the challenge to create a bigger space and room for everybody's ideas. The drawback is that it requires a high-degree of trust and reaching a consensus can require a lot of time and effort to get everybody on board and to synthesize all the ideas.

Competing is the "win-lose" approach which is also referred to as the dominating style and is most confrontational. The style is both assertive and uncooperative. The individual is more concerned with the self than others. One uses forceful tactics and parties are unwilling to reconcile. This style results in one party winning victory at the expense of the other. One acts in a very assertive way to achieve personal goals, without seeking to cooperate with the other party. Hugget (1998), posits that goals are of such great importance to competitors that they seek to reach their target no matter the cost. The overriding need to climb to the top of the ladder persuades them where necessary to attack, overpower, overwhelm, and intimidate others verbally if not physically. Winning makes them to glow with pride and a sense of achievement. They readily sacrifice relationships to win. This approach may be appropriate for emergencies when time is of the essence, or when you need quick, decisive action, and people are aware of and support the approach.

Compromising is the "win-a-little lose-a-little" scenario where neither party really achieves what they want. This requires a moderate level of assertiveness and cooperation, moderate concern for self goals and moderate concern for relationships. Here the parties look for mutually satisfactory outcomes superficially without digging into the problem. It may be appropriate for scenarios where you need a temporary solution, or where both sides have equally important goals. The trap is to fall into compromising as an easy way out, when collaborating would produce a better solution.

One needs the skill to effectively resolve conflict by determining the strategies most appropriate for a given situation (Koza & Dant, 2007). Strong conflict resolution ability is measured by ability to determine the conflict resolution strategy preferred by the majority of those individuals involved in conflict; while weak conflict resolution ability is determined if the strategy selected is not preferred by the majority. Each one needs to know his or her own default patterns and whether they are working for him or her so as to improve one's self-awareness. Using scenario-based approach, one can choose more effective conflict management styles and test their effectiveness in those situations. The diagram below shows the five different styles of conflict management.

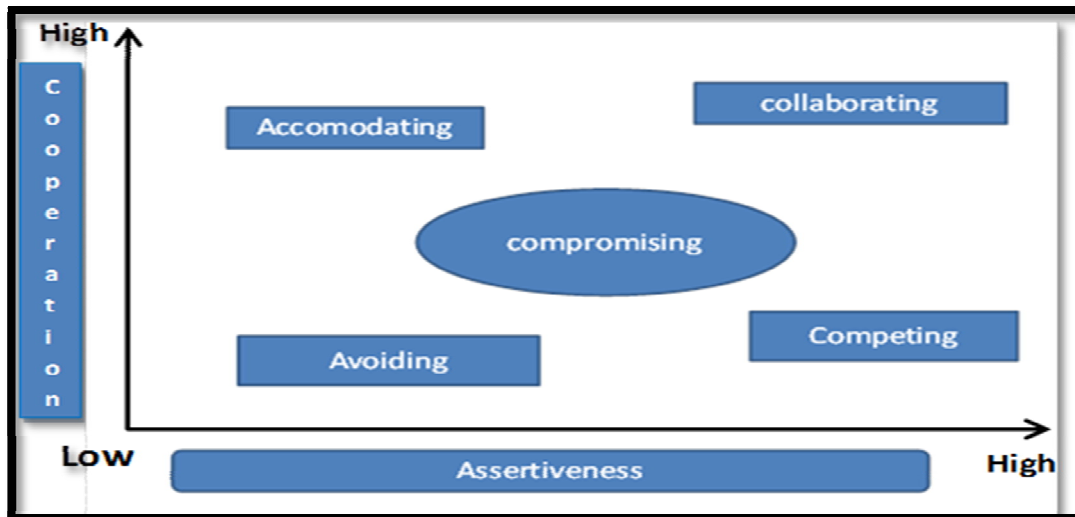


Figure1: Conflict Management Styles
Source: Thomas, Kilman (2007) 2x2 Matrix Model

These conflict management styles draw a relationship between the structure of LSE and the students' ability and choice of style for managing conflicts. The main thematic areas in LSE target self-enhancing/preservation skills, relationship management skills and decision-making skills; in conflict management, students who over emphasize self-enhancing skills will decide to choose techniques that are more assertive while those who emphasize relationship skills will decide to choose more of the cooperative skills in conflict management. The purpose of this study was to find reasons for students in secondary schools in Kakamega County selecting one style over the other and the challenges that they faced in their application of these life skills that precipitated conflicts among them.

2. Statement of the Problem

Life Skills Education enjoys international approval as a prerequisite subject in education for every young person due to its inherent life skills enhancement that aid youths in conflict management among other growth and development needs. Globally the success of teaching LSE to the youth has been varied. This has been manifested in the USA, Canada, United Kingdom and a growing number of African countries including South Africa, Malawi and Zimbabwe (WHO, 1999). In these countries the rationale for introducing LSE was dictated by prevailing social contexts that required sustained response. These varies from substance abuse, prevention of HIV and AIDS, adolescent pregnancy, child abuse, coping with social pressure to creating a curriculum that transmits education for life, (The Human Rights Watch, 2002, WHO, 1999). The success of these initiatives has depended on the degree of exposure to LSE. The exposure to LSE in Kenyan schools started in 2003 as an integrated subject aimed at addressing the HIV and AIDS pandemic as recommended by the Koech Report, (Republic of Kenya, 1999). Subsequent recommendation by a National Life Skills stakeholders conference held in Nairobi made LSE an independent subject aimed at equipping learners in both primary and secondary school with psychosocial skills that would help them cope with conflicts and challenges that arise as they grow (KIE, 2006). Hence from 2008, LSE has been one of the compulsory subjects listed for teaching in Kenyan schools. To date learners continue to show inability to handle life challenges in schools and in their social lives despite the implementation of the LSE curriculum. In Kakamega County, cases of school dropout and spread of HIV, frequent fights, theft cases, bullying, harassment of students by prefects, drug abuse, lesbianism/homosexuality, sneaking out of school and boy-girl relationships that culminate into pregnancy and at times abortion are rampant (Kakamega County, Quality and Standards Assessment Reports 2012-2014). The problems point towards challenges in application of life skills leading towards unresolved conflicts. This brings to question the essence of LSE provided for conflict management. It is in this context that this study sought to examine challenges faced by secondary school students in Kakamega County in their application of life skills for conflict management among themselves.

3. Research Objectives

This paper sought to examine challenges faced by secondary school students in Kakamega County in their application of life skills for conflict management among themselves. Specifically, it assessed the students' conflict management styles and established their emotional reactions in the face of conflict

4. Conceptual Framework

This study was informed by three theories namely; Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Bee,1998), Kohlberg's theory of moral development, (Kohlberg1981) and the conflict communication theory advanced by Cahn (1992) in order to

provide a solid framework for its analysis. Piaget's theory shows that the period of adolescence, is a time when most people are of secondary school age; this is the time when one can ably master higher level cognitive skills such as decision making. It is at the same stage in Kohlberg's view that they ought to imbibe skills of knowing to live with the self and with others. It is also this time that they can develop moral values in their society. As they go through this stage there is the push and pull between being able to assert one's authority as the 'self' and the desire to cooperate with others since there is the need to belong with others. This scenario heightens the pressures and conflicts that surround the learner. It is these conflicts experienced that Cahn seeks to interpret in his conflict communication theory. Proper or improper application of Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories empowers students in secondary school to interpret conflict amongst themselves as either manageable or unmanageable.

5. Research Design and Methodology

The research was a Descriptive Survey that employed the Ex Post Facto Design. Interviews, questionnaires, FGDs and observation checklists were used to collect primary data. Secondary data reviewed was used to corroborate the findings. Both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used to select the 456 respondents from four Sub Counties in Kakamega County, Kenya: namely: Kakamega Central, Mumias, Butere and Lugari. The sample comprising both rural and urban population was 384 students, 22 school administrators, 22 teachers of LSE, 22 G & C teachers and 6 sponsors cutting across girls boarding, boys boarding, mixed boarding, mixed day, girls' day and boys' day, girls' day and boarding and mixed day and boarding categories in both public and private schools. Four FGDs were also held to get more opinions and insight into this study. Data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The main techniques used to analyze were frequency distributions, bar charts, pie charts and percentages.

The Kakamega County is cosmopolitan in nature with a variety of tribes, religious groups in Kenya represented here as noted by the Kakamega County Education Task Force Report (Republic of Kenya, 2014). The cosmopolitanism allowed access to views from a variety of Kenyan cultures and religious faithful. This allowed the researcher to expose the study to a mixed breed of backgrounds, levels of socialization and varied school cultures. This scenario gave the researcher a rich cross section with diverse experiences that can serve as a representative population for the entire population. Kombo & Tromp (2006), state that capturing variability in a population allows for more reliability of the study and the greater the diversity and differences that exist in the population sample, the higher the applicability of the research findings to the whole population.

5.1. Sampling Technique & Sample Frame

Study Population	Sampling Technique	Population	Sample Size	Data Collection Instrument
Schools	Multistage	321	22	Observation checklist
Administrators	Purposive	321	22	Interview
Sponsors	Purposive	321	6	Interview
LSE teachers	Purposive	321	22	Questionnaire
G & C teachers	Purposive	321	22	Questionnaire
Form II & III students	Purposive/ simple random	Above 10000	384	Questionnaire
FGDs	Simple random	22 schools	4 groups of 8	Interview

Table 1
Source: Researcher (2016)

6. Findings

The respondents were exposed to questions that aimed at gauging the students' conflict management styles; this targeted the five main conflict management styles. The emotions of the students in the face of conflict were also assessed to help understand their challenges while faced with conflict.

6.1. Students' Conflict Management Style

Thomas and Kilman (2007), state that none of the five conflict management styles is bad but that a certain strategy will be more ideal in a different situation and a different culture. This view echoes the value of correctness of choice of a conflict management style in relation to situation and culture. Hence a good choice in one context may not necessarily remain appropriate in another situation. All the respondents were subjected to questions that denoted the students' conflict management styles. The conflict management styles were examined using statements deduced in association with the five different conflict management styles. "Avoidance" was designated as 'cry or do nothing'; "accommodation" was designated as 'accept the status quo or accept the situation as it is'; "compromise" was designated as 'sit with the opponent to discuss and resolve the matter'; "competition" was designated as 'quarrel, fight or beat the opponent' whilst "collaboration" was

designated as 'settling for anything agreeable'. The researcher chose to compare the views of the students on conflict management styles with those of the administrators, LSE teachers and G & C teachers. These respondents were expected to choose the frequency with which the students used any of these reactions on a scale of 1-3 represented as follows: 1= not sure, 2= rare 3= often. The results are computed in table 2 below.

Conflict Management Style	Administrator		G & C Teacher		LSE Teacher		Student	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Compromise								
Often	5	22.7	4	18.2	6	27.3	279	72.7
Rare	16	72.7	16	72.7	13	59.1	87	22.6
Not sure	1	4.6	2	9.1	3	13.6	18	4.7
Total	22	100.0	22	100.0	22	100.0	384	100
Collaboration								
Often	11	50.0	8	36.4	11	50.0	227	54.1
Rare	8	36.4	12	54.5	6	27.3	104	27
Not sure	3	13.6	2	9.1	5	22.7	53	13.8
Total	22	100.0	22	100.0	22	100.0	384	100.0
Accommodation								
Often	12	54.5	6	27.3	11	50.0	222	57.9
Rare	9	40.9	15	68.2	10	45.5	122	31.8
Not sure	1	4.5	1	4.5	1	4.5	40	10.4
Total	22	100	22	100	22	100	384	100
Avoidance								
Often	17	77.3	13	59.1	10	45.5	105	27.3
Rare	5	22.7	9	40.9	11	50.0	241	62.8
Not sure	0	0	0	0	1	4.5	38	9.9
Total	22	100	22	100	22	100	384	100
Competition								
Often	13	59.1	15	68.2	11	50.0	65	17
Rare	9	40.9	7	31.8	11	50.0	280	73
Not sure	0	0	0	0	0	0	39	10.2
Total	22	100	22	100	22	100	384	100

Table 2: Views of All Respondents on Students' Conflict Management Styles
Source: Researcher (2016)

6.1.1. Compromise

Majority of the student respondents, 279 (72.7%) often sought for compromise when in conflict situations. Very few 87 (22.6%), said that they rarely sought for compromise while 18(4.7%) of the students were not sure whether they used this method to resolve their conflicts or not. The desire for compromise by many students at this age is in agreement with Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Bee 1998), where being good for adolescents becomes important for its own sake. By compromising, the students seek to avoid conflict. They feel that failure to compromise may cost them friendships. Hugget (1998), compares this kind of outlook to being a relationship-centred approach rather than a goal-oriented approach. A student who compromises with others is more interested in retaining a relationship at the expense of his/her personal goals. The figure below shows the distribution of their responses by gender:

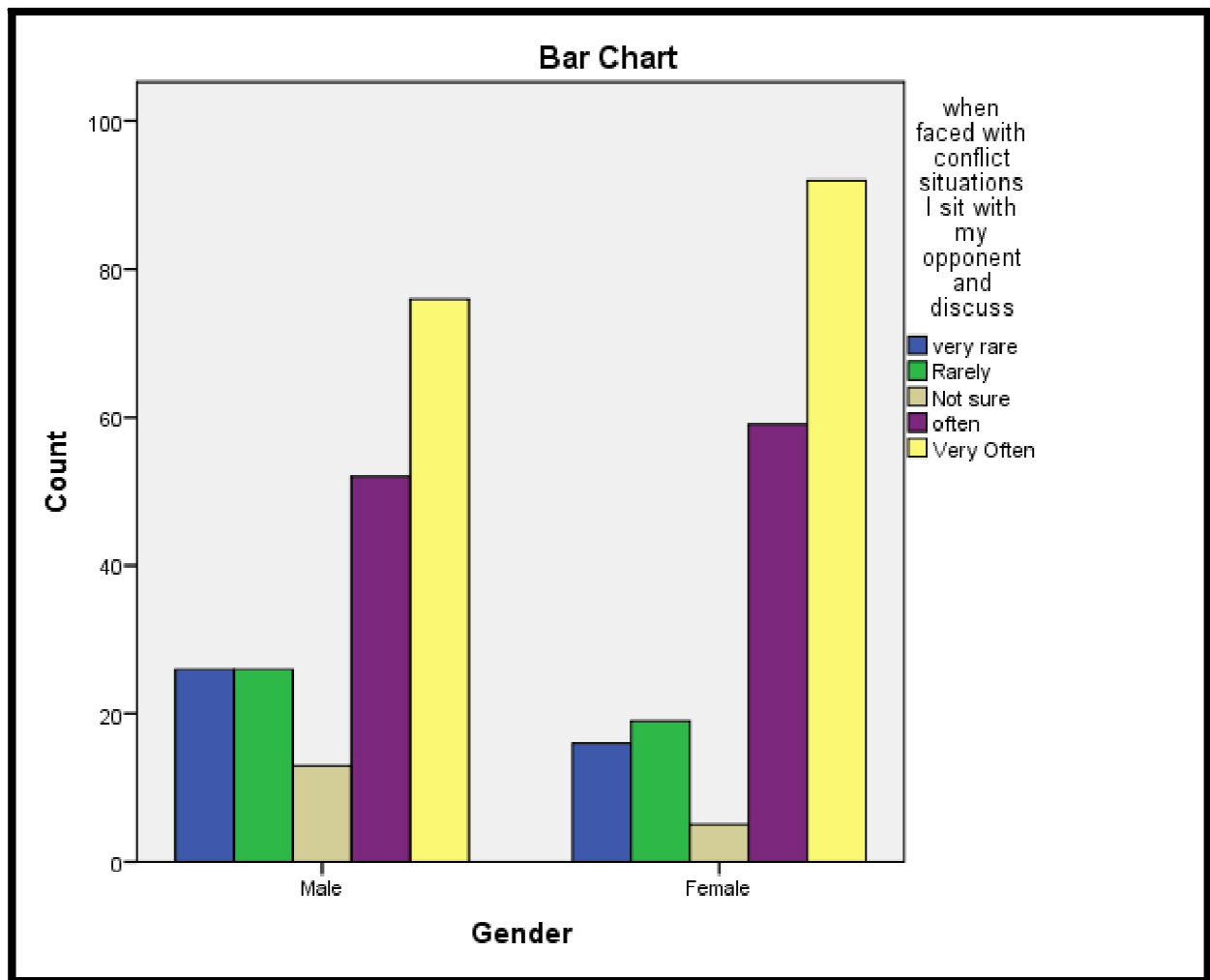


Figure 2: Compromising Style
Source: Researcher (2016)

During the FGDs it was clarified that students who preferred sitting together to seek agreement said that negotiation brings forth understanding and it saves time. Those who said they rarely sat to discuss conflicts explained that some opponents are often unwilling to discuss, some shunned discussions for fear of opening up their hearts to people who would in turn reveal their inner secrets to the public and thereby demean them. This fear of betrayal of trust made some students to avoid venturing into discussions for compromise.

In the opinion of the students, compromise was the method which they commonly used in the face of conflict, this was cited as often used by 279 (72.7%) of the students. On the contrary all the other respondents cited compromise as the style that is rarely used by the students for conflict management as follows: administrators, 16 (72.7%); G & C teachers, 15 (68.1%) and LSE teachers 15(68.1%). During an interview session with one administrator it was divulged that many students compromised mainly in wrong doing, so as to feel a sense of belonging or to fit with the rest, they did not want to offend their peers; rarely did they compromise to resolve conflicts among themselves.

6.1.2. Collaboration

Hugget (1998), states that collaboration allows a high level of concern for self and others. Both parties in conflict desire to solve the problems of each other. They see conflict as opportunities to seek solution so as to enable each other achieve their goals. Over half of the students, 227 (59.1%), stated that they often collaborated with others in times of conflict, 104 (22%) rarely collaborated while 58 (13.8%) were not sure whether they collaborated or not. The fact that 162(40.9%) of the students could not state with surety their readiness to collaborate with others is a sure justification of prevalence of conflicts among secondary school students in Kakamega County. Figure 3 below shows the responses of the students:

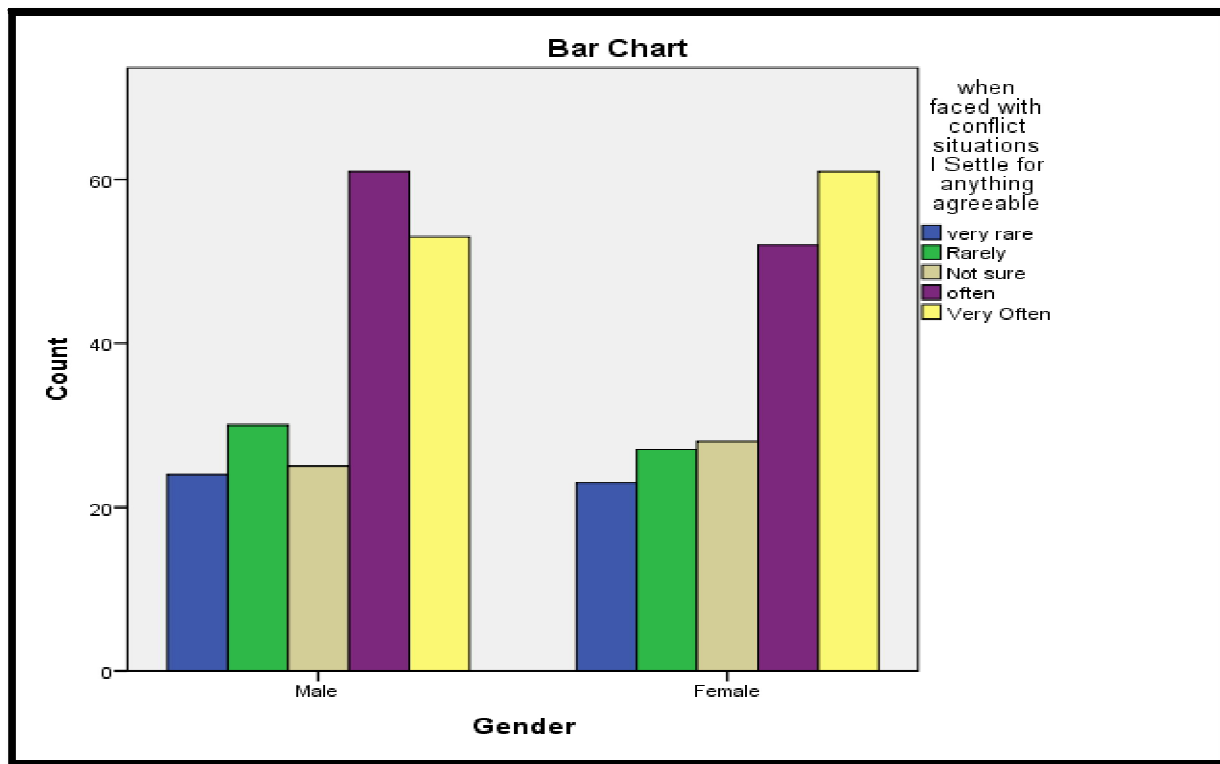


Figure 3: Collaboration Style
Source: Researcher (2016)

In the focus group discussions, it was explained that collaborating with seniors and was inevitable since it reduced friction greatly. Collaboration also boosted friendliness thereby creating peace. The few students who did not prefer collaboration explained that it was very difficult to collaborate with someone who openly publicized your private life. Half 11 (50%), of both the administrators and the LSE teachers agreed with the 227 (54.1%) students who said that they often used collaboration for conflict management while only 8 (36.4%), of the G & C teachers supported the students' views. The administrators explained that students collaborated in order to please each other by playing the 'good girl', 'good boy' status; this helped them retain friendship. It was also clarified by another administrator that collaboration could also be used negatively by the students to fuel conflicts especially where students ganged up for wrong doing. Under such circumstances their purpose would be to win against their opponents no matter the harm caused.

6.1.3. Accommodation

The students' accommodative ability in the face of conflict was rated. Over half, 222(57.9%), of the students said that they often were accommodative in the face of conflict. Students explained why they chose to be accommodative:

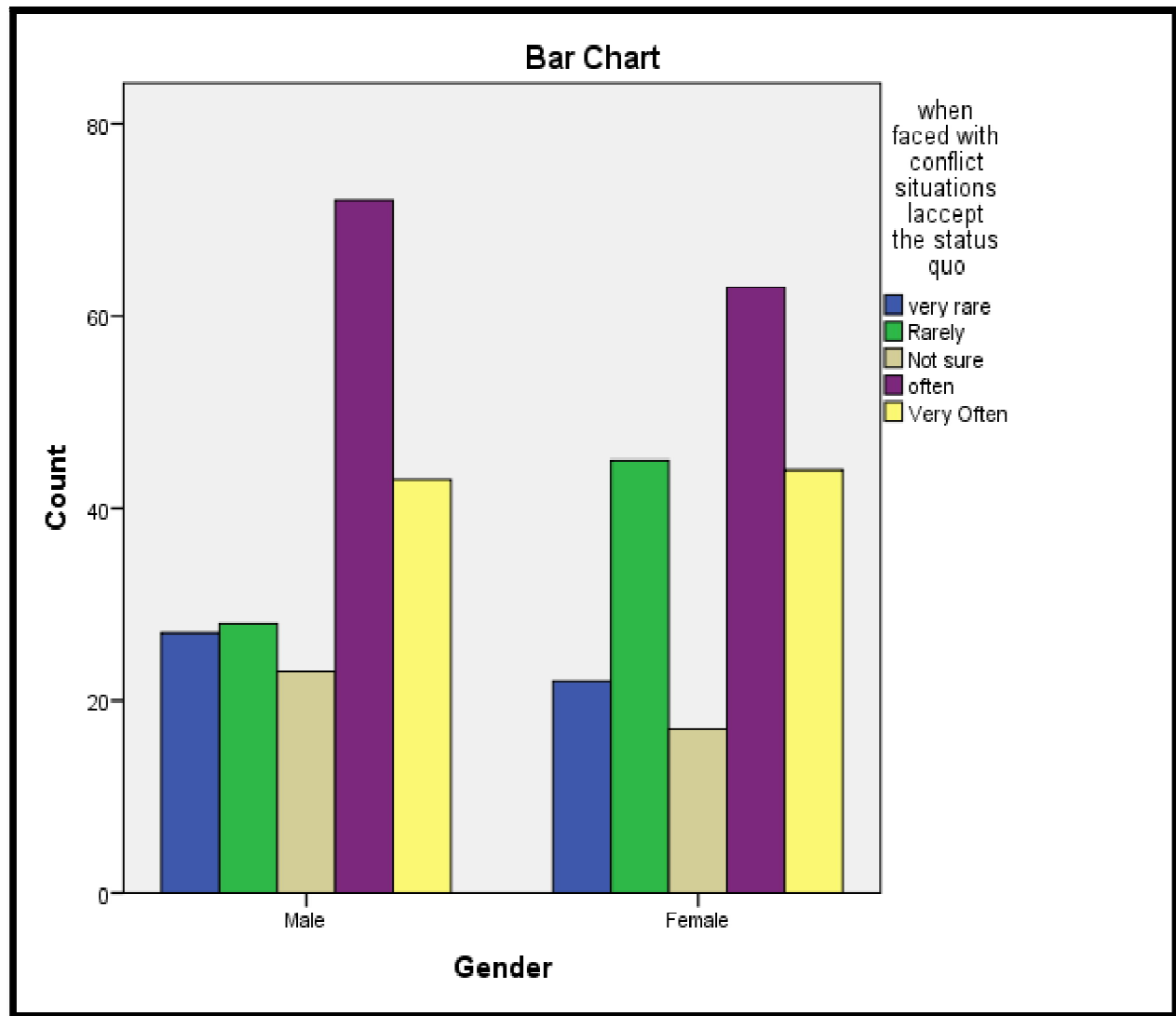
I allow the status quo to remain so as to prevent negative effects of conflict; I view this attitude as one way of problem solving. There are times when am left with no choice; in such instances I leave matters as they are (FGD, views of a Form II male student, Butere sub county, 2016)

The views of this student agree with Augsberger (1982), who explains that accommodators almost always give in to the person they are in conflict with; they strive to preserve relational harmony by accommodating the other person's desires. The biggest challenge that comes with accommodation is the suffering that a student may bear in silence! If such a student does not get an outlet, this continued pressure to accommodate can lead to an eruption thus creating conflicts. Many times, students who are quiet are prone to outbursts.

Few of the students, 122(31.7%), were rarely accommodative in the face of conflict while fewer, 40 (9.9%) were indifferent. Students who were rarely accommodative explained their views. One remarked that:

If I have not been told what I have done wrong or how I have contributed to a conflict situation I will not accept blame; I hate to be embarrassed, I hate defeat, I cannot sustain my anger when am innocent, I have to fight out for my course, (FGD views Form III female student, Mumias Sub county, 2016).

The sentiments of this student give a reflection of an assertive student; Thomas and Kilman (2007), define assertiveness as the extent to which an individual attempt to satisfy his/her concerns. This is the kind of student that uses the competitive approach to problem solving. He/she must win in every given situation. This desire to win always gives room to conflict when two students who have both chosen competition collide. The figure below presents the students' views:



*Figure 4: Accommodation Style
Source: Researcher (2016)*

Many, 12 (54.5%) of the administrators, 11 (50.0%) of the LSE teachers and only 5 (22.7%) of the G & C teachers agreed with the many students, 222 (57.9%) who said that they often used accommodation style for conflict management. The administrators clarified during the interview that students opted for this style when they were under pressure to comply or for fear of losing friends and also fear of being ridiculed publicly. It was pointed out that students who suffered low esteem were prone to choose accommodation when they lost their items even when they knew the thief for fear that when they report no one will take action since no one cares for them. This emphasizes the need for strong self enhancing skills like self awareness and high self esteem.

6.1.4. Avoidance

Avoidance as a conflict resolution technique was often used by 105 (27.3%) of the students while 241 (82.8%) rarely used it; 38 students (9.9%) were not sure if they used it. The tendency of students to use avoidance technique for conflict management also fuelled conflict because problems that went unreported and unresolved gave opportunity to the aggressor to heighten conflict. The results of the students who cited their responses to "cry or do nothing in the face of conflict" are cross tabulated below:

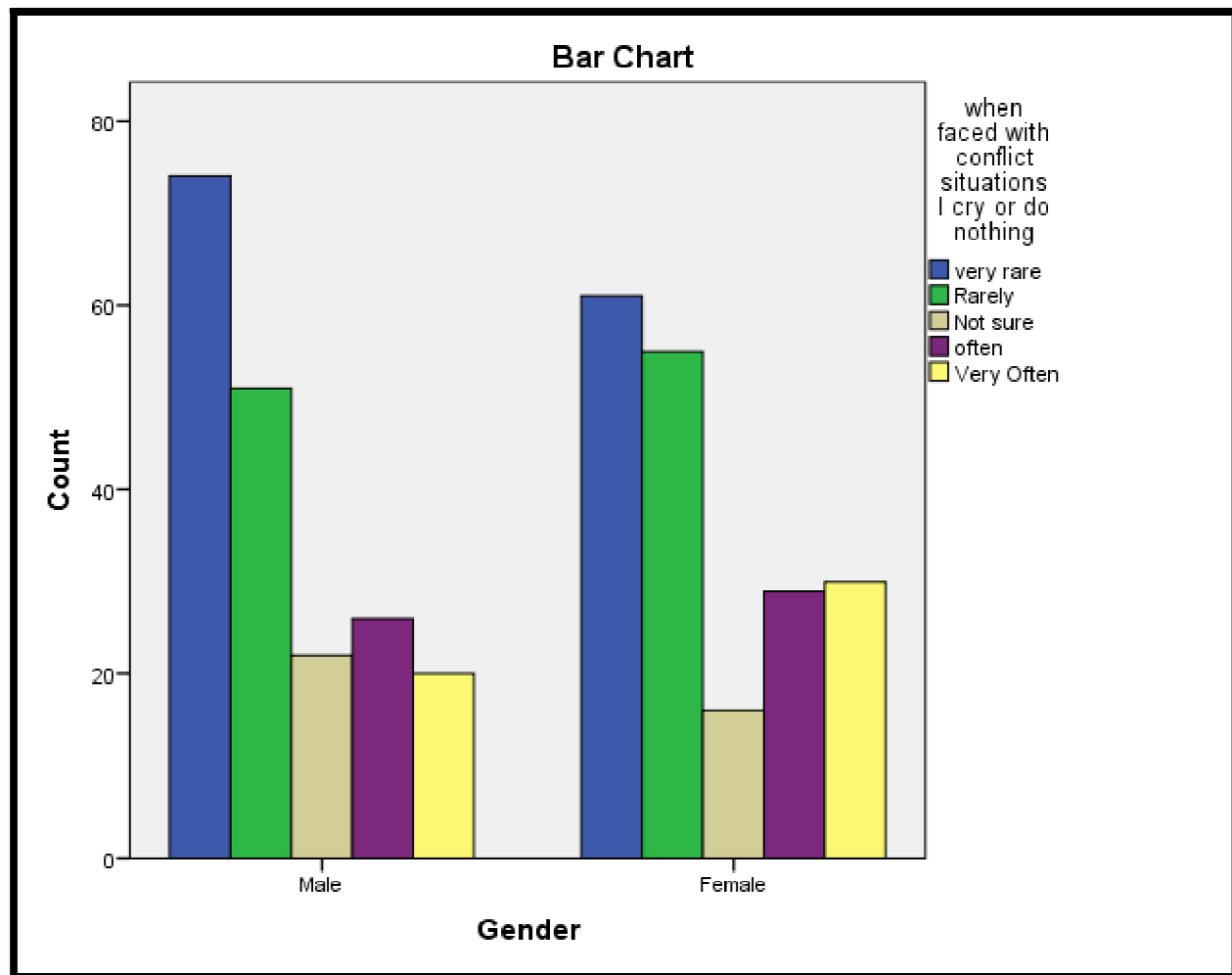


Figure 5: Avoidance Style
Source: Researcher (2016)

The students, who cited the avoidant technique explained that it was used when one was angry, embarrassed, or when one felt inadequate to contain the situation. One may cry under such circumstances to release tension. However, they also explained that crying or avoidance in itself is not a solution. One male student who said they rarely cried explained:

I am a man; we have been raised knowing men should live hard lives so if I cry they will say am childish. It is shameful to cry before others; they will mock you (FGD views of a Form II and III male students, Butere and Mumias Sub County respectively, 2016).

These confessions by these students show that cultural overtones have a bearing on the conflict management style that a student chooses to use. This truth is reflected in the results of the crosstabs since fewer males 46(23.9%) used the avoidance technique as contrasted with females 59(30.9%). Male students are expected by some cultures to take the confrontational approach to problem solving while females are expected to appear subservient. This finding reveals that LSE has a great role to play in assisting students handle conflicts well while taking care of cultural demands for inhibition and overindulgence.

Contrary to the views of the students, many, 17 (77.2%), of the administrators, 13 (59.1%) of the G & C teachers and 10 (45.5%) of the LSE teachers said that students often used the avoidance style for conflict management. An administrator explained during interview that the upbringing of a child contributed substantially to inhibition; parents who were harsh to their children and those who hardly listened to them caused the children to prefer inhibition in the face of conflict. Such children feared to report conflicts for fear of the consequences; they rather preferred to bear the frustration that comes with conflict. It was further clarified that students who had a weak personality did not engage in fights for fear of offending others.

6.1.5. Competition

Competition allows self assertion of rights, opinions and position on varied matters. It allows for aggression to ensure one's stand is recognized. The figure below presents the views of the students:

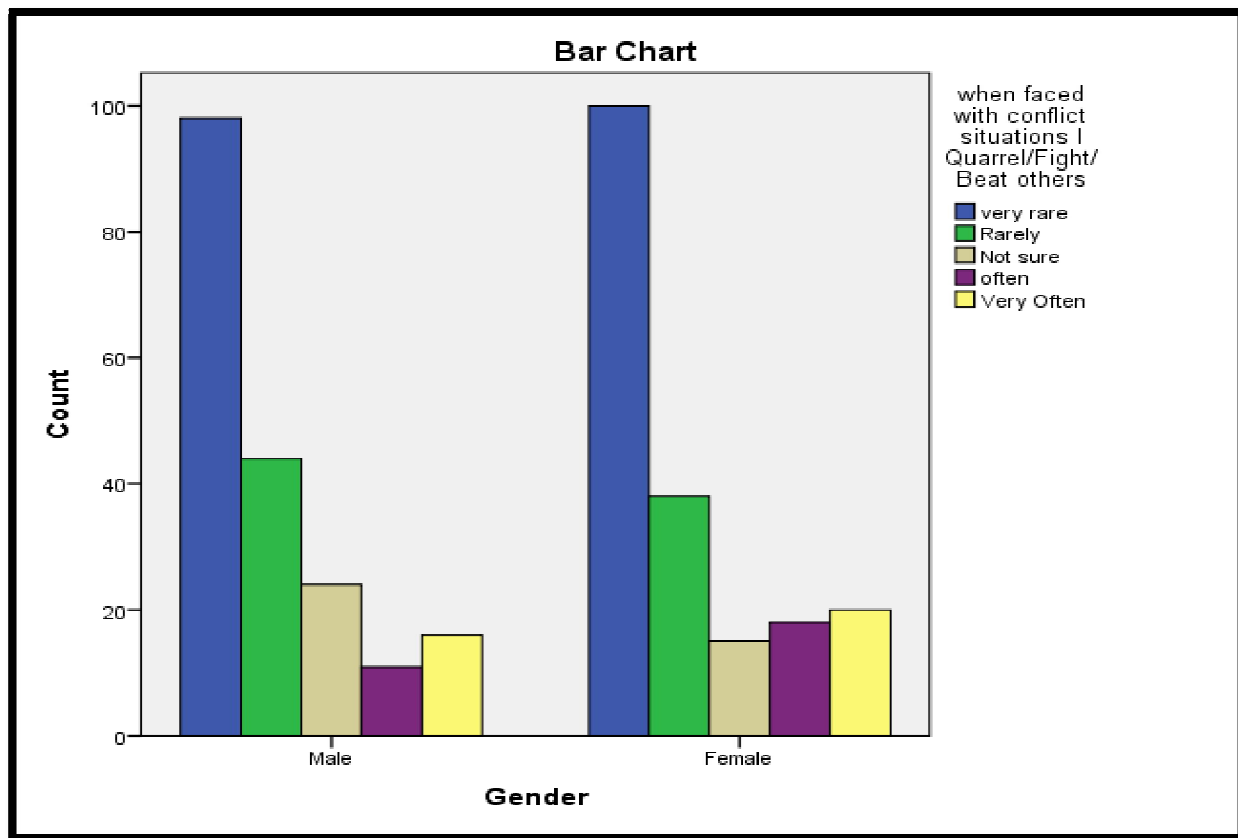


Figure 6: Competition Style
Source: Researcher (2016)

Majority of the students, 280 (72.8%), said they rarely used competition in the face of conflict; 65 (17%) often used competition style; 39 (10.2%) were undecided. One girl reported:

I know that I am weak, I don't want to be beaten, fighting is awkward, and it is not a solution. I fear embarrassment and I also know the consequences of fighting (FGD, views of a Form III female student, Mumias Sub County, 2016).

This student's view shows that students hate assertion that may defame them; they feel assertion may drive them to loneliness as they are shunned by others, yet they desire the company of others. Majority of the G & C teachers 15 (68.2%), 13 (59.1%) of the administrators and 11(50.0%) of the LSE teachers said that students often use competition when faced with conflicts. It was expressed by an administrator that some students are emotionally unstable, others are hot tempered while others are temperamental, yet others believe they must win in all situations; such students are prone to eruptions as they seek to protect their ego. They will argue and even they can throw tantrums so as to outshine others. It is noted that such students require life skills that can help them tame their emotions so as to be able to manage conflicts effectively.

The percentage scores were further computed into mean scores to determine the conflict management style that was commonly preferred by the students. The most preferred conflict management style was compromising followed by collaboration, then accommodation then, avoidance and finally competition refer to Figure 7 below.

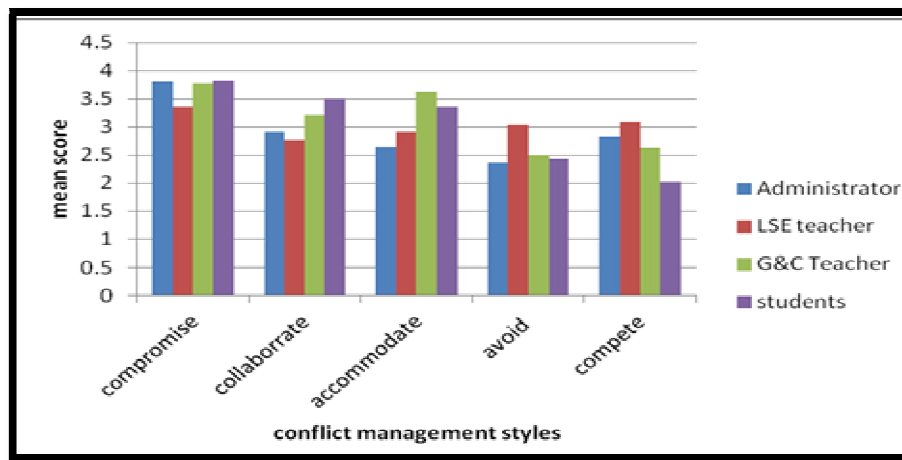


Figure7: Students' Mean Scores on Conflict Management Styles Commonly Used
Source: Researcher (2016)

Compromise, collaboration and accommodation are highly cooperative styles of conflict management. This high tendency for students to prefer more of cooperative styles of conflict management explains why peer pressure and mob mentality are highly active among students in secondary schools. Fear to offend others forces them to conform to activities which if left on their own to decide they would take the opposite view. This could be an explanation as to why social classes turned out to be one of the major causes of relationship-based conflicts.

The results in Figure 7 show that students tended to cooperate more with others rather than asserting themselves in the face of conflict. The Thomas, Kilman (2007) 2x2 matrix model that competition style of conflict management is very low in cooperation, but very high in assertiveness; hence a mean score of 2.02 scored above which is the least score proves that students preferred to cooperate more than to assert themselves. Avoidance which has the next least score below average (2.43) is equally very low in cooperation and also very low in competition, meaning a preference to keep aloof and wallow in self pity is shunned by the students in their opinion. This also implies that the students can hardly avoid cooperation and neither are they capable of asserting themselves fully well. This tendency explains the inner struggle that adolescents face as they try to fight peer pressure and mob mentality. This realisation shows the need for LSE to emphasize greatly on imparting the skill of self awareness and self esteem that would build more independence in the personality of students so as to make them avoid being driven by others but by reason.

6.2. Challenges Faced by Students While Resolving Conflicts

Students were required to state their emotional reactions whenever they faced conflict situations; these are emotions that come as a result of the student's inability to handle a given situation hence it becomes a compensatory measure. A range of the common emotional reactions that they depicted was listed and the students showed the frequency with which they exhibited these emotional reactions. The reactions included: feeling stressed, not knowing what to do, feeling embarrassed, feeling angered or hatred, feeling lonely/unwanted/discriminated, and feeling useless or like you should run away. The students' responses were gauged on a scale of three as follows: 1=rarely, 2=often and 3= very often. Table 3 below shows the percentages of the students' scores on frequency of specific emotional reactions.

Reactions of students when faced with conflict	Frequency & percentage	Rarely	Often	Very often	Total
I do not know what to do when in conflict situations	F %	86 22.4	127 33.1	171 44.5	384 100.0
I feel stressed when in conflict situations	F %	120 31.3	118 30.7	146 38.0	384 100.0
I feel angry, hatred when in conflict situations	F %	130 33.9	114 29.7	140 36.5	384 100.0
I feel lonely, unwanted / discriminated when in conflict situations	F %	134 34.9	120 31.3	130 33.9	384 100.0
I feel embarrassed when in conflict situations	F %	154 40.1	116 30.2	114 29.7	384 100.0
I feel useless/ I should run away when faced with conflict situations	F %	221 57.6	90 23.4	73 19.0	384 100.0

Table 3 : Frequency of Students' Specific Emotional Expressions
Source: Researcher (2016)

The students' emotional states were further presented in Figure 8 below:

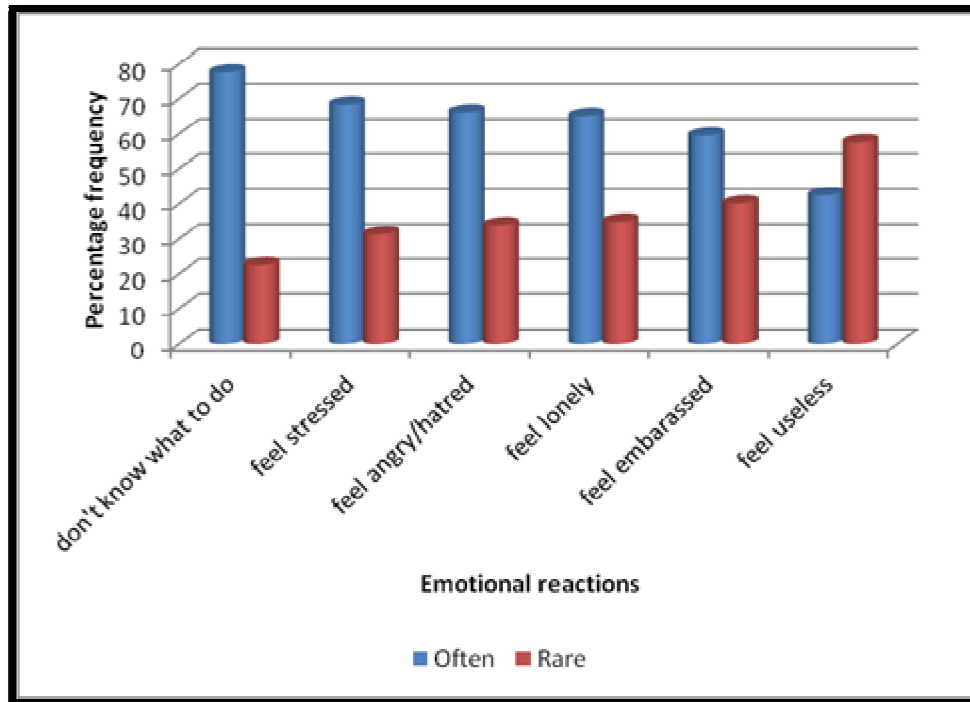


Figure 8: Students' Emotional State When Faced with Conflicts

Source: Researcher (2016)

Majority, 298(77.6%), of the students said that often they did not know what to do when faced with conflict situations. Inability to know what to do in a conflict situation is a dangerous state since in the view of Zartman (1989), conflict management implies elimination or neutralization of conflict; the question of not knowing what to do should never arise in their perspective. Inability to take action is avoidant as it leaves conflicts to chance which in the long run is also a problem. Students who keep to themselves when faced with conflict may eventually cause harm to others. During the FGDs the students gave various reasons why they did not know what to do:

There are some people who like to brag and behave like they are very strong. When I am confronted by such people I usually do not know what to do, I simply walk away or just keep off. (FGD, views of a Form III male student, Mumias Sub County, 2016).

I feel that way when the problem is hard for me to solve and am unable to think further. I usually feel I don't have the necessary skills and exposure to handle the situation (FGD views from a Form III girl, Butere Sub County, 2016)

The sentiments of these two students show that occasionally students lack capacity to handle conflict situations especially when confronted with over powering situations or opponents whom they cannot contend with. This shows lack of both the self enhancing skills like self awareness and self esteem as well as relationship-based skills like friendship formation, effective communication and negotiation skills; these are prerequisite skills in conflict management arising from scenarios like those stated by students. Otite, Onigu and Albert (1999), view conflict management as a long-term arrangement involving institutionalized provisions and regulative procedures for dealing with conflicts whenever they occur; these ought to be learned by students in school.

Wanjama et al, (2006), state that decision making is the process of identifying and selecting a course of action to be taken to solve a problem, attain a goal and or reach a conclusion or a resolution. They add that sound decision making require accurate information; this accurate information that they are referring to are the very much needed life skills learnt from significant others, the school inclusive. It is the absence of these life skills that leads to this state of indecisiveness among students.

Few, 22.4% (86), of the student respondents said that they rarely lacked what to do when faced with conflict situations. One boy reiterated that he rarely lacked what to do since he had the option of handling some issues directly by himself or reporting to the teacher issues he could not handle. He retorted:

When am harassed by a prefect, I report to the teacher but if someone steals my property, or attacks me, it will be 'tit for tat' (FGD, views of a Form II male student, Butere Sub County, 2016)

For this particular student and others who reason like him, self gratification takes eminence, the level of conflict created as the student pursues his needs does not matter to him. This is partly why interpersonal conflicts are aggravated among secondary school students. LSE encourages use of non-violent conflict resolution techniques that do not threaten peaceful co-existence or

relationships among people. It is therefore essential that the students acquire sufficient skills that will help them when faced with conflicts.

A good number, 264(68.3%), of the student respondents cited stress as a common state they found themselves whenever they were found in conflict situations. They explained that stress set in when they felt that there was no one to share with them the problem. Others said that it was the fear of consequences that created the stress. One Form III female student said;

When in a conflict situation, I lack peace, I often feel like it is the end of my world; you know, anything can happen to you including trouble! (FGD, views of a Form III female student, Butere Sub County 2016)

In this case it is the inability to be in control of the situation that creates the uneasiness. The student feels ill equipped to handle the issue at hand. WHO (1997), explains that life skills are psychological competencies which enable one to develop adaptive behaviour that help in dealing with daily challenges. Lack of these psychological competencies is what heightens the stress in the face of conflict. Wanjama et al (2006), argue that deliberate intervention is required to prevent arousal of stress and that this comes from possession of a wide range of stress-preventing and reducing techniques. Students need to be taught skills of relaxation and varied coping skills to serve as a counterbalance to the inevitable onslaught of stress and this is the role that LSE ought to play in secondary schools so as to counter this challenge that students face in conflict management.

Few students, 120(31.3%), said they rarely felt stressed. These students attributed their lack of anxiety to psychological preparedness. They explained that some stressors are inevitable and may be beyond one's control; hence when they occur one has to devise coping mechanisms. One student said he rarely got stressed and his explanation was that:

I know who I am so whatever people say about me is insignificant, what I know about myself is more important. I also know that my parents love me and believe in me. I believe in life, there are challenges and I must deal with them when they come; and I look at them as small things (FGD, views of a Form III male student, Mumias Sub County, 2016).

These views represent a student with a very high self concept, one who derives his strength in the fact that he enjoys favour and support from his family; he believes he has the capacity to confront life's challenges. KIE (2008), explains that knowledge of oneself promotes self acceptance, it enables one to respond appropriately to various life situations. It therefore becomes essential for students to be equipped with rationalisation skills that will boost self confidence as well as make them capable of critical and creative thinking that would facilitate better view of situations.

Many, 254(66.1%) of the student respondents indicated that when in conflict situations they became angry and even hated those who brought about the conflict situation. One form III female student explained that:

If someone reveals something in my private life I get angered and I hate that person. Hatred gives me strength when there is no hope. (FGD, views of a female student, Butere Sub County, 2016).

These views of the student point to discomfort with one's self concept and attacked self esteem. Lierop (1996), explains that anger results from being treated unfairly, being insulted or being cheated. He views this as an attack on someone's self esteem which prevents one's self assertion. In LSE, the topic on self awareness and self esteem is meant to help a student learn to live with the self regardless of gray areas in life that may be repulsive. It is meant to help one develop a high sense of self esteem that enables him/ her to live above negative derogatory criticism. Absence of this skill renders one hot tempered opening room for conflict. One student explained why he would become hot tempered:

What makes me very angry is when my opponent is not giving in to my demands. When prefects always find me in mistakes I hate them because I feel they hate me too (FGD, views of a Form II male student, Butere Sub County, 2016).

This kind of response denotes a student whose conflict management style is competitive. In this instance he believes he must win in spite of being the one on the wrong. Hugget (1998), points out that in competition style of conflict resolution the overriding need to be on top persuades one where necessary to attack, overpower, overwhelm and even intimidate others verbally if not physically. This depicts inadequacy in the life skill of effective communication and non-violent conflict resolution.

Few, 130(33.9%) students said they rarely got angry or felt hatred for others when in conflict situations. Explanation given by some of the students was that anger could lead to fighting or hurting one another yet you could still need the help of that person at a later stage. Anger results when one has limited capacity to handle conflict situations. In LSE coping with emotions is one of the key topics taught to students to give them the ability to effectively handle conflict situations.

A large number of students, 250(65.1%) indicated that they felt lonely, unwanted and discriminated when in conflict situations. Loneliness occurred when one was separated from the rest and labelled as a trouble maker for instance; this was seen as a humiliating experience. One student said:

I feel isolated and discriminated when the majority is against me. It is made worse if my close friend discusses me (FGD, Views of a Form II male student, 2016).

The views of this student show how much students fear rejection, it explains why in some cases the intensity of some conflict situations leads to suicide cases among students. Discussing others is a form of aggression. Hetherington (1999), defines aggression as behaviour that intentionally harms other people; name calling, use of intimidation, abrasive tone and language creates a sense of rejection and is worsened when it comes from a friend. Students need to be equipped with skills

like high self esteem so as to counter such level of rejection from others. The role meant to be performed by LSE is thus accentuated.

The other 134(34.9%) of the student respondents said they rarely felt lonely, discriminated or unwanted. During FGD the students clarified that it was rare to feel unwanted when the person hurting you is not important to you; the person means nothing to you. These are remarks from a student who has high self worth. Wanjama et al (2006), explain that a loving family environment helps a child to develop positive self-worth; he/she sees oneself as important regardless of what others think. The school like the family are institutions that ought to create a warm environment that will help students to develop their sense of self-worth as a life skill to help them manage conflicts arising from this sense of isolation.

A majority, 230(59.5%) of the student respondents confessed that they felt embarrassed when in conflict situations while the remaining 154(40.1%) rarely felt embarrassed when in conflict situations. During the FGDs the students said that embarrassment resulted when you were the cause of the problem, when you ended up defeated or when you were abused publicly or an issue affecting you was publicized. They explained that students who never got embarrassed were those with a "don't care attitude". It was also rare for some to feel embarrassed when they were sure they are not guilty.

Some students, 163 (42.4%) felt useless and that they should hide when faced with conflict. Students at FGDs, explained that feeling of uselessness comes about when you fail; when you are caught in crime such as theft; when you are disowned or rejected; no one is on your side and you are publicized. Double dealing is one example that was given that can lead to this state when you are caught. A state of uselessness can be equated to a feeling of rejection or being unwanted because you are nothing! Lierop (1996), advises that students in this state need help in increasing their self respect. A permissive atmosphere needs to be created in which people are more accepted, more respected and less judged or condemned. LSE emphasizes the teaching of core values like love, respect and tolerance, these virtues can serve to alleviate conflicts that may arise from this scenario.

A majority of the students, 221 (57.6%), rarely felt useless; there was vehement refusal to succumb to a feeling of uselessness. One student categorically stated;

I am courageous, I can overcome challenges, I am a strong believer in God, and I know God has a purpose for my life; my family supports me, so I can hardly feel useless (FGD views of a male student, Butere Sub County, 2016).

The views of this student emphasize the important role played by significant others namely, family and religious institutions in imparting life skills in students. This confirms the findings of the students' on belief in the parents and the church as an important source of LSE.

7. Summary of the Study

This paper focussed on the challenges that secondary school students face in their application of life skills while managing conflicts. The study focussed on the students' conflict management styles to examine whether they precipitated conflict or contributed to conflict resolution. Many students clarified that they preferred compromise, collaboration and accommodation to foster understanding, reduce friction with seniors and majorly to eliminate negative effects of conflict in a bid to manage conflicts with peers.

They considered this to be equivalent to negotiation and problem resolution techniques. It is for this same reason that they avoided competition and preferred to use avoidance technique. Even though teacher respondents agreed with the students order of preferences they differed on their reasons; they argued that students' choice of these methods was not aimed at conflict management; it was driven by low self esteem among some students and the desire to collude so as to please peers and secure friendships that will help them unite at wrong doing so as to fan their ego. The fear of solitude among students complements this fact given by other respondents since it is the reason why majority of students preferred to compromise.

The teachers felt that most of the students were incompetent in the face of conflict; they prefer to either recoil into their cocoons or they ranted for what they considered needful at the moment. The views of the teachers are reverberated in the students' comments on how they felt when they faced conflict. Many students confessed that when faced with conflict they did not know what to do and that conflict situations left them stressed/embarrassed/lonely/useless or angry. This emphasizes why LSE is necessary to help secondary school students handle conflicts amongst themselves. The crucial role played by the parents and religious institutions in building life skills among students is echoed.

This state of helplessness by majority of the students indicates inadequacy in self enhancing, decision making and relationship skills. Even those who showed a level of self enhancing skills like high self esteem ran the risk of being compulsive, a factor which made them susceptible to conflict.

7.1. Conclusion of the study

The paper focussed on the challenges that secondary school students face in their application of life skills for conflict management. The study focussed on the students' conflict management styles in order to examine whether they precipitated conflict or contributed to conflict resolution. The study revealed two key factors that are determinants of the choices made by the students; the desire to be with and like peers and the fear of solitude. This made students avoid, compromise, collaborate or be accommodative. It also determined their decision to refrain from competitive tendencies. While students thought they

used these techniques for conflict management, the administrators and LSE teachers viewed it differently; they viewed it as collusion by peers to get away with mischief. The views of the administrators and LSE teachers were that students mainly used avoidance and competition techniques because most of them were inept in the face of conflict. Results on the students' emotional reactions when faced with conflicts indicated the confession of many students that when faced with conflict they did not know what to do and conflict situations left them stressed/embarrassed/lonely/useless or angry. This revelation enshrines the course of LSE for secondary school students.

7.2. Recommendations of the Study

The study recommends that teachers and sponsors should monitor challenges that students face so that they play an advisory role to the students in a free and friendly environment that builds the student's trust in them. Students need to brainstorm on areas of conflict and challenges they face in conflict management so that they together take a stance on ways of handling these conflicts with the involvement of their teachers. Parents who are a key source of life skills should build self awareness, self esteem and self confidence in their children. They ought to openly and freely discuss challenges that arise with their children so that the children get first hand information from them and not from peers and mass media.

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