

## **Communication Strategies for Effective Conflict Management between Teaching Staff and Principals in Public Secondary Schools in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

Education institutions in Kenya have reported rising cases of conflict between the teaching staff and principals (Ministry of Education, 2002). These conflicts arise from teachers' unwillingness to follow laid down rules and defiance to perceived principals' authoritarian tendencies. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of communication strategies in resolving conflicts between principals and the teaching staff in public secondary schools in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, Kenya. The study was anchored on three theories: Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), and Interest-Based Relational Approach (IBR). A mixed method approach with exploratory research design was employed in the study. The study targeted 620 teachers and 34 principals in Rachuonyo South sub-county. 10% (62 teachers and 4 principals) sample was selected. Stratified random sampling was used to select teachers, of varied teaching experience from different schools; while purposive sampling was used to select principals, based on their tenure, the size of the school, and their involvement in managing conflicts with teaching staff. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from teachers, while an interview guide was used to collect data from principals. Descriptive statistics was used in the analysis of quantitative data, including measures of central tendency and variability, and thematic analysis was applied on qualitative data. The findings revealed that assertive and non-blaming communication strategies were most effective in fostering collaboration and resolving conflicts. The study concludes that implementing communication strategies can foster a more collaborative environment in schools, ultimately leading to more effective conflict management between principals and the teaching staff. The study recommends adoption of appropriate communication strategy for effective resolution of conflicts. The implications emphasize the need for training on preferred communication strategies, ensuring sustainable conflict management in public secondary schools.

**Keywords:** *Communication Strategies, Conflict, Principals, Teaching staff, Public Secondary Schools, Conflict Management*

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## **1.0 Introduction**

A conflict situation arises when two or more parties attempt to undermine their respective abilities to pursue a goal because they believe their aims are incompatible (Usmanova et al., 2021). Essentially, disagreements can result in stress, extreme exhaustion, or tension among parties involved if appropriate social arrangements or resolutions are not made (Yidana, 2022). Folger et al. (2021) emphasizes counseling can be an effective approach to managing conflicts. Therefore, schools can benefit from employing effective communication strategies in engaging various stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Education, suppliers, investors, consumers, employees, and community partners, so as to foster positive relationships.

Effective conflict management faces numerous challenges at global, regional, and local levels. Globally, geopolitical tensions and cross-border disputes often arise from differing national interests, resource competition, and historical grievances, which complicate efforts to resolve conflicts amicably. Regional issues, such as ethnic or political conflicts, can be exacerbated by insufficient infrastructure, weak governance, and economic disparities, which hinder collaborative problem-solving and peacebuilding initiatives. Locally, in educational settings like public secondary schools, conflicts may stem from resource shortages, administrative inefficiencies, and communication barriers, impeding effective resolution. These issues highlight the need for tailored approaches that address specific contexts and underlie causes of conflicts at each level.

Conflicts in educational institutions in Rachuonyo South Sub-County take similar forms. For instance, there are teachers who do not seem to be willing to follow laid down rules, accept more work, or get along with

their principals. Principals, on the other hand, also take an authoritarian stance by forcing teachers to focus on school-related tasks beyond official working hours. Modern Kenyan society has far more sophisticated communication systems. These systems can be used to distribute information and messages, fostering cooperation and global understanding, and meeting social and individual needs. As a result, communication ceases to be merely the exchange of ideas between actors, and becomes a social tool (Meyer et al., 2022).

Communication strategy can be explained as a plan that describes how an organization, institution or individual plans to get in touch with their intended audience (Chandolia & Anastasiou, 2020). Since principals in public secondary schools are required to engage, educate, inform, or persuade their teaching staff on development matters as part of stakeholders, adoption of specific communication approaches can be applied in the management of conflicts in educational institutions (Chandolia & Anastasiou, 2020).

Different results can be obtained depending on the manner in which communication is carried out, the conditions under which it occurs, and the actors involved (Wallenstein, 2018). For example, the results of this study can offer suggestions that can serve as a foundation for long-term dispute resolution, and better communication between principals and teachers in public secondary schools in Kenya. Several pieces of legislation serve as guidelines for the management and administration of Rachuonyo South Sub-County's public secondary schools, which are a part of the greater Kenyan educational system. Nonetheless, a 2002 Ministry of Education assessment found that less than 65% of Rachuonyo Sub-County's public secondary schools were proficient in handling conflicts.

Despite implementation of government policies that mitigate conflict, Kenyan educational institutions have seen an increase in cases of conflict, as reported by a 2002 study by the Ministry of Education. This has generated scholarly interest in the dynamic nature and the increased number of organizational conflicts. However, there is a dearth of scholarly works on the implications of communication on conflict resolution in educational institutions within the study area. This is especially true in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, where there have been high frequency of principals transfers due to disputes between principals and the teaching staff (Yidana, 2022). Thus, it is necessary to determine the optimal communication techniques for handling disputes between principals and teaching staff in Rachuonyo South Sub-County's public secondary schools.

*“The study found that assertive and non-blaming communication strategies were most effective in managing conflicts, since parties involved in conflict are accorded a chance to either escalate or defuse conflict.”*

**Research Objective**

To evaluate the communication strategies used for managing conflicts between teaching staff and principals in public secondary schools in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, Kenya.

**Research Question**

What communication strategies are employed in the management of conflicts

between the teaching staff and the principals in public secondary schools in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, Kenya?

**Theoretical Review**

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) underpin this study. This theory identifies five primary conflict-handling modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Each mode represents a different approach to managing conflict, ranging from assertiveness to cooperation. The TKI framework helps in understanding how principals and teaching staff might employ different strategies based on their individual preferences and situational demands. For example, a collaborative approach emphasizes joint problem-solving, which could be effective in educational settings where mutual understanding is crucial (The Myers-Briggs Company, 2020).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was developed by Howard Giles. CAT examines how individuals adjust their communication styles to accommodate others during interactions. This theory is relevant to the present study because principals and teachers may alter their communication strategies to manage conflicts more effectively. CAT suggests that adapting communication styles can facilitate better understanding and reduce tensions. In the context of Rachuonyo South Sub-County, this theory could explain how principals and teachers modify their interactions to address conflicts (Giles, 2016).

Interest-Based Relational Approach (IBR) approach was developed by Roger Fisher emphasizes the importance of maintaining relationships while addressing interests and needs. It advocates for separating people from problems and focusing on interests rather than positions. This theory underscores

the importance of effective communication in preserving professional relationships while resolving conflicts. It is particularly applicable in educational settings where long-term relationships between principals and teachers are crucial for maintaining a positive work environment (Clark, 2016).

### ***Literature Review***

Communication strategies are vital for conflict management in educational settings, enabling individuals and groups to handle disputes effectively. However, studies by Ay et al. (2019) and Usmanova et al. (2021) suggest that in competitive environments, the effectiveness of communication techniques, such as peer mediation, may be limited. While conflicts can have negative outcomes, they may also foster cooperation and competition, depending on the context. In Kenyan education institutions, particularly in public secondary schools Rachuonyo Sub-County, where rivalry is prevalent, and communication strategies have been identified as essential tools for managing conflicts.

Several communication models, such as Chandolia and Anastasiou (2020) highlight models like the Encoding-Decoding, Intentionalist, Perspective-Taking, and Dialogue models, each of which emphasizes different aspects of transmitting and receiving messages are relevant in conflict management. In public secondary schools, recognizing noise in communication channels and employing assertive, non-blaming strategies can help prevent conflicts. Moreover, incorporating multiple perspectives, as suggested by Marasan (2021) and Shaw (2020), is crucial for effective communication, though it can also lead to misunderstandings and potential conflict.

Conflict management and communication are closely intertwined. Okoko (2020) and

Wallensteen (2018) emphasize the role of effective communication in resolving or exacerbating disputes, particularly in educational settings. Miscommunication is often a significant cause of conflict, underscoring the importance of clear, direct, and inclusive communication between school administrators and staff. Thus, communication remains the cornerstone of conflict resolution efforts in public secondary schools.

## **2.0 Materials and Methods**

This study adopted an exploratory research design, utilizing a mixed-methods research approach to obtain a comprehensive understanding of conflict resolution between teaching staff and principals in public secondary schools in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, Homabay County, Kenya. The mixed-methods approach enabled combination of both the quantitative and the qualitative exploration, enabling a more robust understanding of the phenomenon. The target population comprised 620 teachers and 34 principals across public secondary schools in Rachuonyo Sub-County. A sample size of 10% of the target population was selected, comprising of 62 teachers and 4 principals. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2019), a comprehensive examination, characterised by its descriptive nature, may be suitably executed by employing a sample size equivalent to 10% of the total population that is readily available for study. Stratified random sampling was used to select the 62 teachers, ensuring representation of different schools and teaching experience levels, while purposive sampling was used to select the 4 principals based on their tenure, the size of the school, and their involvement in managing conflicts with teaching staff. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from the sampled teachers, while an interview guide was used to collect data from the

selected principals. The collected data was then cleaned, validated and analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software for quantitative data, as the qualitative data was analyzed thematically using NVIVO software. Quantitative data was presented using tables and pie charts, making it easier to interpret the most common conflict resolution strategies. In contrast, qualitative data was presented based on key themes on conflict resolution derived from the participants’ responses, and coded manually to understand patterns of conflict management approaches.

### 3.0 Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the research findings as guided by the research objective. The study aimed to investigate and identify the preferred communication strategies used to manage conflicts between the teaching staff and principals in public secondary schools in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, Homabay County, Kenya.

#### *Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents*

The researcher considered a multitude of demographic variables including gender, age set, and teaching experience of the respondents in an effort to understand the distribution of teachers in public secondary schools in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, Homabay County, Kenya. Gender was dichotomized into male and female; age was categorized into four groups (25-29 years, 30-40 years, 41-50 years, and 51-59 years); while teaching experience was categorized into four groups (1–10 years, 11–20 years, 21–30 years, and 31–40 years). The respondents were then asked to indicate the categories in which they fall across the three demographic variables. The findings are presented in table 1, table 2, and figure 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Respondents by Gender*

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	37	59.7
Female	25	40.3
Total	62	100.0

Table 1 shows that 59.7% of the respondents were male, while 40.3% were female; indicating a higher representation of male teachers. This finding is consistent with findings by Were (2020), who established predominance of male teachers in public secondary schools. Understanding the gender dynamics is important as it may affect the communication strategies used by male and female teachers when resolving conflicts with principals, a critical factor in the management of disputes. These gender-based insights align with Singer's (2019) findings, which underscore the role of gender in shaping conflict resolution approaches.

**Table 2**

*Distributions of Respondents by Age Sets*

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
25-29yrs	14	22.6
30-40yrs	38	61.3
41-50yrs	9	14.5
51-59yrs	1	1.6
Total	62	100.0

Table 2 shows that majority of the respondents (61.3%) were between 30-40 years old, 22.6% 25-29 years; 14.5% 41-50years, and only 1.6% were 51-59 years old. These findings suggest a predominance of middle-aged teachers in the workforce, a trend consistent with findings by Ingersoll et al. (2019), which pointed out that teachers recruitment policies have led to an aging teacher population. Additionally, recent government efforts to hire younger teachers under 30 have contributed to the current age demographics.

**Figure 1**

*Distribution of Respondents by Experience in the Teaching Profession*

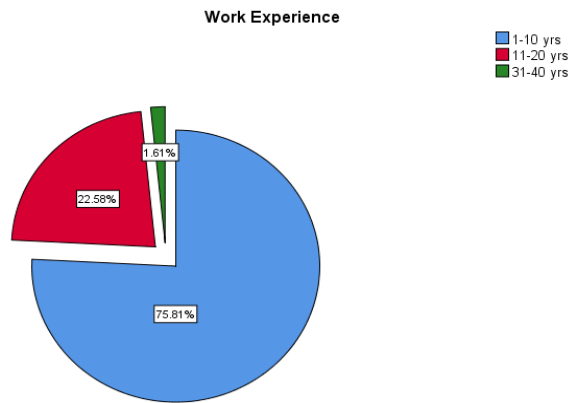


Figure 1 presents the distribution of teaching experience among the respondents. The majority (75.81%) had between one to ten years of experience, while 22.58% had worked for eleven to twenty years. Only 1.61% had thirty to forty years of experience. These findings highlight a relatively younger teaching workforce, a trend supported by Loeb and Myung (2020), who noted that recent government recruitment drives have focused on hiring teachers with less experience to meet increasing student enrollment demands. Understanding the varying levels of experience helps contextualize the responses related to conflict management and communication strategies in schools.

***The Role of Communication in Conflict Management in Public Secondary Schools***

The study sought to determine the perceived importance of communication strategies in managing conflicts within public secondary schools. The respondents were asked to rate whether communication strategies play a major role in the management of conflict in public secondary schools using a four-point

Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree), and the results presented in table 3 below.

**Table 3**

*Communication Strategies Play a Major Role in the Management of Conflict in Public Secondary Schools*

Measure	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	8	12.9
Disagree	2	3.2
Agree	32	51.6
Strongly Agree	20	32.3
Total	62	100.0

Table 3 shows that a significant majority, 83.9% of the respondents, agreed or strongly agreed that communication strategies are crucial for resolving disputes, with 51.6% agreeing, and 32.3% strongly agreeing. This finding aligns with Singer (2019) assertion that effective dialogue is a critical tool for non-violent conflict resolution in educational settings. However, 16.1% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting that other factors, such as power dynamics, competition for resources, or decision-making processes, might also influence conflict outcomes (Wallensteen, 2018).

***Mechanisms of Dealing with Conflicts between Teachers and Principals***

The study aimed to identify the most commonly used mechanisms for resolving conflicts between teachers and principals in public secondary schools in Rachuonyo Sub-County. Ten conflict resolution mechanisms were outlined and the respondents were asked to indicate the most commonly used mechanisms by teachers and principals. The results were presented in table 4 below.

**Table 4**

*Mechanisms of Dealing with Conflicts between Teachers and Principals*

Mechanism	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Avoidance	5	8.1
Consultations with the Deputy principals	1	1.6
Dialogue Sessions	7	11.3
Compromise	2	3.2
Competition	5	8.1
Teacher Transfer	2	3.2
Collaboration	13	21.0
Accommodation	10	16.1
Staff Meetings	2	3.2
Communication Strategies	15	24.2
Total	62	100.0

Table 4 shows that 24.2% of respondents considered communication strategies the most effective, followed by collaboration (21%), and accommodation (16.1%). These findings align with Yidana (2022) finding, which underscores the importance of communication in maintaining positive relationships in educational institutions. While avoidance (8.1%) and consultations with deputy principals (1.6%) were less favored, the study also revealed that teacher transfers used by some principals, are perceived as a temporary fix, rather than a long-term solution to conflicts.

***Communication Strategies Utilized in the Management of Conflicts between Teachers and Principals***

The study sought to determine the communication strategies most frequently employed by principals in managing conflicts between the teaching staff and principals. Four communication strategies were outlined, and the respondents were asked to indicate the most frequently used strategies in the management of conflicts between teachers and principals. The results are presented in table 5 below.

**Table 5**

*Communication Strategies Utilized in the Management of Conflicts between Teachers and Principals*

Communication Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Non-verbal Communication	3	4.8
Active Listening	6	9.7
Understanding other's perspectives	14	22.6
Non-blaming and Assertiveness	38	61.3
Others	1	1.6
Total	62	100.0

Table 5 shows that the most commonly utilized method was non-blaming and assertiveness (61.3%). This finding aligns with research by Chandolia and Anastasiou (2020), which emphasized the importance of assertiveness in fostering respectful and solution-oriented dialogue in conflict situations. Understanding others' perspectives (22.6%) and active listening (9.7%) followed as preferred techniques, while non-verbal communication (4.8%) was less emphasized. These results suggest that assertive, non-blaming communication fosters constructive conflict resolution by encouraging cooperation and mutual respect between principals and teachers.

The study's findings align with Folger et al. (2021), who examined communication strategies for conflict resolution. The Ministry of Education in 2008 reported a rise in confrontations in public secondary schools from 22 incidents (0.9%) in 1980 to 300 (7.5%) in 2008, underlining the significance of the subject in resolving conflicts in schools. In Rachuonyo South Sub-County, participants identified key conflict causes, including resource shortages, personal disputes, inadequate communication, and lack of motivation. This aligns with Chandolia and Anastasiou (2020), who affirmed that prolonged interpersonal conflicts hinder cooperation. Stress levels may rise, and self-image can decline. Thus, effective communication strategies are essential for managing conflicts and preserving relationships among stakeholders in schools.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study found that while non-verbal communication strategies,

understanding others' perspectives, active listening, and non-blaming assertiveness were preferred, they were not being effectively utilized to manage conflicts between principals and the teaching staff in public secondary schools in Rachuonyo South Sub-County, Homabay County, Kenya. The study established that conflicts are a common occurrence in any interaction, including those between principals and teachers. The results of this study indicated that the best communication techniques in managing conflict were assertive and non-blaming, since the parties involved in conflict are accorded a chance to either escalate or defuse conflict. The study concluded that educational institutions can effectively utilize the boundless potential of this conflict resolution strategy to settle disputes between principals and teachers at workplaces.

#### **5.0 Recommendations**

The study recommends selection of appropriate communication technique in settling conflicts between principals and the teaching personnel in public secondary schools. The study further recommends that both the teachers and principals in public secondary schools should receive training on how to apply various communication strategies, such as understanding other people's perspectives, active listening, non-verbal communication, and avoiding placing blame or showing aggression, during conflict resolutions. Training both the administrators and teachers on communication improves the adopting a wide range of communication styles and incorporating them in conflict management.



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