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## How Principals Develop Trust in Kenyan Secondary Schools

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### Abstract

This qualitative multi-case study sought understanding and describing how secondary school principals in south western Kenya build trust with the communities in which their schools are located. Multiple interviews with six high school principals were conducted. Observations were augmented with several days of “shadowing” each principal and the utilization of document analysis at the site. Findings from this study showed that the context in which the principals worked was highly characterized by high level of dependence, uncertainty and vulnerability. In order to mitigate the effects of these characteristics, principals had to deliberately develop trust with the communities. To achieve this, principals had to close the gap between the community and the school and the community and the self in addition to sustaining high levels of competence, professionalism and morals. Through modeling, mediation, genuine interest and participation in community activities and issues, good instructional leadership, balanced management practices, free and open communication with the parents were found out to be some of the methods used by the principal to close these gaps and consequently build trust with the parents.

**Keywords:** *trust, trust-formation, school-community relationships, harambee schools.*

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## **Introduction**

The literature on a principal's role in the public education system seems to have changed over time, becoming more demanding in response to societal changes and school reform efforts (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). May be this is why Archer (2004) described the job of the school principal has become increasingly complex. According to research, school principals have to deal with different contexts that ultimately influence and determine their effectiveness. Studies already conducted in these contexts include social and political forces that undermine tolerance (Felt, Jolly, & Malloy, 2001) bullying, sexual harassment and aggression (Ma, Stewin, & Mah, 2001) Sexuality (Myers, 2002) changes in the traditional structure of the family (Bessant & Watts, 2002) child abuse, increased exposure to medication and drugs (Sullivan, 2001) as well as specific issues such as unhealthy eating habits and preoccupation with attaining unrealistic and unnatural body image (Kater, Rohwer, & Londre, 1992).

Research on trust in schools confirms that a high level of trust in a school is necessary in the success of that school regardless of its location. According to Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell (2009) school leaders can build and sustain parent trust by aligning policies and practices to address the affective needs of parents.

In Kenya, the secondary education cycle is recognized as a significant juncture in the national and educational development (Achoka, 2007). Since secondary school principals play a very important role in the success of this level, any attempts to enhance their ability and competence in ensuring that the secondary cycle succeeds would be an advantage. Unfortunately since the advent of ethnic violence in Kenya in the early 1900's, studies conducted in Kenya with respect to the violence are about ethnicity (Ndegwa, 1997; Chege, 1981; Alwy & Schech, 2004); Causes of ethnic violence (Abrams, 1979; KNCHR, 2006; Kenya Land Alliance, 2004; Waki Report, 2008) and effect of ethnic violence on agriculture (Mars Group, 2008). None of these studies directly dealt with the effect of violence on schools or the issue of trust formation in schools.

### **The Kenyan Context**

As in many countries, the role of the secondary school principal in Kenya has evolved and changed over time. Three major features of Kenya's education system that influenced the role of secondary school principals were the establishment of harambee schools soon after independence, the introduction of 8:4:4 system of education in the 80's and ethnic violence. The term "Harambee" means "let us pull together." Harambee schools, whose roots can be traced to the colonial days, were schools established and supported by local communities (Amutabi, 2003; Mwiria, 1990; Ngau, 1987). Even though the management of most harambee schools was mainly in the hands of community leaders who formed local committees that organized fund-raising, recruit teachers, and do other school-related functions, the day-to-day, school-related functions were left to the principal. Harambee schools do not receive full funding from the government (Omwancha, 2012) and thus depend heavily on fees paid by the parents and local fund-raising (Bradshaw, 1993; Buchmann,

1999). It is often difficult for most of these Harambee schools to meet their recurrent costs.

The introduction of a new education system in 1985 brought about an even more increased role of parents in schools. According to Achoka (2003) prior to 1985 the role of the secondary school principal in Kenya was clear and manageable. However, after 1985, with the introduction of a new system of education, the role of the secondary school principal widened to include management of increased parent's involvement in school functioning (Achoka, 2003). The new system, commonly referred to as the 8-4-4 system of education, which was pre-vocational in nature, strongly emphasized attitudinal and skills preparations for the world of work and especially self-employment (Eshiwani & Mundial, 1990). The new system of education required the construction of industrial and vocational workshops for practicals in each school, stocking these workshops with tools as well as ensuring their safety.

The third major feature that affected school leadership was ethnic violence in Kenya. Southwestern Kenya, where this study was conducted, has witnessed some of the most brutal ethnically charged violence within the last decade. Even though large scale violence seems to have started in 1991 (Kimenyi & Ndung'u, 2005), ethnic violence in this region has been going on since the 1800's albeit on a limited scale (Morgan, 1963). The area is inhabited by various groups of people with unique cultures and expectations. In Kenya, historical injustices, introduction of multiparty politics and Majimboism (Federalism) have been cited as the major causes of ethnic violence (Akiwumi Report, 1999; Waki Report, 2008; Mars Group, 2008). The violence has led to strained relationships amongst these peoples as each group portrays itself as the victim (Kanyinga, 2009). In the study area, ethnic violence adversely affected educational processes (Achoka & Okoth, 2008). As a result of the violence, many people die while many flee for their lives, disruption of education and all other social processes in the affected region.

Since schools are part of the community, it is my contention that schools will be affected by events that take place in the community. The school principal working in a given community context will also be affected by the events unfolding in the catchment area of the school. For instance in Kenya, secondary school principals face a number of challenges in their role performance. Such challenges include having to manage mature learners, lack of school resources and facilities, social issues such as drug addictions in society and schools, and high rates of poverty (Achoka, 2006; Wekesa, 1993), parental illiteracy, students travelling long distances lack of playgrounds, students who cannot pay school fees and or even buy books, shortages of basic equipment and facilities and the inaccessibility of parents (Kitavi & Van der Westhuizen, 1997). According to Mathiu (2008) secondary principals have to deal with cases of indiscipline, poor academic performance in external examination and poor emotional school climate (Mathiu, 2008). Onyango-Ouma (2006) concludes that the Kenyan secondary school principals have 'challenging roles'. Bush & Oduro (2006) state that these problems are indeed common across most African countries and consequently principals spend much time balancing demands from outside the school with raising enough money to operate effectively (Walker & Qian, 2006).

Secondary school principals working in the context of ethnic violence are faced with a community-based context which affects tremendously their role performance. As already noted, since harambee schools depend on the community for survival, the nature of the prevailing circumstances in the community are very important and crucial to the role performance of the principal.

This study was situated in southwestern Kenya and focused on six secondary school principals. In the context of ethnic violence, the secondary school principals were faced with challenges that threatened and disrupted the learning process. As instructional leaders .There is a real need for the principals to take charge of the school environments and steer their schools towards the attainment of the educational objectives while at the same ensuring the safety of the students, faculty and staff.

There are few studies on ethnic violence situations that address school leaders' need for trust relations, challenges principals face in developing and sustaining high levels of trust, new demands from the community as a result of unpredictable, and principals' challenges and efforts to work in the complex and turbulent educational settings of southwestern Kenya. This study becomes imperative as trust is at the heart of strong relationships that help children learn (Kyle, McIntyre, & Miller, 2005; Hoy & DiPaola, 2007). I explore the deliberate strategies used by the secondary school principals in building trust with the parents along southwestern Kenya. The research is based on the following question:

How do secondary school principals working in southwestern Kenya develop trust with the parents?

### **Literature Review**

Literature on school-community relationship confirms that schools characterized with a positive school-community relationship have a learning potential (Crowson & Boyd, 1996; Yinger, 1994; Weiss, 1995) because of the interdependencies between schools, families, and communities (Goodlad, 1987). There is also a sense that sharing between families and educators is essential developmentally to children (Comer, 1980). Active parental participation and close school-community connections are vital ingredients of modern day pedagogy (Crowson, 1998).According to literature, trust is vital for the maintenance of cooperation in society and necessary as grounds for even the most routine, everyday interactions (Zucker, 1986). Consequently, the extent to which principal-parent interactions are productive is affected by the trust that holds these relationships together (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001).

In the school context, principals and parents are partners in as far as ensuring that educational objectives are adequately met. Both interested parties do form a relationship whose purpose is to uphold the interests of the learner. However for this relationship to be productive the parent- principal relationship must be characterised by high levels of trust (Casanova, 1996). According to research, trust is at the heart of strong relationships (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001) and is essential for stable social relationships (Blau, 1964).Trust in

relationships is so important that if it is destroyed, societies would falter and collapse (Bok, 1978). Forsyth et al. (2006) found that high levels of parent trust contribute to effective school performance. Findings from various studies supported the conclusion that relationships between parents and high school principals based on high levels of trust are an important ingredient in the success of the principal and eventual attainment of educational objectives (Epstein, 2001; Henderson, 1987 ; Wenfan & Qiuyun,2007)

Even though literature rightly points out that any meaningful relationships require trust from both parties, this research focuses on the need for trust from the principal's side. This is based on the assumption that parents own resources and the school in general. Further it is assumed that for the principal to effectively perform his role in the school, he would require the resources and good will that reside within the community. However with the ethnic violence prevalent in the study area, principals were faced with warring parents, insecurity and high levels of mistrust. But since interactions between the principal and the parents have to be characterised with high levels of trust, it became vital for the principals to implement initiatives that enhance and sustain high levels of trust with the community members.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In exploring how secondary school principals working in an area affected by ethnic violence and mistrust in southwestern Kenya form trust with communities, reference is made to Pfeffer & Salancik's (1978) Resource Dependency Theory (RDT). According to RDT, actors lacking in essential resources will seek to establish relationships with others in order to obtain them. Reference is also made to Katz & Kahn (1966) and Scott's, (1998) construction of the environment as an open system and asserts that environments are consequential for the survival of organizations. According to Scott (2003), as open systems, organizations and by extension schools are inextricably linked to environmental elements. As open systems, schools need resources from the environment. Referring to a school as an organization, Weick (1995) noted that a school is interdependent with parents and the communities it serve as they consist of its environment. The school therefore draws its inputs from the community in order to operate while its output is geared to meeting the community's expectations. But in order to access these inputs, school principals need to be trusted that indeed they will use the community's resources prudently (Scott, 1998; Selznick, 1957). The parents need to trust the principals in order to release whatever resources they own to him to be used in the school.

Since schools have weakly defined boundaries which have been rendered vulnerable by events that occur within the community they have become exposed to influences and pressures in their socio-political environment (Scott, 1998). In view of these, successful leaders are those who are skilled at managing the boundaries of their institutions to help filter the stresses and pressures of the external environment (Johnson & Fauske, 2000).

In southwestern Kenya, the ethnic violence witnessed in the community found its way into the school compound. Suddenly, principals were faced with sets and subsets of parents each representing divergent/conflicting views on issues

affecting the school. In order to remain non-partisan and inclusive of all the parents, principals had to initiate measures to ensure that all parents perceived that they were valued and their opinions were important. In order to achieve this, principals had to develop high levels of trust with the parents. This qualitative study focused on six secondary school principals in south western Kenya, aimed at understanding how secondary school principals build trust in Kenyan secondary schools.

### **Methodology**

Since the purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (a 'grasp of the very nature of the thing,' (Van Manen, 1990, p.177), a phenomenological approach that focused on describing, and discovering a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007) was adopted for this study. Purposive sampling, considered by Welman & Kruger (1999) as most non-probability was used to identify the primary participants who based on my judgment and the purpose of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997), " had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988 p. 150) in this case ethnic violence. In addition they had to have worked in the area for not less than three years because the violence in area had intensified in 2007 and only those who had been deployed in the area at that time were considered. While it is regarded that two to 10 participants are sufficient to reach saturation (Boyd, 2001), Wertz (1985) recommends between one and six participants may be sufficient for a phenomenological research. The following is a brief description of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to identify each principal, their length of service and their definition of trust.

Participant #1 – "Sam" had taught for 15 years and had been a principal for seven years. Sam defines trust as 'having faith in somebody's ability to fulfil his/her promises' and considers it a 'virtue'. Participant # 2– "Elijah" had worked in the public schools system for 18 years and had been a principal for 12 years. He defines trust as a belief by the parents that a principal 'will meet parental expectations'. Participant #3 – "Mogusii" had worked as a teacher for 26 years. He had been a principal for five years. According to Mogusii trust is 'a mutual relationship between two parties...' Participant #4 – "Minuel" had taught in the public school system for 19 years and had been a principal for ten years. Minuel believed that trust was important because 'minus trust it is hard for the institution to survive'. Participant #5 – "Jane" the only female participant in this research had worked in the school system for 15 years. She had been a principal for 6 years. Jane believed that it was '...necessary that there is trust in a school for the school to continue operating'. Participant #6 – "Onyari" had been a teacher for 19 years and a principal for seven years. He believed that trust like honesty is 'a vital virtue for any principal working in unstable environments'

### **Data Collection**

I used unstructured and open-ended in-depth interviewing (Creswell & Miller, 2002; Seidman, 1998) as the primary source of data collection. The purpose of in-depth interviewing was to explore the experience of participants and the meaning they made of that experience (Seidman,1998). By using an in-depth interviewing approach, I aimed at understanding the "lived experience" (Seidman,

1998), of the principals or the world as they immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as they conceptualized it. The interviews were conducted at the participant's schools and lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes long. Observation which entailed the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting chosen for study was used as the main method of data collection. While in the field, the researcher collected documents detailing school enrolment since 2007, examination performance in the national examinations, fee payment and general attendance in meetings called by the principal.

Data Analysis begun immediately the interviews were completed by reading through the transcripts and field notes to gain a general understanding (Creswell, 2009). The data was then unitized and entered into an Excel spreadsheet, maintaining the integrity of each participant. This unitized data was then categorized into themes and analyzed using the constant comparison method to identify similarities, differences and patterns (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Finally the clustered themes were used to develop the textural descriptions, structural descriptions and integration of textures and structures into meanings and essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). By essence, reference is made to what the participants experienced or how the phenomenon trust was experienced.

### **Validity and reliability**

According to Seidman (1998) "trustworthiness" in qualitative research is defined to substitute the term validity and reliability. Trustworthiness in this study was enhanced by peer debriefing, triangulation and member checking. In peer debriefing, I shared and exchanged ideas with my peers, the committee members and my dissertation chair. Such a method is acceptable and appropriate for credibility (Schwandt, 1997). In triangulation I used multiple sources of data such as individual interviews, observations, and some written documents from each school. Finally interview transcripts and drafts of the final report were shared with participants to make sure true and correct representation of their ideas.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study had a number of limitations as indicated below. For instance, based on only six cases any generalizability beyond the cases at hand was limited. Secondly, this study was framed by literature and a sample purposefully selected to inform this research due to the time and availability constraints. In addition this research was a single researcher's experience, which also affected all evaluations and conclusions. Finally, the sample for this study was restricted to public secondary schools. Since primary schools, private secondary schools and public secondary schools whose principals did not meet the participation requirements were not studied, findings were not be applicable to them.

### **Findings**

This study revealed that parents in the study area play an important role in enhancing the ability of the principals to successfully perform their leadership roles. Unfortunately due to ethnic violence, there is a high level of dependence, uncertainty and vulnerability. As a result, and in order to gain control of the

schools, principals made deliberate efforts towards enhancing trust with the parents.

### **Developing trust with the parents**

It became apparent that parents play very significant roles in the schools that formed part of this research. Consequently principals, who had the trust of parents in their schools, enjoyed a significant boost towards meeting their role expectations. Principals interviewed confirmed they had made concerted efforts to initiate, sustain and improve trust levels between them and the parents. Data collected from this study indicated that principals deliberately and actively engaged in various activities that helped build trust with the parents. Some of the methods adopted by the principals in the study to build trust with the parents include the following:

### **Closing gap between community and school**

In an attempt to build trust with parents in their schools, principals made deliberate efforts to close the gap between the school and the community. This was achieved through:

Chief's baraza:

In Southwestern Kenya, local chiefs are required by law to hold weekly public meetings where matters affecting the community are discussed. These meetings are called Barazas in Swahili. All members of a community are required by law to attend these weekly meetings as this forms the very first level where conflicts and issues affecting the community are discussed. All land cases are deliberated publicly by the community and any decisions arrived at are binding to all. All principals indicated that they had used these meetings to sensitize and enlighten the parents on various aspects affecting education in the community. For instance, parents were made aware of their role in the education of their children, advantages of having high quality education and also cultural practices and beliefs that hampered education.

Whenever I attend these barazas, I have made it a point of initiating dialogue with the parents on their roles in school success. I have also made it known to them that they should buy textbooks as well as encourage and make sure that their children do their homework. (Personal interview, July 2011).

Jane, the female principal noted that she had used the meetings to advocate for the girl child

I constantly encourage parents to discard the belief that girls are an inferior sex to boys. I advocate girls to be given the same opportunities as boys. So far in my school, the number of girls registering has risen steadily as a result of these efforts (Personal interview, July 2011).



### *How Principals Develop Trust*

In addition to informing the parents of their roles in assisting the principals, the principals also took time to enhance reconciliation between the two tribes. By attending these meetings, principals were also accorded an opportunity to assure the parents of the safety of their children. By venturing across the border, the principals passed a strong message that they too believe and are a testimony that it is safe to go to schools located across the border.

This method was noted as a powerful method of getting the parents develop positive perceptions about schools and in so doing feel obliged to offer support in several ways.

#### *Being involved in social and cultural events in the community*

Another finding for this study was that Principals made a deliberate effort to attend social and cultural events held in the community. Events that principals attended included but not limited to burial ceremonies, weddings and church sponsored camp meetings. Even though none of these communal events was of lesser value, it emerged that it was more 'serious' not to attend a funeral than say a wedding. When asked what could happen if a principal failed to attend the following was the response

They (the community) will not take it lightly because the children you are teaching are their sons and daughters...the same people mourning their dead, this is their school...they feel that this is our school... and our school should give us the respect that we deserve... and the respect we deserve therefore is the principal calling the day off and allowing the students and the entire staff and faculty to attend the funeral... you (the principal) also must be there...(Personal interview, July 2011).

By attending the funerals, the principals were being benevolent conveying a message of unity. This, the principals noted drew the community closer to the school.

#### *Offering service to the community*

Another method used by the principals to strengthen the links with their community required them to render service when necessary. For example when floods occur, the principals close schools and allow students and staff to assist in the evacuation. If a fire occurs in the community the principals send students to offer assistance. The principals' justification for this was that since schools were part of the community; there was no way schools would be running normally when the surrounding community was adversely affected by such calamities. Assisting the community effectively proved a bonding event and exposed the human side of the school.

*Use of school facilities*

Another method used by the principals in the study area to bridge the gap between school and the communities was by allowing the community access to school facilities and amenities.

I always avail the school facilities and amenities to the community. For instance last week we allowed them to hold a wedding reception in the school hall. I remember a few months back the pastor conducted a wedding in the same venue (Personal interview, July 2011).

Remember for example I always let them use the school's sound system for free whereas out there, they would have paid a fee for hire. By allowing them use of the sound system, it saves money for them and I think it also closes the gap between the community and the principal and this tends to build trust. Allowing the community unlimited access to the facilities is a powerful public relation (Personal interview, July 2011).

The list of amenities and equipment availed to the community included the use of school sports ground, the dormitories, and furniture. The principals also noted that they allowed the school as a venue for communal events as well as the weekly community meetings. During such meetings, school furniture was used. The principals also allowed community sports events to be held in the school's sports grounds.

**Closing the gap between principal and parents**

It also emerged that due to the nature of their jobs, principals rarely get the opportunity to socialize with the community at a personal level. Consequently there is a disparity between the professional- principal and the human-/person-principal as perceived by the parents. This disparity is aggravated by the fact that parents do not make social visits to schools and only venture to school when summoned or to solve a problem. And even when they do, parents often times end up being served by school staff and never get to meet or visit with the principal. It is these 'distance' both social and personal that principals explained, they aimed to reduce so as to build trust with the parents. The principals called this process 'demystifying the principal'. This was achieved through knowing the parents,

*Knowing the parents*

The principals noted that due to the nature of their work, number of students and delegation of duties in their respective schools, it would be impossible to have a personal connection with each parent. With different ethnic groups, each with different expectations gives rise to different principal-ship perceptions. Principals used various ways to get to know and be known by the parents.

I never lose an opportunity to talk and get to know my parents. Whenever I meet them, I ask their names and introduce myself. I believe when I show them that I am available, they get to relax and be comfortable with me. I am sure through this way they find it easy to approach me whenever they need to in future (Personal interview, July 2011).

## *How Principals Develop Trust*

This is something I learned early in the profession. That it is very important to know the parents you serve on a one to one basis. I greet them wherever I meet them and they always stop me wherever we meet. Most times its only just chitchat about nothing really but this builds up our relationship (Personal interview, July 2011).

The realization that some of the problems students had in school had their roots at home made it the more reason why this is important. When principals knew a parent's unique background they became better placed to offer both appropriate and necessary assistance and support to their children at school. By initiating conversations with the parents, the principals showed that they valued the parents and also cared for their comfort. Parents also used such conversations to talk and share about their problems and worries and this proved a catharsis process for the parents.

### *Being transparent to the parents*

The principals interviewed confirmed that lack of transparency especially in financial matters had generated serious conflicts with the parents. To avoid this, principals were very liberal with school calendar, monies collected, financial expenditures, projections for the future and any that parents might be interested in. This made the principals honest in the eyes of the parents. It was important that parents be aware of what was going on in the school and to know that whatever was being done had the community's input and support.

Another thing that I have come to realize that I use in building trust with my parents is being honest. Honesty in handling finances... you know they are really very keen... they are very keen on finances anything talked negatively about misappropriation of funds ...they go mad (Personal interview, July 2011).

Principals who were generous with information readily realized that this had a positive effect on their relationship with parents and bolstered levels of trust.

### *Seeking parents input*

Apart from being aware of goings-on in the school, parents felt respected and valued when their opinion was sought and factored in decisions taken by the principals. Principals sought out the experts with relevant experience, opinion leaders and respected members of the community for advice because they realized that seeking a second opinion was perceived as their way of acknowledging the parents.

When I am not sure about something, I consult before I do it. Where I get the advice and help from does not matter but finally what matters is that the final decision is mine. May be I would have gotten it from say a priest, a neighbour principal, a parent who has experience, a friend of mine... whoever (Personal interview, July 2011).

There are times when I encounter an issue but don't have the answers immediately. So I decide to consult. I always go to a person with experience ... Once they advise me; I use it and assume responsibility of that decision (Personal interview, July 2011).

Seeking advice and being seen implementing it became a powerful method used by the principals interviewed in building trust with parents. Parents perceived that the principals valued them by seeking advice or just by knowing that the principals had involved their leaders in whatever decisions taken, the parents offered their trust in return.

*Listening To the Parents*

Another method the principals used in building trust with the parents was listening to the parents. The listening discussed by the principals involved appreciating the parent's unique situations and responding appropriately.

When parents come to my office with problems, I always try to understand their individual situations and either offer moral support and encouragement...And sometimes I just sit there and offer them my time. As a principal I have come to appreciate the true value of listening and sometimes communicating effectively without uttering a word (Personal interview, July 2011).

Listening to the parents in their respective localities required developing a genuine interest in their stories and plights while desisting from belittling their worries, problems and situations. It also required early detection of divisive talk and discouraging it.

In a school environment such as here in my school, I would say that for parents to have trust in you as a principal number one is you really have to be patient with them. Being patient with them may mean allowing them more time in order to meet their pledges. Being patient means that I understand what they are going through and I also believe in them to meet their pledges (Personal interview, July 2011).

As a result of being listened to, parents became more open and bold when dealing with the principals. In the long run the principals confirmed that the trust levels in their relationship with the parents improved. And just like the principals said, parents would trust and support a principal because their voices have been heard.

**Maintaining good professional conduct**

It emerged that principals in the study area who deliberately organized their schedules around achieving not only parental expectations but also professional expectations stood a better chance of having strong relationships anchored in trust.

*Being competent at your work*

Even though all principals agreed that competence was very important, there was no one single item that fully conveyed the principal's competence but rather a series of activities as well as their lifestyles.

Commitment is a sign that one is competent. Commitment in my work can only be noticed depending on how I carry myself while doing it. I mean, I cannot say that I am competent when I am always late in school, when the school is disorganized or when students are failing. Competence to me

and commitment by extension is only possible when I am good at what I do and that is being a principal (Personal interview, July 2011).

The principals noted that student performance was also important and a good indication of competence. They felt that it was their duty to ensure that the school was well staffed and that learners were engaged at all times.

I have also ensured that I have enough teachers to cover all subjects. When the government fails to give us, I have gone ahead and hired teachers for each subject keeping our students engaged. No teacher misses his/her lesson and students are happy (Personal interview, July 2011).

The principals monitored to ensure that actually learning was taking place. The sum total effect of their competency was to ensure that the school was meeting parental expectations both for the faculty, staff and the students.

### *Ensuring safety of learners*

The fact that the principals were working in contested areas prone to violence rendered the need for securing the learning space a matter of priority. The principals noted that parents would only release their children to come to school if they perceived that they would be safe.

There is no way effective learning can take place in my school if the students don't feel safe. They would be so unsettled that even teaching or communicating with them would be impossible. But once you assure them that all is well and that they have no cause for alarm, learning becomes quite productive and you have their total concentration and attention (Personal interview, July 2011).

To secure the learning environment, the principals initiated several safety enhancing measures in their schools. The principals hired extra security guards to control entry and exit from the schools. Visitors were required to sign a visitor's book indicating personal details, purpose of visit, person to visit and the duration of the visit. The principals also hired extra security guards to patrol during day time. These guards were also equipped with cell phones for fast and easy communication. The introduction of closed campus in all the schools also improved the security of the school tremendously. Consequently no student was allowed to exit the school during break or lunch.

In my school, once the students enter in the morning, they are not allowed to walk out or venture out of school for whatever reason until at the end of the school day or term. I have told the parents and they are aware, if a student has to leave school before they are released, then we insist that a parents should pick the child. That way we are able to monitor our students better(Personal interview, July 2011).

Principals in the study area realized that educational objectives could not be met in an unsafe environment and instituted measures to improve the safety and security of the students. The effect was to maximize learning and consequently this improved the parental trust.

*The school should grow*

It was found out that principal who had instituted development projects in their schools seemed to command more trust from the parents. When asked to explain this relationship, all principals explained that a growth in the school was taken positively and portrayed the principal as a positive minded person, competent and had the interest of the community at heart.

For the few years that I have been here, I have managed to put up a laboratory. Even though it is not fully stocked with the latest gadgets and chemicals, at least it is functional and our students are getting valuable knowledge in them- I have also rehabilitated all classrooms, painted the whole school with a new coat of paint (Personal interview, July 2011).

To have started such a huge project, it took a lot of convincing. But I assured the parents that it could be easier to have all the school in close proximity and in modern classrooms. As you can see the project is up and running and am sure it will soon be completed. Once it is completed it will be the most modern educational complex around here. The parents.... Well they are impressed and they are quite happy about it because they see it as their school and besides they can also see where their money is going (Personal interview, July 2011).

Growth was not limited to physical structures only but also included student enrolment as well. Principals marketed their schools especially during sports and athletics with an aim of attracting more students. In addition, they offered bursaries and scholarships to the top runners. Some principals also introduced extra services in their schools such as boarding facilities and school meals. The introduction of these services became an attraction to more students and principals offering such facilities in their schools had an edge over those who did not.

### **Discussions**

The purpose of this research was to understand and describe how secondary school principals in southwestern Kenya build trust with communities in their catchment areas. Due to ethnic violence rampant in the area, strained relationships between the various ethnic tribes populating the area are common. These strained relationships have seeped into the school and suddenly principals are faced with potentially hostile environments. Principals cannot afford to be biased and as a result are forced to reach out to all groups of parents for support. Undoubtedly, parents and other interested members of the broader community have much to contribute to the articulation of the school's values, vision and purpose statements. In particular, as indicated from the research findings, parents play a direct role in the success of secondary school principal. In order to create an environment in which all parents successfully participated in the education of their children, principals put in place initiatives that encouraged development of high levels of trust.

First, the principals became mediators in the conflict that afflicted the communities. Research confirms that trustworthy leaders are skilful in conflict management strategies (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The principals tried to deal with conflict and repair trust amongst the different groups of parents through mediation.

Secondly, as indicated in their responses, the principals in the study area stood for something different from the conflicts in the communities. The principals not only knew how to 'talk the talk' of trust but also they knew how to 'walk the talk'. The principals were aware that discontinuity between word and example would quickly erode their ability to lead thus create distrust with the parents. The principals in this study modelled norms of conduct that promoted the well-being of the whole students and the parents and invited others to abide by those norms as well. In parents meetings, the principals spoke the truth in ways that showed they cared. The principals also modelled neutrality and fairness in their dealings with the parents.

Thirdly, Principals encouraged collaboration by eliciting and understanding parents' perspectives and expectations. Principals took genuine interest in the triumphs and tribulations of the community. The principals confirmed that they viewed themselves as part of the community where they worked. Consequently, they actively participated in activities in the community and by so doing; they not only identified themselves with the communities but also endeared themselves to the parents. By actively participating in the socio-cultural events, the principals showed support and acknowledged that they were part of the community.

Fourthly, by working with families from diverse backgrounds with impartiality, the principals working relationships with the families improved and as a result all families benefitted. The principals also deliberately collaborated with the parents to offer the necessary needed support for all students from different ethnic groups and situations while working tirelessly with all students and parents without considering their tribal affiliations or situations. The principals encouraged understanding and celebration of diverse family forms, cultures, ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, and socio-economic status.

Fifthly, principals were actively involved in greater inspection of teachers' classroom practice. This supervision was practiced in such a way that the greater attention was perceived as increased care, thus giving the principals an opportunity to demonstrate their competence and expertise. Likewise, the principals initiated changes on the self and in their respective schools that increased their competence and degree of professionalism.

Sixthly, the principals initiated free flow of information within and outside the school. Parents' seemed to trust and support a principal who was seen to have invested and spend the money wisely and who was willing to explain his expenditures. The principals sought the opinion of the parents and listened to the parents stories.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of trust in any relationship especially in a school setting that requires interaction between the parents and the principal cannot be understated. It involves the assurance that parents can count on the goodwill of the principal to act in the students' best interests and that he will not exploit their vulnerability even if the opportunity to do so is available (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996). Parents trust the principal to care for their children and are confident that

the principal will consistently act in the best interest of the students (Beard & Brown, 2008).

Evidence from this study confirms that parents play an integral part in schools. Irrespective of the location or the social context in which the school is located, successful attainment of educational objectives will be enhanced when parents are actively involved in the education of their children. However, when environments are afflicted by social issues as ethnic violence, the resulting mistrust affects the school's ability to operate smoothly and consequently school leaders are forced to initiate measures to ensure that the stability of the school is maintained. School leaders are expected to take charge of curriculum implementation and as such have a duty to ensure that ideas and policies are implemented within the school that enhance successful attainment of their roles as curriculum leaders.

Even though, the study was carried out in an environment that is afflicted by violence and mistrust, this does not lower the requirement that school leaders ensure that educational objectives are attained at a minimum disruption. If anything, the role of the school principal becomes more pronounced as the school becomes a centre of cohesion and a place of forgiveness for the various groups of parents. The meetings organized by the principals become important as common grounds are forged here and the school becomes a rallying point.

In the study area differences in ethnicity as well as differences in cultural norms and values makes the attainment of trust between the principal and the parents even more difficult a task. Trust is more difficult in situations of diversity because people are uncertain (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Hoy, Gage, & Tarter, 2006). This uncertainty coupled with limited or partial knowledge about the principal makes the parents often unsure of what to expect. The uncertainty also involves the trust between parents from different tribes. Biased attributions about the capabilities, intentions, and actions of out-group parents can fuel feelings of distrust.

As evident from the research, trust becomes even more central and critical during periods of uncertainty due to crisis because demands on trust increase. (Mishra, 1996; Weick & Roberts, 1993). Irrespective of the social situations present in an area, principals who are perceived by the community as competent, honest, and open are accorded the support by the parents. Parents need an assurance that the principal has the ability to perform leadership role according to appropriate standards. Parents also need to perceive principals as reliable and keepers of their words and promises, whether verbal or written. Also parents value frank exchanges and communications with principals.

In conclusion, trust becomes necessary for a principal especially for those who work in environments where conflicts and trust is not guaranteed. Such environments include those that are afflicted with high levels of distrust. In such environments, trusting becomes the crucial strategy for dealing with uncertain and uncontrollable future. Evidence gathered from the field did confirm that the violence present in the study area causes divisions among the stakeholders. Such mistrust is reflected in parent meetings as well as suspicions and counter suspicions that impede collaboration and team work. Thus trust becomes 'a simplifying strategy that enables individuals to adapt to complex social



environment, and thereby benefit from increased opportunities (Earle & Cvetkovich, 1995, p.38). This has been attributed to the fact that parents ideographically influence their children's academic performance by imparting appropriate values such as expectations for their children's achievement (Seginer, 1983; Stevenson- Lee & Stigler, 1986; Wright & Wright, 1976).

### **Implications for theory and practise**

Trust has been identified as a vital component of effective school-community relationships (Dunst, Johanson, Rounds, Trivette, & Hamby, 1992). There is already a huge amount of research that has been conducted on the importance of trust in schools. For instance Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002) note that trust is a core resource for improvement in schools and Tschannen-Moran, M. (2004) concludes that trust matters in any meaningful interrelation. Goddard, R. D., Salloum, S. J., & Berebitsky, D. (2009) have studied trust as a mediator of relationships. The product of these and many researches on trust in schools is to use their findings and conclusions as a resource that provide guidance to educators interested in building trust with parents and all other stakeholders (Margolis & Brannigan, 1986). Unfortunately studies that have investigated building of trust in circumstances and unstable contexts similar to those in southwestern Kenya between school leaders and parents are rare in the educational research literature. The issue, then, that needs to be explored is how principals build relationships in contexts similar to those in this study and also come up with contextualized suggestions on how trustful relationships can be fostered.

When the degree dependability of the principals on the parents for inputs and resources is high, trust becomes a mandatory from the principal's perspective. This might not be an issue in environments where resources are guaranteed. In a situation where parents control resources, principals are at the mercy of parents and there is possibility of manipulation by the parents. Policy makers should come up with alternative ways of minimizing this dependability and vulnerability.

Conflicts are not limited to the study area. Various regions in the world are faced with disagreements that degenerate into sometimes violent confrontations. When such occur, the schools that operate within the affected environment are spared as they sometimes bear the brunt of these conflicts. Principals working in contexts afflicted by conflicts often times take on the roles of mediators. Consequently, policy makers and those engaged in developing leadership curriculums need to develop some form of training manuals in conflict resolutions for teachers. Since all conflicts are not the same, the manuals can be contextualized for specific contexts so that leaders are acquainted with skills that are useful in specific contexts.

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