

**INFORMAL COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: A CASE
STUDY OF MPESA FOUNDATION ACADEMY STAFF**

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DECLARATION

I, **Abigael Chepkurui**, declare that this research project is my original work and that any other borrowed literature or information from other scholars or writers has been duly credited to them. I declare further that this project has not been submitted to any college, university or other institution for any academic awards.

Signed _____ Date 17th Nov 2020

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K50/6636/2017

Declaration by the Supervisor

This research project was written under my watch and guidance and submitted for examination with my approval as the University supervisor.



Signed _____ Date 18/11/2020

Prof. Ndeti Ndati, PhD.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family. You have been of great support to me. My father and mother who have always remembered me in their earnest prayers, thank you.

To my brothers Elly and Ezra, you have always reminded me that I am your role model.

For that reason, I have had to press on so as not to let you down.

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ABSTRACT

Informal communication or grapevine, is a channel of communication that stretches through organizations in all directions, irrespective of the levels of authority. Grapevine arises from social interactions among the employees, and serves to describe the structure of an organization. Informal communication tends to become conspicuous when formal communication channels are closed. However, it is not clear whether informal communication contributes to conflict management, and if so, to what extent. This leaves a knowledge gap worth exploring. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the outcomes of using informal communication in managing conflicts among employees at MPESA Foundation Academy. The general objective of this study was to assess the place of informal communication in conflict management. The specific objectives were, (a) to find out the factors that lead to the use of informal communication over formal communication among employees in schools, (b) to explore the main causes of conflicts among employees in schools, (c) to assess the role of informal communication as a conflict management strategy in organizations. The study was informed by Organizational Conflict Theory and Social Network Theory. Descriptive study design was used in conducting the research. A Qualitative approach was adopted, where qualitative data was collected. Data was obtained using Focused Group Discussions, and key informant interviews. The research population included teachers and non- teaching staff. Collected data was analysed and presented thematically using the narrative form. The study found that informal communication is used as a means of communication as well as a means of managing or solving most conflicts in places of work. Furthermore, the researcher established that as a conflict management tool, has both positive and negative outcomes, although the positive outcomes outweigh the negative outcomes. The study recommends that policy makers at various levels of educational management incorporate informal communication training at various curriculums and professional development training so as to equip employees and management personnel with skills necessary in tapping into informal communication in managing and solving workplace place conflicts.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

This chapter will give the background of Informal Communication, referred here as grapevine communication, as well as organizational conflicts. It will also discuss the research problem, research objectives, research questions, rationale/justification of the study, significance of the study, the scope and its limitations.

1.1 Background of the Study

Schools, like other organizations, are made up of several people with different needs, perceptions and attitudes. These differences may cause conflicts and misunderstandings between people or groups. A conflict is seen as a natural and resultant process of human reactions in a situation where two or more people are together over a period of time, as outlined by Rahim (2001). These conflicts end up affecting the general performance of an institution whether positively or negatively. Workplace conflicts are inevitable and tend to cause friction between management and employees, and have the potential to limit progress and career growth. They are uncomfortable and tend to take away the energy required for productivity as stated by Gelfand (2008). The existence of conflict in an organization, however, is not necessarily detrimental because if managed well, the organization can achieve growth. Batool & Riaz (2013) found that when conflict is seen as an opportunity to improve on the existing organizational policies, it can lead to an increase in productivity.

Since conflict is an endemic occurrence in any organization, it is of essence that managers can recognize sources of conflict, assess its constructive and destructive ability and be able to manage it by implementing the most efficient and practical resolution techniques as stated by Fleetwood (1987). Conflict management is therefore necessary to bring order, since conflicts affect performance of any individual as shown by Dessler (2008), be it a teacher, a school support staff or a school management personnel, or even between the school itself and other social entities such as parents or local authorities. Mullins (1996) has stated that the effects of these conflicts are even more when goals differ, high levels of misunderstandings or when individuals' work are interdependent. Moreover, schools are service providers and educators are pushed to achieve and maintain standards that will best satisfy the community as explained by Shih and Susanto (2010).

Conflicts may be on different levels in any given school, such as intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict or intergroup conflict. Sources of these conflicts amongst employees in schools may be too varied and numerous, however they share a common characteristic and are largely integrated, according to researchers like Kabanoff (2015), Rahim (2010), Tjosvold 2008) and Van de Vliert (2008). Such causes include problems in communication where messages are poorly encoded, poor interpersonal relations among members as well as inappropriate channels and timing for the intended communication. Lack of openness can also result in undesired organizational behaviour.

Mullins (2007) has identified ambiguity in roles is equally a cause of conflicts in school. Every organization has roles that are performed by employees according to the job description of the organization /school. Goal conflicts occur when the achievement of a goal by one individual or group is perceived to prevent the achievement of a goal by another

individual or group. Conflicting interests also results in conflicts where every entity is fighting to acquire a reasonable amount of a scarce resource such as finances. Rahim (2000) identified differences in values as often causing chaos where interdependency happens since every school has different people with different interests, values and opinions which can clash and result in unachieved goals.

Conflict management refers to the reduction of levels of severity of a conflict. It entails the various steps that are taken so as to prevent a conflict at the right time (Dictionary.com). Conflict management may also involve resolving conflict where the conflicting parties do not completely end a conflict, rather, they reduce the severity or the extreme tactics they used during conflict. Moreover, it may involve the conflicting parties bringing a conflict to an end.

The term informal communication/grapevine in this study is defined as an unofficial means of giving and receiving information especially through face to face communication (Dictionary.com). According to an article in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, grapevine also refers to the informal transmission of information, gossip or rumour from one person to another. Grapevine, loosely known as rumours or gossips, and synonymous with informal communication in this research, is made to provide people with an outlet for their worries, expectations, anxieties and imaginations. It also helps to satisfy a desire to know what is really going on.

The history of grapevine can be traced to the United States Civil War. Due to the frequent moves from battle line fronts, army intelligence telephone wires were hung loosely from one tree to another, more like grapevines hanging from the tree. Due to the way these lines were hung, any message sent via them was always confusing and

inaccurate, hence the common phrase that ‘I heard it from a grapevine’ according to Shahid (2011).

Wells (1994) stated that this type of communication does not emanate from any position in the organization, neither does it follow a certain chain of command or network. News from grapevine can flow out in any direction, diagonally, horizontally or vertically, all in a very short time span, as stated by Mishra (1999).

Fredrick Koenig, a sociologist studying rumours and hearsays finds out that grapevine communication solely serves to satisfy human’s desire to know what is happening, and at the right time. He says people listen to a rumour or pass it over because it satisfies a certain desire. The levels of this desires that a particular rumour satisfies differ from one person to another. For a rumour to be successfully transmitted depends on the people involved as Spinks (1994) discovered.

Shahid (2011) also discovered that rumours are undocumented, hence very prone to changes and varied interpretations as compared to formal communication that is documented through meetings, reports, conferences and notices. Nicoll (2014) asserted that grapevine is a communication method that arise out of direct social interactions, and out of how organizations are socially constructed. Richard, (2018) argued that grapevine is a common source of misinformation, especially when an organization is facing threats or uncertainties. Vickery (2004) stated that rumours are powerful forms of grapevine and could reflect genuine fears of members of an institution. It becomes very conspicuous when the formal channel closes. Topics of discussion in grapevines majorly vary from organizational to personal matters. It also involves the past and present employees. Too

much grapevine can indicate organization's dysfunction or loss of confidence in the company's hierarchy, fear or excessive secrecy.

Grapevine communication, in its simplest form, does not follow, nor do they coincide with the formal channels of communication. From this information, it's almost impossible to get a school that has no conflict as well as informal communication.

Schools are becoming more complex and it is therefore plausible to anticipate an increasing number of issues in schools due to conflicts. It is important therefore for school employees to confront and de-escalate conflicts effectively and on time, so as to reduce or overcome the disruptive effects of conflicts and obtain a positive outcome that will facilitate the performance in a given school.

The purpose of this study was to assess the role of informal communication in conflict management and offer recommendations based on the findings for a better conflict management that will enhance smooth running of schools.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite efforts by various managements to reduce, and possibly eliminate conflicts amongst employees, organizational conflicts continue to become a huge problem and major inhibitor of growth in various organizations. Attempts to address these organizational conflicts are proving ineffective. Even in organizations that are seemingly established, and with Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADRs) put in place, such as mediation and negotiations between the conflicting parties and a management personnel, the levels of destructive workplace conflicts are on the rise as stated by Jaffee (2001). This is made

worse by the fact that whenever two or more people meet to conduct various business, conflicts are bound to occur as stated by Malcom & Rennie (1998).

Conflict therefore is an integral part of the organization resulting from the day to day interactions among the staff. It is the management's role therefore to identify the most effective and practical conflict management technique that has the ability to address both the management's and employees' needs in equal measure, says Jaffee (2001).

Kraus, Morsella & Deutsch (2006) propose that Informal Dialogue Model of communication, that is, informal communication, is a Conflict Management model of communication that focuses on reducing the extremes of a conflict through informal and collaborative communication between two conflicting parties.

While it could be used as a conflict management strategy, it is not clear whether Informal communication escalates or de-escalates conflict, given its two-faced nature. Furthermore, it is not also clear which types of conflicts can best be managed through informal communication to the conflicting employees' satisfaction. Despite the fact that most organizational conflicts are due to communication problems such as partial messages, ambiguity in words or lack of communication, most of these conflicts are also largely solved by communication, either through enhancing understanding, or solving ambiguity. This research therefore seeks to establish the exact role of Informal communication in managing conflicts amongst employees in a school setting.

1.3 Study Objectives

1.3.1 General Objective

of this study was to investigate the role of informal communication in managing conflict among employees at MPESA Foundation Academy.

1.3.2 Specific objectives

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- i. Find out the factors that lead to the use of informal communication over formal communication among employees at MPESA Foundation Academy.
- ii. Explore the causes of various conflicts among the staff at MPESA Foundation Academy.
- iii. Investigate the impact of using informal communication as a strategy of conflict management at MPESA Foundation Academy.

1.4 Research Questions

- i. What is the role of informal communication in Conflict Management in schools in Kenya?
- ii. What factors lead to the use of informal communication over formal communication among the staff at MPESA Foundation Academy?
- iii. What causes conflicts among staff at the MPESA Foundation Academy?
- iv. To what extent is Informal communication effective as a conflict management tool?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research comes at a time when the Ministry of Education and school managements are looking to find ways of effectively managing the education system so as to reduce the conflicts that have been experienced over the last few years. This study, therefore seeks to benefit various stakeholders in the education system. Educational institutions' management will use the findings from this study to come up with suitable approaches to grapevines that will result in Conflict management. They will use grapevine as an alternative mode of communication where necessary, especially if the formal communication fails.

Academic research institutions will also benefit from the study, since it will provide extensive knowledge on the extent to which grapevine contributes to Conflict Management. Policy makers will also align their communication policies according to the recommendations of this research. They will also be advised by its findings on what policies to put in place like in-corporating communication in the syllabus. The study's recommendation could also be used as a requirement in appointing educational managers to positions. With knowledge on informal communication, the managers can harness the advantages of grapevine to provide a feedback forum from students on matters affecting them. This will go a long way in reducing possible conflicts.

Development partners also stand to benefit from this study. They have contributed a huge number of funds and other facilities to the education system with the hope of improving the quality of Kenya's Education system. This study thus has important perspectives for their analysis on the school management and conflict management in education institutions.

1.6 Rationale for the Study

School managements in Kenya continue to experience an increase in the number of employer employee conflicts, which present a challenge in general academic and professional performances. These conflicts produce an environment which culminates into chaos and low morale when not checked on time. Many school managements have laid down conflict management or prevention strategies that have continually been unsuccessful according to the Ministry of Education (2012).

Various committees, unions and boards have been formed by the Kenyan government to address workplace conflicts in schools. Mensar (2007) identified the positive roles played by various teacher unions in managing workplace conflicts arising among various stakeholders in schools. More so, Saundry et al (2011) stated that 63% of school managers believed that union representatives were key in managing and resolving conflicts among teachers and their employers. Teachers Service Commission, established under the Act 237(1) of the Kenyan Constitution has a great role in managing and resolving conflicts involving teaching staff.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

The study was limited to the management and employees of MPESA Foundation Academy. This gives the study a larger sample frame. These employees are drawn from all parts of the country, which increases the project representation. The study was also limited to Thika West Sub County in Kiambu County. The responses were limited to the staff and management of MPESA Foundation Academy.

1.8 Operational Definition of Terms

Informal communication- Refers to giving and receiving information using the unofficial, casual channels, without conforming to the set channels, systems, chains of command and formalities. In this study, informal communication will be used interchangeably with grapevine and rumours.

Management- The people who play the leading roles in an organization. They coordinate the employees' efforts to achieve an objective. They may also hire and lay off employees using a set standard. In this study this term shall be used with employer interchangeably.

Employee- A person who is paid to do a particular job after meeting a laid down criteria that indicates that they are qualified.

Organization- An association, a company or an institution comprising a group of people, mostly an employer and employees, who have an objective. In this study, school is used in the same sense as an organization.

Informal communication- Unofficial means of giving and receiving information.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Overview

This chapter deals with empirical and theoretical analysis of literature on organizational conflict and the place of grapevine. It is divided into two parts. Part one identifies related literature from other scholars on conflicts management and the place of gossip in an organizational setting, more so a school setting. The second part discusses various theories on gossip which the study will be hinged and relates it to conflict management in educational institutions.

2.1 Empirical Review

Grapevine communication is a form of undocumented informal communication that simply spreads and covers a lot of ground like vines do. It is used synonymously with gossip and rumours. Davis (1953) stated that the term grapevine originated from the United States civil wars in 1860s. Various telegraph wires were hung loosely from one tree to another so as to pass military intelligence in a manner that resembled a grapevine tree. The stringing method was meant to distort messages for non-militants. Grapevine is now used to refer to messages that travel through any organization with no apparent structure or clear direction, as stated by Davis, 1953, Gibson, Ivancevich, & Donnelly (1991).

Grapevine can be traced to far back in history. Shakespeare, in his play Othello, brings out the dangerous influence of hearsays and rumours if unchecked. The Hawthorne Effect of the 20th Century written by various authors show that informal and social aspects of communication including grapevine were far better in improving organizational behaviour.

Pravin (2013) identifies various paths and flows that an informal communication, be it a gossip, rumour, casual talks or hearsays can take, from the source to recipient, as well as the changing roles that participants take, changing from a source to a recipient and back, depending on the role they play during transmission. First, is the single strand chain where a gossip or rumour flows in a single chain. Person X tells it to person Y who in turns tells it to person Z and so on. In this case a recipient turns into a source and tells it to the next recipient who also turns into a source, and so forth.

Gossip chain is the flow where one person tells a rumour to everybody else. There is only one source and several recipients. The Probability chain is where there is no specific source and receiver. A gossip moves from anybody to anybody, especially when the gossip is about something interesting but not significant. The Cluster chain flow is when a gossip moves through selected groups. Person X tells gossip to a few selected individuals and a few of these individuals inform other few selected individuals and the chain moves in that manner.

According to Harrison (2013), gossip and rumours can be transmitted in various ways such as Pipe Dreams method, also known as Wish Fulfilment. This is a way of transmitting a rumour by identifying the wishes and hopes of the targets and coining the rumour in a manner that seems to attend to those wishes and hopes, with the aim of getting them to spread the rumour. The Boyer-rumour strategy of transmitting rumours exaggerates the targets' fears and concerns so as to make the rumour very worthy of spreading. The Wedge drivers is a strategy to transmit a rumour by using aggression to spread an unfriendly rumour that damages and splits groups. The Home stretcher involves anticipating the final announcement of a manager by guessing and brainstorming

possibilities with the aim of filling information gaps during times of ambiguity.

Various scholars have delved differently into the field of gossip and conflict management in an organizational setting such as a school. Baker & Jones (1996) and Therrien, (2004) states that gossip is detrimental to work morale and productivity, creates conflicts among employees and should be discouraged and not condoned. Gossip is a problem to the 'managed'. They associate gossip with trivial and negative assumptions. Emler (1994) and Jones, (1980) further add that gossip is an inauthentic discourse that ought to be discouraged or banned.

Gossip has been further criticized in organizations because of its ability to generate negative outcomes such as disharmony and bringing out the worst in other people. In a gossip, it is difficult to separate action from the person (Bergmann,1993). Gossip tends to perpetuate the sense of the other person in question as an outsider, thus creating a division in an organization and damaging relationships (Elias & Scotson, 1994). Gossip is an activity that seeks attention, promotes self-interest and image through social comparison and discrediting of others (Paine,1967).

Gossip, rumours or grapevines are not easy to manage in an organization. Sometimes the information is very offensive to targeted individuals in the organization and this will create unnecessary stress for the targeted worker and further escalate a conflict as discovered by Michelson, Iterson and Wassington (2010). Grapevine in schools, just like any organization, always randomly spreads around. Ellwardt (2011) has identified that the view can be very biased and polarized around certain individuals. If the gossip content is negative, this will be damage individuals.

Grapevine can also distort and give incomplete information because it does not follow any set of rules, Shahid, (2011). Any information is shared with anybody in an uncontrolled manner hence distorting the original message or sending out selected aspects of a message that are seen to spike attention to those involved.

Grapevine also results in lack of secrecy since every one interacts with each other freely and any secret matter is flashed out without any hesitations, more so the sensitive information about the organization.

In contrast, there are other perspectives of gossip or rumours in an organization in relation to conflict management. Noon and Delbridge (1993) propose that gossip is intrinsic to any organizational life and call for more systematic research into gossip and its benefits to an organization. Zamanou & Glaser (1994) terms grapevine as undocumented and unstructured communication and the only way for people to find out what is happening.

Gossip can provide contextual information according to Rosnow, (2013) and in this manner, it becomes a way through which individuals relieve tension and anxiety, more so, in a situation of organizational conflict. Circulation of information through gossip among individuals enhances ties and reduces chances of a conflict as Noon & Delbridge, 1993) identified.

Ogasawara (1998) states that gossip is one way of giving power and voice to the seemingly voiceless in a school setting after proving that students were able to influence the reputations of teachers and managers through gossip. Reputation was important to managers since it influenced their future promotions. This way, students were able to have their grievances addressed. School managers also can be able to determine the effects of new programmes and policies on employees by gauging their reactions (Mishra, 1990).

This means that tuning into a grapevine can act as a potential system of getting early warning signs that might have otherwise ended up in conflicts.

Baumeister et al. (2004) argues that organizational managers who leave out gossip networks have less power and control over individuals in an organization than those who pay attention to the organization grapevine. Often, such managers don't stay at the managerial position for long.

On the other hand, grapevine in schools has helped the employees of an institution build strong personal relationships and hence reduce chances of conflicts among them. Being part of a grapevine makes people bond better since it makes them develop feelings of being a part of school family, a factor that reduces conflicting interest.

Grapevine communication can also be a great source of reliable feedback. By tuning in to a grapevine communication among members of a school setting, managers can be able to point out the morale level among its employees as well as areas that require attention so as to prevent serious conflicts from rising. It is also a major tension releaser among people in any organisation. Grapevine communication is therefore a double-edged sword that can either escalate or de-escalate conflict. After the other conflict management methods have seemingly failed, as seen through the ever-rising number of conflicts in places of work, the researcher sought to investigate the extent to which grapevine contributes to Conflict Management.

Grapevine was once seen as an enemy, and various organizational managers sought to combat and thwart it. However, grapevine has proven to be an asset in an organization if well used. Rumours have the potential to enhance status by filling gaps in the conversations within any organization as Hicks,(1971) found out.

Given the importance of effective communication in any organization such as schools, as well as the potential destructive effect of grapevine (gossip), more research needs to be done to determine factors that propel negative gossip. Although previous research has examined the effects of gossip in organizations, the focus has not been on assessing the contribution grapevine communication in Conflict Management.

2.1.1 Causes of Organizational Conflicts

Conflicts in organizations can be traced back to the industrial revolution era where workers, managements adopted a managing structure based on command and control, spiking up conflicts and revolts at the places of work. This new management strategy adopted the scientific management styles that reduce an employee to a mere means to an end, and a unit of production. These styles also eliminated freedom and employee welfare. The employees started to view management as a sign of lack of trust by their employers (Bowles and Gintis, 1990).fearing that they were losing their autonomy and free will, started to resist their capitalist employers, according to Jaffee (2001).

Other than the management strategies, there are other sources of conflicts in various places of work. De Dreu and Gefand (2008) state that since resources in the places of work are always limited or shared, there will always arise a continuous conflict of interest between employees on an individual, group or organization levels.

Jaffee (2008) identifies two areas that spikes most conflicts in work places. First, is the division of labour. Whether vertical or horizontal, dividing work among different individuals comes with dividing resources and other vested interests. This amounts to frictions and conflicts. Second, he says, conflicts stem from individual employees' tensions. These conflicts arise due to uniquely different individuals with different goals

working together for an organization that has one objective. This relationship tends to naturally produce conflicts, since the individuals view the others as potential competitors interfering with the attainment of the main organizational goal (Dirks & Parks, 2003).

Putman and Poole (1989) viewed participation in decision making, among others, as a key factor leading to conflicts in an organization. Employees who feel left out in making decisions affecting them are prone to demoralization and often conflicting attitudes.

Mooney (2014) attributes organizational conflicts to gender differences. He affirms that conflicts arise when employees feel discriminated based on gender. Thatcher (2008) found that the subgroups formed by the employees at the organization along social categories like gender can lead to prejudice and may encourage conflicts.

2.1.2 Conflict Views. Over the past decades, three different views about conflict in workplaces have evolved.

2.1.2.1 The traditional view of conflicts

This view started in the late 19th century until the mid-20th century. This view sees conflict as a negative phenomenon, always bad and resulting in a drop of the organizational performances. Verma (1998) says that the traditional view of conflict is associated with derogatory terms such as destruction and violence, and therefore conflict should be suppressed, eliminated or managed.

This view of conflict is responsible for the formation of labour unions, and is the view held by most businesses and organizations. Violent confrontations between management and its employees made people believe that conflict is harmful and employees should avoid it as a means of airing their grievances (Verma, 1998).

2.1.2.2 The Behavioural view of conflict

This view became popular through the 1970s. It states that conflict is a natural and inevitable occurrence in any organization, and can have a negative or positive outcome depending on how it is handled. However, even in the presence of conflict, performance can increase until a certain level whereby if it is not resolved, the performance begin to decline (Verma, 1998). This view advocates for organizations to accept conflict due to its potential to benefit the organization if managed effectively.

2.1.2.3 The Interactionist view of conflict

This is the newest perspective on conflicts in organizations. It views conflicts as a necessary ingredient required for an increase in organization's performance. While the behavioural perspective accepts conflicts in the organizations, with the view that an organization with tranquillity, too much cooperation and pleasant human resources is likely to be stagnant and unable to respond to changes and crises. This approach encourages management to use conflict as a self-criticising tool necessary for creativity and innovation. The table below shows a summary of the characteristics of the three conflict views and their effects on organizational performance as shown by Verma (1998).

Table 2.1 Views of Conflicts

Details	Traditional view	Contemporary View	Interactionist view
Characteristics	Harmful, always bad, negative, caused by trouble makers, should be avoided, suppressed or managed.	It is an unavoidable, natural occurrence. It can be managed, not always bad, it's a result of change	Should be stimulated, its beneficial, it's as a result of the commitment to the attainment of the organizational goal, used to foster creativity, it's a self-criticising tool.
Effects on the Organizational performance	It leads to decline in organizational behaviour.	Performance depends on how its managed. If well managed, performance increases.	Certain levels of conflict is necessary to increase performance Leads to an effective organization It encourages innovation.

2.1.2 Types of Organizational Conflicts

Aula & Siira (2010) identified four types of conflicts in an organization. Interpersonal conflicts, involving two or more employees of an organization, whether of the same hierarchical level or not. It is also known as dyadic conflicts according to Rahim (2001). Riaz & Junaid (2011) state that interpersonal conflicts between employees of the same rank is due to personal reasons while conflicts between an employee and his superior is due to organizational goals such as employee commitment, job satisfaction and performances.

Intra-group conflicts are the conflicts that occur between members of a group, in relation to the group's goals and behaviour, attitudes or procedures. It could also be due to disagreement between members of a group and their leaders as identified by Riaz & Junaid, (2011). Inter group conflicts, also referred to inter departmental conflicts are the conflicts occurring between two or more units/ groups in an organization. Such conflicts include

such as those between the headquarters and the field staff, or between two different departments. At times, one group rises against another group due to differences in status or competing goals. Bankovskaya (2021) advises management that such types of conflicts should be solved quickly due to its destructive potential.

Jones & George (2008) defined inter-organizational conflict is the type of conflict between two or more organizations. It could be due to competition or cultural differences. These conflicts are often solved through mediation and appreciating the differences in cultural backgrounds of each organization as explained by Yi-Hui lee (2009).

2.1.3 Conflict Management Strategies

Over the years, various organizations have adopted ways of reducing the severity of a conflict, if not eradicating it completely. Pickard (2012) states that each individual and organization has a way of dealing with conflicts and sometimes, that is the most effective way, but often, it's not the best strategy and may end up worsening a situation. Thomas & Kilman (1975) developed a conflict management model that identifies six common management strategies that are used in various organizations. The table below outlines the 6 strategies and their definitions as well as the tactics used in each strategy as identified by Cahn & Abigail (2007).

Table 2. 2 Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms

A.D.R	Definition	Tactic	Outcome
Avoidance	Withdrawing physically	Absence, silence	Loss -loss
Accommodation	Giving in to give an illusion of harmony	Giving in	Loss -win
Competition	Aggression	Argumentative, self-defence	Win-loss
Compromise	Trade-offs, giving up something to achieve settlement	Bargaining, trading off one thing for another	Win-loss
Collaboration	Working together to avoid conflicts	Mutuality	Win-win

According to the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, mediation, negotiation and effective communication (more so informally) are often cheap and most effective tools of conflict management in organizations across the world. In comparison with other Alternative dispute resolution Methods, dialogue and mediation, where communication is the key tool, has proven more productive even in conflicts of greater magnitude than those experienced in an organizational setting.

In 2007 and 2008, while other resolution strategies had failed to end tribal clashes in the Rift Valley region of Kenya, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and other peace stakeholders conducted a successful peace process through dialogue and meditation. This resulted in the signing of the Nakuru County Peace Accord in 2012, which ensured a peaceful elections process of 2013. In school settings most of the ADRs employed rely on informal communication for success. Conciliation, mediation and negotiation are all products of successfully employing communication in its informal form as stated by Mnoonkin (1998).

According to a research conducted by Adhiambo & Simatwa (2001), the various ADRs adopted in secondary schools included arbitration, negotiation, climate of trust and as well as effective informal communication. Of all these, effective informal communication had the highest percentage of successfully managed conflicts at 15%, followed by other ADRs that had an aspect of communication in them such as collaboration, negotiation and mediation at 9%, 14% and 11.3 % respectively.

The conflict management strategies that did not incorporate communication in its processes, such as avoidance, competition and accommodation yielded a lower number of successfully managed conflicts. They attained 0.4%, 5% and 1.4 % respectively. This justified the fact that effective use of communication could be the most effective conflict management tool amongst secondary school employees.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study was based on two theories namely Organizational Conflict theory and Social Network theory.

2.2.1 Organizational Conflict Theory

This theory states that there are different types of conflicts within an organization caused by various factors. A section of these theorists advice the management that these conflicts must be addressed to avoid slowing down the organizational progress, while another section of these theorists view conflict as among the factors that promote organizational success, according to Nain (2017). According to Organizational Conflict theory, some of the conflicts experienced in organizations include interpersonal conflicts, inter group conflicts and role conflicts. Interpersonal conflicts involve employees of an organization who may not always interact well with each other, and may not wish to

socialize with each other and in the event the need to work together, conflicts between them is inevitable, says Mikkelsen & Clegg (2017).

Kerzner (2013) defines intergroup conflict as arising when one group of workers conflict with another group of the same organization. Mostly, this conflict is brought by conflicting roles and competing objectives and if it escalates, it may damage the whole organization and should be solved as soon as it occurs. Role conflicts arise due to situations related to organizational duties and roles. Such conflicts are usually resolved by higher management authorities.

Frank et al (2014) identifies various causes of conflicts outlined by the Organizational Conflict theory as follows:

Communication issues- Poor communication, miscommunication or the absence of communication leads to most of the conflicts occurring in various organizations. Different communication patterns can result in different interpretations of a statement and hence a difference in attitudes towards a particular topic.

Organizational structure- Gelfand et al (2012) states that an organizational structure such as the matrix structure as being prone to structural conflicts since an employee is required to report to two or more senior employees who may differ in opinion on organizational matters.

Competition for resources- Organizational resources such as equipment and money are often limited. It is natural for the employees to compete in accessing them, which leads to conflicts. This unhealthy competition gives rise to an environment that is unethical and discouraging. Employees who feel that they have been left out in accessing resources may

resort to revolt. This encourages individualism and reduces teamwork, as shown by Katz & Flynn (2013).

Task interdependency- In an organization working towards the achievement of one goal, most tasks are linked to each other. An employee's completion of a certain task depends on another employee's effort and efficiency. When there is a mismatch in the level of completion, conflicts arise according to Meier et al, (2013).

Most group tasks and projects are affected by these types of conflicts, where lack of efficiency in an area of the project affects the project as a whole. Difference in values- Due to differences in ages among some employees at the organization, the belief in certain values and norms may vary. Over time, values and beliefs have changed. New reforms, norms and values have been adapted by a rapidly changing society, which may not sit well with the older employees. Divisions brought by these differences in values spike up conflicts of different magnitudes as shown by Cahn & Abigail (2014).

2.2.2 Social Network Theory

Social Network Theory has its roots in the work of 18th century sociologists such as Georg Simmel and Emile Durkheim, who applied it to study patterns of relationships that interconnect social actors. In 1930, Jacob Moreno and Helen Jennings modified the Social Network theory to Social Network Analysis to refer to the process of investigating social network structures in terms of nodes and ties, edges or links (the interactions) that link or connect them. Such social networks include acquaintances/friendship networks, business networks and social media networks.

Moreno and Jennings visualized social networks through sociograms in which nodes are represented by points and lines are used to represent links/ties. Other scholars such as Mark Granovetter, Ronald Burt, Kathleen Carley, Barry Wellman, Douglas White and David Krackhardt have further expanded the use of Social Network Analysis. This research utilises the Social Network Analysis to establish the relationship between gossip and the social network ties' strength and network ties' density.

2.2.2.1 The Strength of Social Network ties

The Social Network Analysis views a network tie as ranging from weak to strong, and refers to the closeness and frequency of interaction between two or more nodes (individuals) in an organization according to Granovetter (1993). Strong social network ties are those with frequent contacts, as Nelson (1999) states, reciprocal factors like helping each other as Nelson & Matthews (1991) found and are able to reduce, resolve and prevent conflict due to its friendship nature, according to Krackhardt & Stern (1998). Weak ties, on the other hand, are characterized by less frequency in interactions and low levels of intimacy. In linking gossip and network strengths therefore, an organization with strong ties is likely to experience plenty and frequent flow of negative gossip where as an organization with weak ties is likely to have positive gossip, which does not need intimacy and trust to transmit.

It is therefore probable that organisations with overall weak ties amongst its members have somewhat high degree of positive gossip, whereas those that feature stronger ties have higher degree of negative gossip. If negative gossip is negative in the sense that it has destructive effects on relationships, it's therefore plausible to conclude that

organizations with strong ties have more conflicts, while organizations with weak ties have less conflicts.

2.2.2.2 Density of Social Network ties

Social networks density refers to the actual number of links between nodes over the maximum number of possible links as shown by Philips (2010). Social networks with higher degree of density will facilitate a higher degree of communication and the flow of information will be directly between nodes (individuals) of the network as Nelson & Vasconcellor (2007) identified. Relations are highly reciprocal in a high-density network and the nodes do not engage in actions that are opportunistic and self-serving. Instead, the nodes encourage trust and mutual obligation amongst their networks.

On the other hand, low density networks have less links and less degree of communication as well as flow of information. Nodes in such networks are connected through indirect links that do not have personal involvement, obligations and lack frequent contacts. Low density networks result in emergence of substructures in the network, according to Nelson & Vasconcellor (2007). The information that flows through a low-density network is therefore guarded due to the indirect ties and the lack of trust therein.

Negative gossip often presents a risky social behaviour and requires a high level of interpersonal trust. It is therefore expected that a high degree of negative gossip will be found in networks with a high-density while positive gossip is termed as less sensitive and requires less interpersonal trust. This means that positive gossip can mostly be found in low-density networks.

In view of the destructive impact of negative gossiping, more research is needed to eliminate the identified factors that facilitate negative gossip in any organization. Since no much research has been conducted on the effect of social network ties' strength and density on the types of gossip in an organization (positive or negative gossip), the conclusions made from this analysis provides other researchers with a starting point towards examining different types and forms of gossip. The propositions also build upon literature on grapevine communication in an organization.

The nature and function of gossip changes depending on the organizational situation as well as the relationship dyads amongst the nodes in an organization as shown by Michelson & Mouly (2004). Gossip can have positive impacts such as strengthening ties amongst individuals, fostering solidarity and cohesiveness as well as reducing stress. However, it can also be detrimental in that it can spread false information and damage reputation. It wastes valuable time, creates division among people and reduces the morale. In general, gossip can escalate or de-escalate a conflict.

This analysis suggests some managerial tools that can be used in organizations to reduce the impact of negative gossip, and maximize on its strengths. The Social Network Analysis suggests that strong network ties results in negative forms of gossip, whereas weak ties lead to positive forms of gossip. Managers can strive to reduce the strength of network ties by reducing task interdependence.

However, most organizations depend on teamwork for positive outcomes. If teamwork is key for organizational performance, managers may require carefully designed teams of individuals who don't share to the extent of becoming personal. They could also suggest minimized use of social team building events. In regards to network density, low

levels of network density facilitate positive gossip while high-density networks facilitate negative gossip. Management can reduce negative gossip by reducing the number of actual links through reducing the number of reciprocal contacts (direct reporting) and instead forming subgroups to reduce the links. Virtual offices also reduce the frequency of contact, hence reducing the degree of negative gossip.

2.2.3 Limitations of Social Network Analysis/ Theory

Although this study analysed the strength and density of ties in a systematic way, it had its fair share of limitations. First, it was limited in terms of the scope of analysis. The theoretical framework solely focused on two social network aspects, strength and density. Other factors such as content of the gossip and its configuration were not studied. However, since strength and density are the major factors in determining the type of gossip because they determine the frequency of interactions as well as the number of links one has, this limitation did not affect the success of this study. A second limitation to this theory was on individual perception of what is a positive gossip and what constitutes a negative gossip. One individual's positive gossip may be another one's negative gossip. For that reason, the researcher clearly defined the operational meaning of positive and negative gossip according to this study in the operational definitions section.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Overview

This chapter explains how the research will be conducted, and data collected and analysed. It describes the research paradigm, the study site, the research approach, the research method, data collection and analysis, the research population as well as the sampling procedure.

3.1 Philosophical Paradigm

This study utilized the interpretive paradigm that seeks to understand a phenomenon from an individual's view. It investigates the interactions among people and the cultural contexts they live in, as stated by Creswell (2009). The study relied on the data from various respondents to draw a conclusion about Grapevine and conflict management. Interpretive paradigm also seeks to understand a phenomenon through the researcher's interactions with participants as identified by Guba & Lincoln (1994) as well as generating information and theories from the data from the respondents' data, according to Cohen et al (2007).

It utilizes various data collection methods such as key informant interviews, observations, focused group discussions. This paradigm was effective for this study because the researcher would generate conclusions from the data collected from interactions with respondents. This paradigm was also used since it's best suited for finding out phenomena that's found in inter related social processes like inter-firm relationships and office politics where quantitative evidence may be inaccurate, biased or difficult to obtain.

3.2 Study Design

A study design refers to the process that a researcher should follow from the inception to the completion of the study, as defined by Mugenda & Mugenda (2008). This study used a descriptive design which involves observing and describing the behaviour of a subject without influencing it. Descriptive design seeks to generate a conclusion from the findings, rather than test existing ones. It does not only find facts but also formulate important knowledge and solutions to significant problems.

Descriptive design was important for this study because it helped the researcher generate new hypotheses from the findings. It also allowed the researcher to look at numerous characteristics such as gender, position and level of education at a single point. It was therefore relevant in proving or providing a correlation that may exist in a particular point amongst a population.

3.2.1 Study Site

The study was conducted in MPESA Foundation Academy which is geographically located in Kiambu County, Thika West sub county, 65 Kilometres North East of Nairobi.

3.3 Research Approach

The study utilized a qualitative approach that involves collecting and analysing qualitative data, according to Salant & Dillman, (1994). This approach was best suited for this study because it explains areas of human behaviour such as attitudes and feelings that may not be captured using numerical values. Data on these attitudes and feelings was obtained through Key Informant Interviews and Focused group discussions.

3.4 Target Population

A population refers to the aggregate of all that conforms to a given specification, says Mugenda & Mugenda (2008). It is the entire set of relevant units of analysis. The study population in this research included the teaching and non-teaching staff at the Academy.

3.5 Sampling Methods

Since it is not always plausible to include every member of a population in a research due to time constraints, Sekaran & Bourgie (2016) states that a researcher should pick a smaller number of participants from the population, known as a sample, and collect data from it that will be used in making inferences about the entire group. Pyrczak et al, (2017) emphasizes that a sample picked should accurately represent the larger population.

This research utilized purposive sampling to select a sample that will represent the entire population of staff at MPESA Foundation Academy. Purposive sampling technique, also known as judgement sampling involves deliberately choosing informants of a study based on the qualities they possess. The researcher decides what information needs to be known and purposefully selects who can provide the information based on knowledge and experience as explained by Bernard, 2002; Lewis & Shephard (2006). Purposive sampling was relevant in this study since it involved an area of research with experts in it, and the limited primary resources would not have provided adequate information for the study.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Data collection refers to the process of gathering and measuring any data or information in a systematic way that enables a researcher to answer research questions, test hypotheses and theories or evaluate the outcomes, according to Stephen & Mac Carthy

(1998). This study obtained its data through Key informant interviews and focused group discussions.

3.6.1 Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews involve interviewing certain people about a topic based on their informed perspectives on that topic. They are qualitative in-depth interviews that involve people selected for their first-hand knowledge on a certain aspect. Davis (2019) states that it is a one on one assessment conducted on knowledgeable people. The researcher conducted 4 Key informant interviews with respondents who are in charge of various sectors since they were more knowledgeable in matters regarding conflict resolution due to their administrative positions.

3.6.2 Focused Group Discussion

These are discussions by a group of people with similar backgrounds and experiences about a particular topic of interest. It is a qualitative research method that gathers data on people's beliefs, perceptions, opinions and ideas. It is often led by a moderator, who is the researcher. There is no particular agreement on the exact number of participants in a focus group discussion, according to Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick & Mukherjee, (2018), but Casey & Krueger (2000) advise that between 6-8 participants is appropriate.

The researcher held 3 focus group discussions each with 6, 5 and 4 participants respectively, making a total of 15 respondents. Focus group discussions were selected for this research because it enabled the researcher to be present with the respondents. This was helpful because the researcher was able to probe the respondents deeply and gather detailed

information. Focus group also allowed the researcher to get more information from non-verbal cues such as body languages and facial expressions.

3.7 Data Analysis and Presentation

Data analysis refers to the computation of certain measures in order to identify patterns of relationships that exist among data groups as defined by Kothari, (1995). Data gathered in this research was analysed based on the research objectives/ aims of collecting it, nature of the data and the scale by which the variables were measured.

The data collected was grouped and classified into similar categories that were then assigned a code. This data was then analysed thematically and presented in narrative forms. Herzog, Handke & Hitters (2019) state that thematic analysis is an approach popular in analysing qualitative data by analysing patterns related to themes. The researcher classified responses into major themes and presented an analysis of each theme in a narrated form. The researcher then made inferences.

3.8 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability of research instruments is of much concern to a researcher when conducting a research. This is because the instruments used to collect data can be a source of distorted findings and an unacceptable research. Researchers therefore need not underestimate the importance of ensuring that the instruments they use are valid and reliable.

3.8.1 Validity

Joppe (2000) defines validity as “*the extent to which a research measures what it was intended to measure.*” According to Cook and Campbell (1997) validity is the best available approximation to the truth and falsity of a given inference or proposition.

Cacciopo and Dely (1982) posits that validity is the extent to which scores from a test represent the variable they are intended to. Validity of a research instrument “is the extent to which an instrument measures what it was intended to measure.” This study was content-validated. Kerlinger (2011) defines content-validity as the representativeness of the content, while Bush (2011) states that content-validity refers to the degree that the instruments cover the content that it was supposed to measure. With the help of the Supervisor, the researcher ensured that the test items in the data key informant interview and focus group discussions schedules were derived from all the 4 objectives in a manner that they represented adequately the general area of study.

3.8.2 Reliability

Kothari (2009) defines reliability as the extent to which a research consistently produces the same results when conducted repeatedly over time. It is the consistency of test scores from a measurement. Reliability of the research instrument, therefore refers to the extent to which a research tool or instrument provides consistent results if the test is repeatedly done, according to Dillman, (2007). The researcher checked the reliability of this research’s instrument by pilot process. Piloting refers to the process where the research instruments are used on subjects who are seen as being similar with the expected members of a sample, as stated by Babbie, (2003).

One focus group discussion and one key informant interview were held as a pilot process with respondents who had similar characteristics as the intended respondents.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethics in research focus on the application of ethical standards in the planning, data collection and analysis, dissemination and use of the results, according to Sobal (1984). This work is entirely original and any work belonging to other authors and researchers have been duly credited to them through referencing and citations. The researcher ensured privacy and confidentiality of the research data. The research findings were not disclosed to a third party who may use it for personal gains.

Anonymity of the data was also observed. Identifiable characteristics of the respondents such as their names were not used, and instead, pseudonyms were given to respondents. The respondents' consent was sought before undertaking data collection from them. They voluntarily participated in the research. The researcher did not influence the responses from the respondents in any way. Verbatim responses from the respondents were recorded and analysed without any alterations. The researcher relied entirely on the respondent's information to make conclusions and recommendations without giving the data additional interpretations. This eliminated any biases that would arise from subjectivity, since researcher worked at MPESA Foundation during the time of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Overview

This chapter presents the research findings and discusses the results. This study sought to establish the place of informal communication in conflict management in secondary schools.

4.1 The Response Rate

Four of the 5 key informants were interviewed and their responses recorded, while a total of 3 focus group discussions were held with various groups of employees from the Academy. One focus group had all the 6 members while the other two focus groups had 4 and 5 members respectively. This research therefore achieved an acceptable response rate.

4.2 Employees' use of informal communication

Focus group discussions were held with various groups of respondents. The researcher introduced the research topic as well as the objectives to the respondents, and sought to clarify any questions from them. The researcher also informed the respondents that the discussions were recorded for reference during data analysis.

The researcher asked the respondents if they use various channels of informal communication at their place of work, whenever they are managing various conflicts. This was necessary since it formed the basis for inclusion in to the discussion. The respondents unanimously agreed to using various forms of informal communication.

The researcher probed further on whether the respondents used informal communication as a conflict management strategy frequently or less frequently at the work place.

Q: Tell me about your experience with informal communication and its role in managing various conflicts at the workplace. How often do you use it?

R 1 "It happens every minute, at times even when not intended."

R 2 "Yes. I use it every day. Everybody does."

R 3 "Informal communication takes 50% of the overall communication at the workplace."

R (i) "Hearsays, rumours and casual talks are always in the air. Even in the middle of a formal communication, there is an aspect of informal communication."

R (ii) "I use it more than I use formal communication."

R (iii) "It depends with what and who I am talking to/about. Since I talk with my colleagues more frequently than my boss, therefore I use informal communication more."

From the discussion, the researcher established that most employees often engage frequently in informal communication at the place of work. Mathis et al.,(2004) states that informal communication is likely to be prevalent in places of work when employees trust the message recipient and the sender. This therefore explained the large number of employees who used informal communication frequently at work, as a conflict management strategy, since there is an aspect of trust among employees of similar category, according to Wells (1994).

However, a small percentage of respondents from the focus group discussions reported not using informal communication as a conflict management too frequently.

R (4) " I do not use informal communication to solve conflicts because first I sit alone in the office and have less conflicts at work. I only communicate majorly through emails."

R (iv) " I do not like gossip, rumours or hearsays and casual talks. I don't use those types frequently because they can cause quarrels."

Elias and Scotts (1994) highlights the ability of informal communication to present the sense of another person in question as an outsider, hence division. This explained the reason why some employees used informal communication less frequently when solving conflicts.

Key informants were also asked about how frequent they resorted to using informal communication as a conflict management tool.

K 1 “ I use it frequently especially when addressing a conflict that is less serious and does not require to go through the formal, and at times tedious process of managing conflict.”

K 2 “ I use it very often because it is very easy and shortest way when dealing with issues. The people involved also feel like they are satisfied with that method, and even consider themselves respected.”

K 3 “I use it most of the time since it helps me know my juniors better so that I can understand why the conflict arose. I talk to them casually and joke about the effects of such conflicts on performance and employees’ name. It is a good way of reducing conflicts.”

From the trend above, it was evident that a large number of employees and management personnel frequently used informal communication as a means of communicating, and as a conflict management strategy. Hicks (1971) justifies this trend by stating that informal communication is more prevalent at places of work due to its ease in use, more so where there is conflict. Nica (1998) states further that organizational managements adopt informal channels of managing various conflicts due to their ability to create a comfortable and relaxed climate required to duly address the root cause of a conflict.

The key informants agreed that even though initially, managements preferred official and formal communication channels when addressing conflicts, gradually they have embraced informal communication as a conflict management tool. They stated that if used properly and to the right extent, informal communication can reduce the gap between employees and the management, and hence reduce possible conflicting situations. This finding is in tandem with Verma (1998) behavioural view of conflict that advocates for organizations to accept conflict due to its potential benefits to the organization if managed effectively.

K 4 “There are other line managers that will not accept it (Informal communication) in their departments because they see it as gossip, but you can never avoid it.”

However, when probed further on any negative impacts of using informal communication to manage conflicts, the key informants expressed concerns on the possibility of informal communication being detrimental to teamwork and collaboration.

Q: Are there any dangers of using informal communication as a conflict management strategy?

K 1 “We should also be careful so that gossip and unsubstantiated rumours do not make employees enemies of each other and unable to work together.”

K 3 “ Even though it is a relaxed form of communication, casual talks can waste productive time and achievements.”

K 4 “Using informal communication can result in enmity amongst employees since if they had a conflict, one party may feel that the matter was not solved with the seriousness it deserved, hence they think you favoured the other person who might have caused the conflict. This is very harmful to teamwork.”

From the interviews, the researcher found out that the key informants recognized the impact of informal communication as a conflict management tool. If not used alongside other formal channels, or to the satisfaction of the conflicting parties, it can have negative impacts on teamwork and work morale. This concurs with a study conducted by Jones (1996) and Therrien (2004) which states that informal communication can be detrimental to work morale and productivity, and creates conflicts among employees, and should be discouraged.

On whether the use of informal communication was prevalent amongst a particular gender, the respondents in the focus group discussion had varied responses.

Q: What can you say about grapevine/ gossip/ rumors over the years in schools, is it gender balanced or gender biased?

R (i) “ Informal communication , more so gossip, is nowadays balanced. Both gender participate in it.”

R (ii) “ Its gender biased. Most females engage in grapevine than males.”

R 1 “ Both gender equally participate in the various forms of informal communication.”

R 2 “ Both gender engage in grapevine, however the curve lies more on the females side more than males. Reason is that females want to be heard more and by nature they are emotional and hence would prefer sharing information & predicaments regardless of whether or not they will attain resolution.”

R 3 “No, it works best for same gender.. If colleagues of one gender have a conflict, say males or females alone, informal communication will work well in resolving that conflict.”

R 4 “Statistics show women are more open to their peers than men in solving conflicts. Men tend to be reserved.”

The key informants had varied views on whether the use of informal communication was prevalent among one particular gender.

K 1 “ It affects both gender, but its more on the female side.”

K 2 “ Previously, only women would engage more in informal communication, but nowadays, both gender engage in it equally.”

K 3 “It cuts across both gender”

The discussions identified that most respondents believed that in as much as both gender engage in informal communication, its more prevalent among women. This finding was in tandem with a research done by Robbins et al. (2003) that claimed that since women and men are socialized differently, women have more ability to express their feelings through communication more than men. By expressing their feelings of fear, anxiety, worries or dissatisfactions, they are able to clear, or reduce chances of conflicts.

These findings are further supported by the Social Network Theory that identifies people of one gender as possibly having strong social network ties which facilitate plenty and frequent flow of friendly gossip, either positive or negative. This is depicted in the responses where many respondents believed that mostly women engaged in various forms of informal communication as compared to their male colleagues. Structurally, also the density of the female friendship is high, such that a female employee can have several

numbers of links (contacts), which facilitate a higher degree of informal communication due to its reciprocal nature. High density social networks also encourage trust, a factor that facilitates gossip or any other form of informal communication.

4.3 Causes of Conflicts among employees in schools

The researcher asked the respondents on the various causes of conflicts in schools. From the focus group discussions, various causes were outlined.

R (i) “Work related resources like vans, rooms and playing grounds.”

R (ii) “Finances/ salaries. The main cause of conflict between employees and managements is salary differences between employees of different departments.”

R (iii) “Unfair distribution of resources and duties/ responsibilities.”

R 1 “Power struggles amongst various employees seeking promotions.”

R 2 “Unmet objectives at the end of the term causes conflicts between line managers and employees.”

R 3 “Miscommunications amongst employees, or from managements causes frictions and speculations which end up being conflicts.”

R 4 “Competitions for leadership positions.”

R (A) “Unpopular management policies.”

R (B) “Closed mindedness when making decisions.”

From the discussions, the researcher identified that the various causes of conflicts stated by the respondents were in tandem with those identified in previous research done by various scholars such as De Dreu & Gelfand (2008), Jaffee (2008) Putman & Poole (1989) and Mooney (2014), such as miscommunication, limited resources and competing for leadership positions. These findings are backed by the Organizational Conflict Theory (Nain, 2019) that states that there are different types of conflicts in any organization, such as conflicts between an employee and a fellow employee, employee and a management personnel, between different departments or two different organizations. These conflicts are caused by various factors such as work-related resources, unpopular policies, unmet objectives and miscommunication.

4.4 The Outcomes of using Informal communication as a conflict management tool in schools

The research was intended to find out what outcomes were achieved when informal communication was used as a conflict management tool by both employees and management. The key informants agreed that informal communication was a necessary tool when managing conflicts.

Q: What can you say are the outcomes of using informal communication to manage conflict among school employees?

K 1 “The outcome is always positive. Informal communication has helped resolve a lot of minor issues. At times, minor conflicts are resolved by the conflicting parties without my involvement.”

K 2 “It may not apply to managing of all conflicts, but informal communication such as a casual talk over meal times with two people who had a conflict can solve a lot of problems at work. Managements should embrace /adopt informal communication especially when dealing with minor cases amongst employees.”

K 3 “I have used it frequently. It works and I recommend it.”

K 4 “It saves a lot of time, and makes the employees who had issues to end up being friends.”

From the focus group discussions, the researcher identified varied responses in regards to the outcomes of using informal communication as a conflict management tool.

Q: What can you say are the outcomes of using informal communication to manage conflict at the work place?

R 1 “The outcomes are positive because the conflicting parties are in a free environment where the express their issues openly.”

R 2 “Sometimes, it does not solve a conflict if the parties involved do not want to resolve conflicts whatsoever, so the formal channels work best.”

R (A) “The outcomes are negative because often, information passed through informal channels may not be true. Its distorted and hence the outcome is false.”

R (B) “The outcomes are positive because the origin of the conflict might have been through grapevine, so when the parties meet and discuss it informally, the conflict is managed, and the doubts cleared.”

R (i) “The outcomes will be negative because it can escalate the matter at hand, and lead to more conflicts. If it had been solved officially using the laid down official communication, there wouldn't have been misunderstandings. Secondly, the conflict may be touching on very

sensitive matters and informal communication may leak and spread such sensitive information and destroy the reputation of the concerned party.”

R (ii) “The outcomes are positive since there is a mutual understanding amongst employees.”

R (iii) “In most cases, the outcomes are positive since the management of conflicts was through informal conversations that are friendlier and are more interactive paving way to deeper understanding of the genesis of the conflict.”

The key informants gave both the strengths and the weaknesses of using informal communication as a conflict management tool. Some of the key informants maintained that informal communication is effective in solving various conflicts since it saves time that would have been used in following up on the official conflict resolution procedures.

K 2 “ A lot of time is spent on following up a case when done through official channels since you have to keep records of every step, but when informal communication is used, you solve a case there and then”.

They also recommended it since it mends relationships among two conflicting parties as one respondent mentioned “ In the process of solving the issue, the previous working relation is strengthened”.

This is in line with a research conducted by Noon & Delbridge (1993) which states that informal communication is an aspect of communication that enhances friendships and bonds between people.

Other key informants stated that informal communication may not resolve all conflicts at the work place, nonetheless, it contributes to the resolution of several minor conflicts.

From the focus group discussion, the researcher established that respondents believed in the use of informal communication to solve various conflicts. Most of them considered informal communication as a better tool since it creates a friendly and

conducive environment for resolution of conflicts as found by Noon & Delbridge, (2011), hence the process is genuine and not controlled by formal procedures. Employees also ended up restoring or mending their previous working relationships. They also noted that solving conflicts among themselves informally saves a lot of time and procedural tasks involved if formal channels were to be followed.

However, the researcher found out that not all respondents agreed to the use of informal communication to manage conflicts since they felt that conflicts resolved through informal communication always occur later since the resolution was not backed by any formal documented evidence. Other respondents also stated that if the parties are not willing to speak to each other so as to resolve a conflict, that particular conflict may not be solved at all, unlike if the formal channels of communication was used. This creates a toxic working environment for both parties.

R 1 “When a person does not want to talk, a case may not be solved. And again when that case is not solved, it will always re occur, and the parties can develop enmity”.

This was in line with Gelfand (2008) findings that indicate that informal communication, if not well managed, can create personal and group differences in a workplace, and hence discomfort and lowered morale among the employees.

Other respondents stated that at times, informal communications serve to escalate conflicts since words and phrases can be misinterpreted and taken out of contexts.

R (A) “During the resolution process, a person can say something may be misinterpreted and hence making the situation worse”

Information given informally can be distorted since it's not documented. The respondents therefore felt that it can lead to a false resolution. This finding corresponded to the findings from a research conducted by Shahid (2011) that rumours were prone to alterations and changes due to the fact that it is undocumented.

Others felt that informal communication is not an appropriate tool in solving most work place conflicts since it can result in leaked personal and sensitive information that may end up damaging the reputations of the people involved.

R (A) “ Sometimes sensitive information from the solving process ends up leaking out, and affecting the person involved emotionally.”

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Overview

This chapter summarizes the study by giving various conclusions and recommendations.

5.2 Summary

5.2.1 Employees' use of Informal Communication.

The researcher began by assessing the frequency of the use of informal communication among the employees. The focus group discussions indicated a varied nature and frequency of its use. Some employees reported unanimously on using informal communication to different degrees and in various forms. Others stated that whenever they have a conflict, they preferred having a one on one talk with the other person, while others reported sending a third person to the conflicting party to talk to them and resolve the conflicts. Others indicated that gossip was a very prevalent mode of resolving conflicts whereby person A would tune into a gossip or here say about person B, and would speak to person B about what was said in the gossip, with the aim of warning them or advising them about a certain matter.

That way, person B is aware of the grapevine and is able to change a particular behaviour if need be. Other respondents stated that they would guide and counsel members who were in conflict particularly if they were younger than him /her.

Casual talks over meal times was also reported as a prevalent form of informal communication practised by employees. This study therefore found out that informal communication was a form of communication that most employees utilized in resolving conflicts.

However, a small number of respondents reported using informal communication as a conflict management tool less frequently due to the fact that they can cause quarrels and misunderstandings, as well as the fact that some of them work in a stand-alone area and most of their communication is formal through channels such as emails, texts and memos.

The respondents were probed further on whether informal communication as a conflict management tool was prevalent amongst a particular gender, either male or female. The researcher established varied opinions since most respondents stated that nowadays, unlike traditionally, informal communication is prevalent among both genders. A few participants stated that it was more prevalent among the females due to their talkative nature.

The researcher further established through the focus group discussions that different genders used different forms of informal communication. Females were likely to use a lot more gossip and hearsays as well as guidance and counselling, while males were fond of casual talks and using a mediator when resolving a conflict.

The researcher asked further why the employees resorted to informal communication easily as a conflict resolution method. Participants had varied reasons. Some stated that sometimes when there is a communication breakdown, informal communication becomes the only way of passing information and resolving conflicts. Furthermore, on matters that the management had provided little or no information and guidelines on various matters of the organization, the employees speculated and sought to fill the information gaps with hearsays and rumours.

Other participants stated that organizations were set in a way that employees interact largely with fellow employees of similar ranks and therefore there was no need to be official in relating, including when solving a conflict. More so, the activities going on can dictate the use of informal communication. The researcher established that most activities involved teamwork amongst employees, which made it easier for them to engage in informal communication.

The study also established through the key informant interviews that various management personnel used various informal communication techniques to solve or reducing instances of conflicts. One on one casual talks with the conflicting parties was mostly used by management when the conflict was on personal matters and misunderstanding, where the manager would ask both parties to clear the misunderstanding. Whenever a conflict was caused by resources, the management also adopted informal communication in resolving it through asking the conflicting parties to find an amicable way of sharing the resources.

The research also established that there were several reasons that led to the management adopting informal communication to solve conflicts.

The management preferred an open-door policy whereby employees would walk in to their offices and discuss informally about a concern or a conflict, and give a possible solution. This policy promoted the use of informal communication rather than the formal channels. The interviews also highlighted the fact that most conflicts between employees are rarely major, and hence easily solved through informal channels of communications. The key informants stated that formal channels of communication involve long and tedious procedures that would have been avoided if one talked informally to the conflicting parties.

Furthermore, the key informants stated that they prefer informal communication because it maintains a healthy working relationship with the employee, unlike the official channels that bring out the differences in hierarchy levels between them and the employee.

On whether informal communication has evolved or changed over time, the respondents in the focus group discussions had varied responses. First, informal communication, gossip and grapevine in particular, has adopted a gender balanced approach as compared to year before where it was only associated with the female gender. It has also gained popularity as a conflict resolution tool in various places of work. However, due to the increase in the use of information and communication technology at various schools, informal communication has declined significantly due to reduced instances of face to face communication.

Key informants likewise stated that grapevine has evolved over the years. It has gained acceptance among managements of various institutions both as a conflict management tool and an acceptable communication method, unlike previously when managements shunned it as a communication channel and as a conflict management tool. However, with the recent change in the nature of communication from face to face communication to platforms such as Emails, WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook, informal communication reduced greatly over the years.

5.2.2 Causes of Conflicts among Employees in Schools

The researcher sought to determine from the respondents, the various causes of conflicts among employees in the school. The study identified various causes of conflicts amongst employees of same ranks as well as various factors that caused conflicts between employees and management. Amongst employees, the biggest cause of conflict was

resources. Since different employees had different tasks that required the use of similar resources, there was always a conflicting interest in its use. Such resources included facilities such as the resource centre and transport facilities. In the incident where two groups were required to use the same facility at the same time, a conflict could arise. In most cases, the respondents from the focus group discussions stated that they would talk and agree on a way to resolve conflict such as rescheduling a different time by one group.

Another cause of conflict cited in the discussion was leadership positions. Whenever a vacant position was available, there arose a stiff competition amongst employees which often led to conflicts on why an employee was appointed over another employee. On such incidences, the management sought to explain the criteria used to appoint that employee, so as to clear any doubts and conflicts. Some respondents highlighted a difference in income for employees performing similar tasks. This was a cause of conflicts among employees since they felt that it created disparities and inequalities. Breakdown of communication, or misunderstandings brought by communication also caused conflicts among employees where comments and allegations made by an employee could be misunderstood by another, resulting in conflicts.

Amongst the employees and management, the discussions and interviews highlighted various causes of conflicts such as miscommunication or lack of communication. This led to speculations and fears amongst employees, which created an uncondusive environment that is prone to conflicts. Unmet expectations were also highlighted by the respondents as a major cause of conflicts between management and employees. At the end of a certain period, the manager expects the employees to have met certain set objectives, and when these objectives have not been met, there arises a conflict.

5.2.3 Outcomes of using informal communication as a conflict management tool in schools.

The research outlined various outcomes of using informal communication amongst employees in schools to contain or resolve a conflict. Both positive and negative outcomes were identified by various respondents. The focus group discussion respondents stated both the positive and negative outcomes of using informal communication as a conflict management tool. They outlined that informal communication as a conflict management tool helps the conflicting parties to retain a previous working relation. Rather than end up as enemies, the parties resolve the conflict in an amicable friendly way that does not affect their personal work relations. Informal communication also, when used as a conflict management tool, does not result in unnecessary exposure of the persons involved in conflict. This is because once a conflict arises for whatever reason and they are able to solve it amongst themselves, without involving a third person. This saves them any negative implication that comes with conflicts. Informal communication as a tool for conflict management also results in better resolution of conflicts that arose due to miscommunication or lack of communication. This is because the parties are able to clarify any misunderstanding and the meanings they implied that might have caused conflicts. Therefore, as compared to formal communication, some conflicts are best solved by informal communication. They also stated that solving a conflict using informal communication saves one a lot of time that would have been spent if other conflict resolution methods would have been adopted.

Negative outcomes were also outlined from the focus group discussions such as the fact that since it is not documented, a conflict resolved via informal communication may

arise again. Distrust among the conflicting parties may also make it hard for the parties to talk and resolve a conflict. Furthermore, personal information that might have come up during the resolution process may leak out and cause an embarrassment to the affected employee(s). They also outlined that a conflict can be escalated by informal communication, rather than de-escalating it. This is brought by the fact that during the resolution process, the conflicting employees can disagree further and increase the conflict intensity.

From the key informant interviews, the researcher identified both positive and negative outcomes of using informal communication as a conflict management tool in schools. The positive outcomes included the fact that solving conflicts through informal communication saved the parties and the management time. It only involves largely a talk over the matter and the solution is arrived at. Furthermore, it also maintains the positive working relationship between the employee and the management as compared to other methods of conflict resolution that could be more stringent. Informal communication as a conflict management tool also reduces the animosity between the conflicting parties since resolution was conducted through a friendly way. However, the key informants mentioned that using informal communication as a conflict management tool can also lead to feelings of unfairness, more so if one of the conflicting employees does not consider informal communication as an effective conflict resolution mechanism.

5.3 Conclusions

The research concluded that most school employees as well as management at MPESA Foundation Academy use informal communication often, as a conflict management technique at the workplace. The employees stated that they used informal

communication frequently because at times, there is a breakdown in communication from management, and employees seek to fill in the information gaps using informal speculations. The school is also structured in a way that most employees interact with fellow employees, with whom there is no need for formal communication. Moreover, management adopted the open-door policy where employees can walk in and have a casual informal talk with a senior employee regarding various issues. This made informal communication very popular.

As a conflict management tool, most employees and management used casual, informal talks to solve various conflicts that did not require any official intervention. On whether informal communication's use in managing conflict was prevalent amongst a particular gender, the researcher established from the focus group discussion that it was equally adopted by both genders. Each gender utilized a different form of informal communication while solving a certain conflict where men were likely to adopt casual talks and the use of mediators. Women on the other hand adopted more of gossip, grapevine and guidance and counselling. However, a few employees and key informants reported not using informal communication as a conflict management tool due to its ability to create more conflicts and demoralisation.

The study concluded that conflicts were caused by various factors. Unclear communication was the major cause of conflict between employees and employers. Scanty information, or lack of it completely resulted in employees speculating and mis performing, which often brought conflicts amongst employees and management. Unmet objectives and targets also brought about conflicts between employees and management in the academy,

whereby targets not met were considered a failure on the part of the employee. Scarce resources also caused conflicts amongst employees and management.

Competition for leadership positions was also outlined as the cause of conflicts amongst the staff, especially positions that attracted financial benefits. This often led to animosity amongst various employees. At times, decisions made by the management were unpopular amongst the employees, which led to demoralisation and possibility of conflicts. Sometimes, salaries and remuneration brought conflicts amongst employees since they felt that different employees were remunerated differently for performing equal tasks.

On outcomes of using informal communication as a conflict management tools, the research concluded that proper use of informal communication helped in solving conflicts that did not necessarily require a formal approach. These conflicts were a large percent of the conflicts experienced in schools. Informal communication as a conflict management tool yielded positive outcomes due to its ability to ensure a continued positive relationship amongst the employees after conflict resolution. This positive relationship among employees of different ranks is essential in making the workplace habitable. Conflicts that were brought by misunderstandings were also largely solved by informal communication, and since such conflicts were the highest in number amongst employees, informal communication as a tool is very essential. When used to solve conflicts, informal communication also saved a lot of productive time that would have been spent following the official channels of conflict management.

5.4 Recommendations

Drawing from the above research findings, the study made the following recommendations:

- i. The study recommends that policy makers both at the national and school levels incorporate informal communication in various curriculum and professional development trainings so as to equip employees with skills needed to tap into Informal communication when resolving conflicts.
- ii. The study further recommends that Informal Communication be incorporated into Institutional conflict management policies as one of the officially recognize tool of conflict management tool amongst employees.
- iii. School managements should identify various possible sources of conflicts so as to curb them and manage the conflict on time.
- iv. Managements in schools and other organizations should adopt effective use of informal communication, alongside other conflict management strategies such as negotiation, collaboration and reconciliation as among the officially accepted conflict management strategies in schools.

5.5 Recommendation for Further Research

This research further recommends more studies on the field of informal communication as a conflict management tool. This research was limited to employees of MPESA Foundation Academy. Further studies on other types of institution such as hospitals and companies, as well as with different respondents such as students and parents should be conducted in other parts of the country other than Kiambu County.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: Introduction Letter

P.O Box 7954-01000,
Thika.

10th July 2020

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: REQUEST FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

I am writing to kindly seek your consent to participate as a respondent in a research I am conducting towards the fulfilment of an award of Masters' degree from the University of Nairobi. My research is on Informal Communication and Conflict Management, A case study of MPESA Foundation.

I will collect data using focus group discussions and key informant interview where upon acceptance, you will participate in either. The research is intended to benefit various stakeholders in managing various workplace conflicts.

Your participation will be highly appreciated.

For further communication, kindly contact me.

Abigael Chepkurui
0726201693
chepkuruiabby@gmail.com

Appendix II: Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. Tell me about your experience with informal communication and its role in managing various conflicts at the workplace.

Probe further:

- i) *Did you talk to a conflict victim over lunch break?*
- ii) *Did you talk about it through grapevine with a colleague?*
- iii) *Any other information?*
- iv) *After using the informal communication technique, did you manage the conflict? Expound.*
- v) *What about your colleagues, are there any other unofficial ways of communication they use to manage conflicts amongst themselves? If yes, have they been successful in managing these conflicts?*

2. What do you think are the factors that contribute to the use of informal communication over formal communication in schools?

Probe further:

- i) *Are there times when grapevine is a dominant form of communication amongst the employees in schools?*
- ii) *Which is the most common informal communication technique used?*
- iii) *Is the use of grapevine communication in schools inter departmental, i.e can employees of different departments and hierarchical ranks use informal communication?*

3. What factors lead to conflicts in schools?

Probe further:

- i) *What particular resources cause conflicts amongst employees in schools? Explain.*
- ii) *Is there a particular time of the school that employees' conflicts occur more?*
- iii) *Any more factors that lead to conflicts?*

4. What conflict management techniques do schools adopt in managing various conflicts among the employees?

Probe further:

- i) *Which of the techniques work best?*
- ii) *Are there conflicts where the employees resolve amongst themselves without the management involvement?*

5. Tell me about the outcomes of using grapevine as a conflict management strategy.

Probe further:

- i) *Do you think the outcomes are positive? Explain.*
- ii) *Do you think the outcomes are negative? Expound.*
- iii) *Would you encourage your learners to utilize informal communication when managing conflicts in their daily routines?*
- iv) *If you could change anything in the Communication policy in your schools, what would it be?*

- v) *Looking at the various conflicts that have occurred in schools, which ones have been largely managed by informal communication? Why?*

6. What can you say about grapevine over the years?

Probe further:

- i) *Has it adopted a gender biased or a gender balanced nature? i.e do both gender engage in grapevine?*
- ii) *Has it gained or reduced popularity as a conflict management strategy?*
- iii) *Has technology affected the nature of informal communication?*

7. Is there any other information you would like to discuss that we did not ask in regards to the use of informal communication and conflict management?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix III: Key Informant Interview Guide

1. Being in charge of some employees, you have experienced and managed various conflicts at the work place. Tell us more.

Probe further:

- i) *What was the conflict about?*
- ii) *What form of informal communication technique did you use to manage that particular conflict? (guidance and counselling, talking to another student to speak with him/her, making jokes about the consequences of the conflict during breaks, etc).*
- iii) *Was the conflict successfully managed using the informal communication technique? (did you observe a character change in the victim, was the effects of conflicts on performance eliminated/reduced?)*
- iv) *Any other additional information you may want to add?*

1. What do you perceive as the factors that lead to the use of informal communication over formal communication amongst employees in school?

Probe further:

- i) *Are there situations when informal communication becomes the dominant form of communication? If yes, which ones?*
- ii) *What forms of informal communication techniques are more prevalent amongst the employees?*

2. Who do you think are the main sources of gossip in schools?

Probe further:

- i) *Why do you think these people/ groups are the main sources of gossip in schools?*
- ii) *What do you think are the major topics of the gossips?*
- iii) *Is the gossip beneficial or detrimental to teamwork? Explain how.*

3. What are the outcomes of using informal communication to manage conflict?

Probe further:

- i) *Is informal communication used more frequently or less frequently in school?*
- ii) *If the outcomes are positive, what recommendations would you give the county educational management?*
- iii) *If the outcomes are negative, what advice would you give?*
- iv) *If you were to introduce Conflict Management Policies in your school, what role would informal communication play?*

4. What can you say about grapevine/gossip/rumors over the years in schools?

Probe further:

- i) *Has it changed in the way it is carried out?*
- ii) *Is it gender biased?*
- iii) *Has technology affected informal communication?*
- iv) *Are there conflicts that have been largely managed using informal communication techniques? Which specific ones?*

5. Are there any other things you would like to share that we did not ask you regarding informal communication and conflict management?

Thank you.