Teaching in conflict-affected settings during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersections and impact of violent conflict and the COVID-19 health pandemic on teachers and teaching in Kenya. The qualitative case study utilises interview data from 15 practising teachers and 8 teacher-trainees to assess their perceptions and experiences of teaching in crisis- and pandemic-affected settings, and the impact on teaching and learning. Teaching in settings of violent conflict is stressful, and COVID-19 further compounded the challenges teachers and learners were already experiencing. The findings show that many practising teachers would either prefer to transfer from conflict-affected regions to more 'stable settings', where like other teachers they would face the singular challenge caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, or to leave the teaching profession entirely. Teacher-trainees felt that they had more time and better options to choose and secure teaching opportunities in their preferred geographic locations.

Key Words

violent conflict, pastoralist communities, teacher retention, teacher well-being

Introduction

Some communities experience multiple and overlapping disasters that continue to aggravate an already complicated situation. The unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic hit countries differently and further exacerbated an education crisis, especially in regions facing myriad disasters (Banati *et al*., 2020; Nesamoney *et al*., 2021). The negative impact on education has continued, but much of it has gone unreported. Children's and teachers' fundamental right to education and safe spaces has been harmed by rampant abuses and targeted assaults (UNESCO, 2011). According to UNICEF (2017), approximately 27 million children in fragile contexts were out of school pre-pandemic. Some countries have experienced protracted violent conflict, leading to generational disruptions of both the supply of and demand for education (UNESCO, 2011) that have far-reaching implications for reducing poverty. Violent conflicts displace families and force them to flee to safer locations. In the face of such stressful scenarios, students become de-motivated, some girls are married off, some are ashamed to return to school after a certain age, and others are subjected to early pregnancy and child labour (Abdullahi, 2019; Gatskova, 2017; Shakya, 2011; UNESCO, 2018).

Out of 54 known violent conflicts world-wide, 25 are in Africa (Strand *et al*., 2020), where economic disparities, particularly horizontal inequalities, are common because of systemic inequities that correspond with religious, ethnic, or geographic fragmentation (Cederman *et al*., 2011; Kimani *et al*., 2021; Langer *et al*., 2013; Stewart, 2000). Furthermore, during a conflict, schools may be suspended for months, causing suffering for teachers, students, and families. In Kenya, most of the violent conflict has been reported among the pastoralist communities that have practised

cattle rustling for decades. These conflicts have grown increasingly violent and are laced with more dangerous weapons (Institute for Security Studies, 2020; Gumba *et al*., 2019). Profiteering, small weapons proliferation, and competition over resources are driving conflicts amongst numerous pastoralist groups in Kenya (Triche, 2014). These are profound, deeply embedded problems without obvious solutions. It is unclear why cattle rustling-related violent conflict, including fatal attacks, has affected schools, teachers, and learners in many Kenyan sub-counties since 2018 (Gumba *et al*., 2019; Ominde, 2022; Osamba, 2000; Triche, 2014), which has forced many schools to close for months.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened settings in Kenya that were already experiencing armed conflict, which resulted in multiple vulnerabilities for the teachers, learners, and communities living in settings of violent conflict caused by cattle-rustling (Ide, 2021). To mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kenyan government introduced measures such as nation-wide curfews, national and international travel bans, a ban on public gatherings, and the closure of places of worship and educational institutions. Some of these measures, like curfews, opened a window for armed groups to attack at night, when few people would notice or respond to the victims' cries for help (REINVENT, 2019).

Although the government closed schools for nine months in March 2020, there were some short-term education provision solutions, such as distributing revision papers to students, especially for students preparing for the national school-leaving examinations; teachers communicating through parents' smartphones to share learning materials via WhatsApp platforms; and parents finding the time for their children to participate in radio and television programmes that were available. Amidst these arrangements, this article seeks to illustrate teachers' and teacher-trainees' experiences on how teaching was affected amidst the dual challenges of violent conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Violent ethnic conflict among pastoralist communities

In numerous Kenyan counties, socio-economic imbalances have traditionally generated conflict, which is described as a rivalry between two or more parties over scarce resources, power, and prestige (Laue, 1993; Mukoya, 2015; Wambua, 2017). Toft (2004) posits that conflicts within the geography of ethnic violence are complex phenomena that emerge from either socio-political, economic, or environmental disintegration. Conflict is about non-negotiable demands, such as recognition, participation, and dignity, which may have been implanted in Kenya during the struggle for independence that was championed by ethnic unions among different tribal groups that ultimately separated Kenya into tribal regions (Mwagiru, 2006; Nyukuri, 1997). The disagreements among these different groups have devolved into violent ethnic clashes, particularly in areas of the Rift Valley, Laikipia, North-eastern, and the Western regions, threatening peace and stability amongst pastoralist tribes such as the Marakwets, Tugen, Pokots, Turkana, and Keiyo (Schilling *et al*., 2012; Van den, 2011).

Ethnic conflict and impact on education

Cattle rustling and banditry have long been drivers of violent communal disputes, which have also affected schooling in ways that have resulted in the closure of schools and the deaths of teachers and students (Ominde, 2022; Osamba, 2000; Triche, 2014). Although empirical studies on the impact of COVID-19, conflict, and insecurity on education are limited (Megersa, 2020), it is known that the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the education sector in a variety of ways. The compounded impact of COVID-19 and long-term conflicts created uneven access to quality education which, if not addressed, creates a vicious cycle of conflict that leads to sentiments of discontent, unfairness, and complaints (Crespo, 2018). The intolerable circumstances created by the pandemic, ongoing conflict, and displacement affect teachers, and many are eager to change their location or leave the profession entirely.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative case study designed to examine teachers and teaching in conflict-affected settings during COVID-19. The case study helped the researcher understand the context and the reality faced by teachers in Kenya who work in regions affected by violent conflict. Kenya has approximately 13 pastoralist districts and a population of approximately 9 million

(K.N.B.S., 2019). However, not all the districts are experiencing cattle rustling-related violent conflict. The constructed-week-sampling method (Riffe, 2009) was used to analyse weekly newspaper content between February and November 2020 on government pronouncements and directives, the imposition and extensions of curfews, the number of banditry attacks, and school closures since March 2020. The researcher was able to identify seven (n=7) Kenyan counties for this study.

A mix of non-random selection approaches (Etikan *et al*., 2017) were used to choose two groups—practising teachers in violent conflict regions and undergraduate teacher-trainees from violent conflict zones. This was followed by an exponential discriminative snowball sampling strategy (Anieting, 2017) to select individuals from the two groups. This method was chosen because the focus

of the research deals with sensitive topics, and participants may be hesitant to reveal information to unknown researchers for fear of ramifications. The researcher conducted most of the interviews in May 2021 by phone, except for three in-person interviews with teacher-trainees who were in Nairobi. This approach mitigated the researcher's and the research participants' concerns about health and security by collecting data from a distance or outside of conflict-affected regions (Irvin, 2011). The researcher, however, recognizes the sampling bias, because when using the snowballing method, people tend to refer to people they know who share similar characteristics. Nonetheless, given the small scale of this study, this method was appropriate. Table 1 shows the targeted regions and the interview participants.

Table 1: Targeted Regions and the Interview Participants by County and Education Level

Regions Targeted	Study Participants		
	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools	
	Teachers	Teachers	Teacher-trainees
West Pokot	1	2	1
Turkana	1	1	1
Garissa	1	1	1
Mandera	1	1	1
Samburu	1	1	1
Wajir	1	1	1
Baringo	1	1	2
Total	7	8	8

The study participants included 15 practising teachers with an average of 5 years of teaching experience, as well as 8 teacher-trainees from the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, and Mt. Kenya University. Only four study participants were female: three teachers and one teacher-trainee. Although the gender dimension was not considered for this case study, the results were not significantly different for male and female participants. However, it is noted that, despite having given consent and the researcher having ensured confidentiality in the reporting process, two of the original ten teacher-trainees withdrew from the study. One of trainee's reasons for withdrawing was difficulty in reconciling his thoughts, having seen some of his teachers

killed in violent attacks. The other participant, who resided in a village that is regularly targeted for violent attacks, expressed concern that they might not know enough about the motives fuelling the violence and the potential stigmatisation of other communities that might result from their participation. Phone interviews lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes on average, while face-to-face interviews typically took 1 hour and 15 minutes. Both in-person and phone interviews yielded similar data, although the phone interviews were ultimately more efficient and cost-effective. The study aimed to interview primary school teacher-trainees, but unfortunately, none replied to the interview request.

Findings and discussion

The findings of the study generally noted that teaching in environments of violent conflict pre-COVID-19 was difficult, and that COVID-19 added to the existing challenges and difficulties teachers faced in such contexts. Generally, teachers working in these contexts faced a dual pandemic—of violent conflict and COVID-19. The findings below illustrate the specific challenges that arose and the teachers' decision-making processes when determining whether to remain in the same region, change professions, seek transfer to other regions, or retire from the civil service.

Lack of technology and telecommunications infrastructure

By virtue of the violent conflict, most regions lacked technology and telecommunications infrastructure. During school closures that lasted for nine months due to COVID-19, the teachers were expected to maintain constant contact with learners via their parents' phones. Because there was no prior mapping of the availability of digital infrastructure or households' capacity to offer the requisite devices and internet connection, it was difficult to create any meaningful engagement with the learners, as most parents did not own smartphones. Many teachers also utilised low-cost phones that were incompatible with Zoom, Google Classroom, or WhatsApp technology, thus limiting access to EdTech training or communication. Furthermore, the cost of internet access was left to the teachers, who faced their own financial challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to teachers, even though they had faced many challenges teaching in these regions, at no time did they think teaching and learning would be affected by a lack of technology and telecommunication, as no pre-service or in-service training emphasised use of technology in the classroom. Eight out of 15 teachers were pessimistic about the government's, teachers', parents', and students' ability to cope with COVID-19 in regions of violent conflict, where learning outcomes were already weak, or to overcome the technological and connectivity challenges that arose during school closures and curfews.

Despite high levels of anticipation for creativity

and innovation from teachers during the pandemic (Barron, 2021), one interviewed teacher acknowledged his attempts to reach the students: 'I explored communicating to learners using parents' phones but only reached around 10 percent of the total of my class—i.e., eight learners whose parents had smartphones. This created major equity implications if 90 percent of my learners are left behind'.

Further, because Kenya's internet infrastructure and bandwidth are privately owned, access and connectivity at the required speed and quantity are unattainable (Gichuhi, 2021). This is corroborated by 12 out of 15 teachers who reported having internet connectivity at odd hours of the night. Ten out of 15 teachers travelled to higher ground in the highlands area, mainly in West Pokot and Turkana, to find a strong connection with solid bandwidth. The teachers expressed concern about the realities of teaching and learning under such circumstances. As one male teacher from Samburu stated,

> Although many conflict-affected regions experience curfews now and then, many teachers and community members have self-enforced curfews of not walking at night due to insecurity, and therefore, with a 9 pm to 4 am COVID-19 pandemic curfew, walking or gathering as a group for any COVID-19 response discussion was impossible. This made it even more difficult for teacher-teacher and teacher-learner interactions, particularly without any smartphones to facilitate communication, or even [the ability to] visit our learners at home.

Curfews and school closures both exacerbated and mitigated insecurities

The curfews brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic created new vulnerabilities for some people in the community, but school closures also meant that students were less exposed to harm. Seven teachers reported that many parents were relieved that their children were on an 'extended vacation' and out of the way of the dangers caused by bandits, which often are experienced by children while at school or on their way to and from school. According to teachers, many parents were happy that they only had to deal with COVID-19 health concerns, as the children remained at home. Conversely, one male teacher noted that

many bandits used the COVID-19 period as a window of opportunity to assault many communities, especially during curfew hours, when more people were at home under movement restrictions.

Gaps left by teacher attrition

Teacher attrition was already a challenge in these settings prior to COVID-19. The regions affected by violent conflict lack locally trained teachers who could be hired as a stop-gap measure to cushion the major gaps when non-local teachers depart (ICG, 2019; Mendenhall *et al*., 2018). One male teacher, who since the interview was transferred from Baringo County, empathised with students, especially when teachers leave in large numbers or become victims of bandits. Nevertheless, he stated that he

> was teaching an examination class but had sought a transfer one year prior [to the] COVID-19 pandemic. With the delay of a transfer and continued insecurity, I had to leave,…I didn't care if TSC transferred me or not; I was content to be at home.

Another participant noted that,

> in violent conflict regions, the conditions cannot maintain trained teachers who have other profession options, especially those of us whose home regions are non-violent.

Another teacher-trainee also noted that,

> in my secondary school, non-local teachers were continually kept on notice, and they would take leave even for two weeks until they were assured about their security. This affected our smooth learning and curriculum implementation, and syllabus coverage was always many weeks behind.

The study reveals that teachers' departures, prompted by ongoing insecurities and/or the pandemic, had a negative impact on the quality of learning and students' academic achievement. Along with three teachers who expressed willingness to remain in their assigned county, ten teachers were seeking transfers to safer locations. Two teachers had already been transferred by the time of data collection, six teachers were waiting for

official communication about a transfer, and four teachers were not sure whether to transfer or retire, as their ages would allow them early retirement with benefits. Out of the four teachers willing to retire, three had chosen to leave teaching for farming or other pursuits by 2022. These movements made it even more challenging for these teachers to remain in contact with their learners during the COVID-19 school closures. During the period of data collection, five non-local teachers had already left their regions after the school closures.

Reflecting on their time as a student during the health pandemic, one teacher-trainee stated,

> When schools shut during the COVID-19 time...we couldn't connect with [our teachers] since [our] parents didn't have smartphones… Unfortunately, two of my teachers did not return after the re-opening of schools...and that had an impact on my university admissions rating[1].

Psycho-social impact on teachers' well-being

Non-Muslim teachers working in predominantly Muslim regions (9 out of 15) were emotionally depleted, and many harboured untold trauma that could be detected in their voices as they recalled their teaching experiences during times of violent conflict. For example, in Northern Kenya, the militant organisation Al-Shabaab regularly accuses non-local teachers of corrupting Muslims (who are the majority in the region) with foreign ideals through secular education (ICG, 2019). One teacher described the security concerns she faced while teaching and her desire to find other work because of the pandemic:

> I was the head-mistress of a school in the North-eastern region, and my students would warn me of any imminent attacks...They would assist me to hide in their dorms while wearing a hijab.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewees observed worsening schooling conditions where they worked, which was exacerbated by the community ignoring any government efforts to curb the pandemic. Wearing of masks was ignored by many, and this exposed many teachers to the risk of illness. When schools closed, the bulk of the teachers from

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1 I had aimed to get an A in my final examination but got a B, which affected my course of choice at the university. I was to do computer science, but I am now pursuing a bachelor of education (arts).

other regions (non-local teachers) returned home. The teacher who was protected by her students recounted her experience:

> The first weeks of [the] COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya were hectic, as the community and many students didn't embrace government protocols of wearing masks and washing of hands. When the schools were finally closed, I got a golden opportunity to rejoin my family and some time to request a transfer [to another school].

Local vs. non-local teachers' struggles

Even though all eight teacher-trainees were born and educated in the sampled regions, seven of them were concerned about the security and quality of teaching and learning. One stated that 'little learning can be achieved in [an] environment of uncertainties'. According to the findings, the causes of the disputes are deep-rooted, and the seeds of conflict are planted early in life. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers were not ready for an additional crisis.

As one trainee observed,

> most attackers [Pokots] know their fellow [Pokots] among the learners…They were never assaulted, but I later discovered that Pokots wear cultural artefacts that distinguish them from us [Marakwets]...and Pokots had a method of sensing danger from afar...and would warn us of impending attacks.

In this case, a local teacher had to count on their students (from a different ethnic group) to provide information or/and security. Given the experiences that have befallen teachers and schools, many teacher-trainees noted that they would only choose to teach there as a last resort.

COVID-19 has also exposed the gaps in teaching and learning in regions of violent conflict and the challenges of retaining non-local teachers. With the COVID-19-related lockdowns, non-local teachers felt they were more vulnerable and many 'left immediately [once] schools were closed'.

Distinct needs of teachers working in conflict-affected settings

According to both practising teachers and teacher-trainees, curriculum designers and policy-makers are out of touch with the reality in many regions that have experienced ethnic and violent conflicts for many years, and training colleges do not adequately prepare teachers for the experiences they will face in the field. All respondents agreed that the theoretical techniques and training used are detached from the realities on the ground. A male teacher from Baringo, with more than ten years' teaching experience, remarked that

> many of our trainers have no experience teaching in conflict zones. They simply teach book narratives that are different from reality, [and] we learn about risk mitigation 'on the job'.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, both the teachers' and teacher-trainees' lack of preparedness to teach during a crisis or pandemic further complicated their ability to reach their students amidst the pervasive insecurity. The teachers' experiences painted a picture of double tragedies—violent conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic—that might affect the daily lives of teachers and learners, as well as the ability to achieve both national and international education goals (World Bank, 2020). Better and more relevant teacher professional development is clearly needed, but broader efforts to ensure the safety and security of teachers and learners in these settings is paramount.

Conclusion

This study focused on the teaching and learning perspectives and experiences of practising teachers and teacher-trainees in environments of violent conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that violent conflict and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic significantly disrupted teaching and learning, particularly for teachers working in contexts affected by ongoing violence who feared for their lives. The COVID-19 pandemic affected different regions differently, depending on their level of vulnerability, but its impact was clearly exacerbated in settings of violent conflict, due to existing risks to the lives of teachers and learners. Both teachers and teacher-trainees reported that the information provided by universities and teacher training institutes fell short of their expectations on how to deal with the crisis. To pursue global and national educational goals during complex emergencies, educational

communities should be equipped with effective measures on disaster preparedness and conflict mitigation. This would enable the teachers and teacher-trainees living and working in these settings to provide invaluable resources that would inform education policies, curriculum development, and teacher professional development activities. This is one important lesson learned from the experiences of educational institutions in conflict-affected areas of Kenya during COVID-19.

Author bio

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