The Impact of Armed Conflict on Leadership and Management of Schools in Banadir Region, Somali Headteachers' Perspective

Dr. Abdishakur Tarah

Abstract

This paper aims to capture Headteachers' perspectives on managing and leading schools during active conflict. Moreover, the paper examines what strategies Headteachers apply to fulfil their headship roles in conflict-affected environments, such as managing and supporting staff, managing school resources, ensuring the safety of children and staff, and maintaining good education attainment for children. The theoretical framework used for this study draws on two components, environmental factors and competencies, of Mumford's Skills Model. The methodology chosen for this research is qualitative, with semi-structured interviews with current and retired Headteachers. The interviews with participants were conducted in Somali so that it enabled participants to answer interview questions in a language that they were able to express openly. The interviews were audio-recorded and translated from Somali to English, requiring a good understanding of transliteration and contextual translations.

Key words: *school leadership, leadership skills, environmental factors, conflict, crisis, personal attributes*

Introduction

A number of researchers discuss the great impact of armed conflict on education in many facets. Some of them highlight the physical destruction of the education system, while others have looked at the extent to which these conflicts affect social development, human resources in education, and the emotional well-being of children in conflict (Tarah and Sood, 2022). Globally, of the 28.5 million primary school-aged children out of school in conflict-affected countries, 12.6 million live in sub-Saharan Africa, 5.3 million in South and West Asia, and 4 million in the Arab States. The vast majority, 95%, live in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Girls, who make up 55% of the total, are the worst affected, as they are often victims of rape and other sexual violence that accompanies armed conflicts (UNESCO, 2011, p. 4).

There are many barriers faced by children living in armed conflict; these barriers "range from schools simply not being available in the worst affected areas of a country to the difficulty of recruiting sufficient teachers or persuading former teachers to return to teaching" (Save the Children, 2013, p. 3). The 'Attacks on Education' published by Save the Children (2013) further explains that "even where children can access schools or schools are functioning, the chances of receiving a good-quality education — and learning basic skills — can be diminished as a result of, for example, disrupted attendance, poor learning environments, unsafe or no school reconstruction, and reduced distribution of learning materials. In an already precarious context, these constitute additional barriers that can lead children to drop out permanently" (p. 4).

The context

Gardner (1990; cited in Baker, 2014, p. 356) defines leadership as "the process of persuasion or example by which an individual or team induces a group to act". Since most leaders are also engaged in management, it is useful to distinguish between these two interrelated processes: leadership and management. "Leadership and management are not synonymous terms; one can be a leader without being a manager" (Bush and Coleman 2000, p. 18; Schon, 1984). Citing Bush and Coleman (2000, p. 19), Schon (1984) further explains that "one can

fulfil many of the symbolic, inspirational, educational, and normative functions of a leader and thus represent what an organisation stands for without carrying any of the formal burdens of management". In discussing the aspect of 'management' or being a 'manager,' they state, "One can manage without leading, monitor and control organisational activities, make decisions, and allocate resources without fulfilling the above-mentioned norms" (p. 19). In the field of leadership in education, "educational leadership and management is pluralist, with many competing perspectives and an inevitable lack of agreement on the exact nature of the discipline" (Bush, 2008a, p. 1).

A central element in many definitions of leadership is that there is a process of influence. Wasserberg (2002, p. 158) claims that "the primary role of any leader is the unification of people around key values". From his perspective as a secondary Headteacher, he argues that these core values come down to: a) schools are concerned with learning, and all members of the school community are learners, b) every member of the school community is valued as an individual, c) the school exists to serve its students and the local community, d) learning is about the development of the whole person and happens in and out of classrooms.

In discussing the strategic dimension of leadership, West-Burnham and Harris (2015, p. 8) suggest three things that enable us to understand the strategic dimension of leadership: principle—the values informing an organisation's culture and priorities: purpose—the dominant view of the most important reason for the existence of the school; and people—their engagement, motivation, and performance in securing principles and purpose. They further suggest that the operational aspect of leadership, by contract, is "concerned with the routines, systems, structures, and procedures that translate principles and aspirations into actual goal-oriented results. Leadership and management work in a symbiotic relationship, but this should always be with leadership driving the management" (p. 8).

School leadership in a conflict-affected environment

The enormity of the effects on education during and after armed conflict was felt everywhere. These effects included the complete destruction of education in both physical and human forms. "Despite these effects, the post-conflict educational debates have largely undermined the voice of those who were at the frontlines during the crisis" (Pherali, 2016, p.1). There is a high prevalence of attacks on schools during armed conflict, with a commonality of deaths among pupils, teachers, and school leaders. Although there is an increasing amount of literature that deals with relationships between education and armed personnel, "there is still a research gap in terms of understanding how teachers and school leaders experience and navigate through both physical and psychological threats and how they trade off their survival in the context of a protracted conflict" (Pherali, 2016, p. 1).

In their previous study on Somali headteachers' experience in operating in an active conflict environment, Tarah and Sood (2022) found despite community mobilisation to safely reopen schools, many school leaders face challenges in recovering school buildings for a safe return for children. Somali Headteachers have experiences of the conflict in managing their schools. Here are a number of key personal accounts where school leaders face violence and have to work in a challenging environment (Tarah & Sood, 2022).

As a school leader, with help from local communities, school staff had to clear debris and dead bodies from school buildings before it was safe for students and staff. Staff removed 17 dead bodies from his school ground before the community had the trust to send their children there. These were not isolated cases but rather common ones. Another Headteacher revealed that it took more than 2 years to negotiate with militiamen to vacate the school premises, and the deal on which they agreed to leave was a monthly share of 50% of the collected revenue.

They also reported that Headteachers experience trauma and other psychological disturbances, with no support being available to them during those difficult times. Tarah and Sood's study also found school leaders were compelled to pay financial support to grieving families, although the schools themselves were in financial difficulties. Waiting

for bad news of the death or injury of a member of staff or a student who was on the way to school was their daily expected briefing. Another effect of the conflict on schools was a shortage of teachers which sometimes impels school leaders to teach, especially those who possess teaching skills. These staff turbulences have a knock-on effect on schools' overall subscriptions, as parents can remove their children if a school does not have sufficient teachers to teach them (Tarah & Sood, 2022).

As a result of the absence of government regulation and support, there are no institutions that prepare and develop Headteachers in Somalia. Also, there is no formal training and leadership development for public and private primary Headteachers in Somalia, whereas, in contrast, there is a growing recognition of the significance of school leadership preparation through professional development and training across the world. Comparatively, the procedures used in appointing and offering pre-service training in many countries, particularly in Africa, are inadequate. Induction and in-service training for Headteachers are also inappropriate in many developing countries, especially those within the continent of Africa (Bush & Oduro, 2006). Globally, "the majority of school heads do not receive training prior to the assumption of office, and they perform their work from experience; this is not ideal for creating an effective and supportive environment for teachers and other staff in schools." (Kayiwa, 2011, p.1).

Although there are no specific Somalia-related studies on the availability of professional development opportunities for school leaders or a skills audit of current leaders of low-cost private schools in Somalia, the World Bank (2018) suggested that "there is a need to further study the role of school leadership, since leaders have important roles in determining quality through resource allocation, hiring practices, and establishing school guidelines. It is vital for Headteachers to possess the required competencies and skills to lead, support, and challenge members of their institutions, including teachers, support staff, and Administrators, as well as manage external relations effectively" (World Bank, 2018, p. 72).

It is important to acknowledge the link between the leadership competencies of school leaders and their positive impact on the success of schools. " This indicates an increasing acceptance that Principals play a significant role in affecting student achievement and should be held accountable for it (Davis et al., 2005, p. 3). In discussing this further in the context of school improvement and
students' learning outcomes, it is important to acknowledge the relationship between different sections of schooling, including leadership and management. In addition to the role they play in improving students' achievements, it is also important to point out that the principal's role also includes developing effective relationships among staff members, acquiring and allocating resources, promoting teacher development, improving student outcomes, and building mutually supportive school community relations.

According to a recent document published by the Federal Government of Somalia, one of the key components of its Education Sector Strategic Plan is the enhancement of the quality of education and children's learning outcomes through the provision of school-based coaching for headteachers to improve school performance (ESSP, 2017). To achieve this, it will develop comprehensive and consolidated Headteacher training programmes. This strategy only applies to the education sector in Somalia (Benadir Region and Federal Member States), as Somaliland has its own ESSP. Although Somaliland's ESSP has extensive references to increasing female Headteachers in Somaliland, there is nevertheless no mention of any direct government policy for preparing, developing, and training Headteachers.

The realities of school leadership in Somalia are complex. There are neither post-secondary educational leadership programmes nor school-based apprenticeship programmes in Somalia. This makes it more difficult for school leaders to learn how to enact any type of leadership other than daily unavoidable managerial tasks (Khalifa et al., 2014, p. 236). This leaves Headteachers untrained and with no professional development programmes available to them. We therefore need further study to understand the role of Headteachers in post-conflict education in Somalia (World Bank, 2018, p. 72). Thus, participatory action research (PAR) was the appropriate approach to collecting their views

on what constitutes an effective school leader in a conflict and post-conflict environment and what factors influence their day-to-day role in managing their schools.

Benadir Regional Administration

Mogadishu, which is the main area of the Benadir Administration, is the capital city of Somalia with an estimated population of 1.6 million people which accounts for about 13% of the total population of Somalia and it is the headquarters of the Federal Government and the small number of schools it manages (ESSP, 2017). The city has the largest private primary and secondary schools in the country, and these are members of a large umbrella association.

Despite the government restoring its role in the education sector, the position of umbrella associations remains strong, as important providers of education and guarantors of a minimal quality of education. Government data indicates that there are over 1,000 umbrella-affiliated schools in Somalia, providing education to over 250,000 students (p. 22). Unlike Puntland and Somaliland, the Benadir Regional Administration does not have its own education policy although it has recently been mandated to take over 23 public schools which were under the direct management of the MOECHE of the federal government. These schools were part of the Benadir Administration's initial statutory responsibilities with a view to subsequent progress.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted by the paper is Mumford's Skills-Based Model (Mumford, 2000), which examines the relationship between a leader's knowledge, skills, and capabilities (Northouse, 2016). The skills-based model is relevant to the Somalia context, as leadership is less likely about status and position in a hierarchy than the possession of essential competencies, skills, and expertise (Morrison, 1998, p. 205; Khalifa et al., 2014, p. 246). The paper discusses only two of the five components in this model: competencies and environmental factors, which are discussed next.

Competencies

The term competence is both a complex and contested concept. Competency is a way of doing things better, "karti," in Somali. Consequently, school leaders must gain the necessary competencies for effective karti. These competencies are developed not only through organised training but also through guided practice to be upskilled (Gurmu, 2020, p. 655). It is worth noting the significant role a Headteacher plays in raising educational standards. The Headteachers do this by planning the organisational management of the school, planning for effective teaching and learning activities, creating a positive school climate, building a collaborative organisational learning culture, developing staff, and building community leadership (Day and Sammons 2016, p. 7). It is important to highlight that these outcomes are strongly influenced by a leader's competencies, like problem-solving skills, social judgement skills, and knowledge (Northouse, 2016, p. 53).

Managing Environmental Impacts

The environment can be influenced both internally and externally. Environmental factors relate to internal factors such as working space, communication infrastructure, and the capability of subordinates, as well as external factors such as economic, political, and social issues (Northouse, 2016, p. 55). In the context of Somalia, a shortage of school places, a lack of trained teachers, and the absence of professional development opportunities for teachers are key environmental factors that Headteachers must manage, which for some Headteachers negatively impacts their capability of supporting teaching and learning effectively. Conflict, security, political instability, and the new system of governance—federalism—have hindered the education system's development, and these factors contribute to the lack of planning in the country's education system.

For example, the security situation may lead parents to send their children to nearby schools to avoid travelling through potentially dangerous neighbourhoods (World Bank, 2018, p. 63). If school leaders are to successfully respond to the distinctive challenges presented by schools' internal and external environments, their development must be seen in line with the environment in which they have to operate. To minimise any potential negative impact or influence on schools' operations, leaders must apply personal skills.

An effective performance by a leader during a crisis is determined by their capability and skills in problem solving, social judgement skills, and knowledge (Mumford et al., 2000). Problem-solving skills are a leader's creative ability to solve new and unusual, ill-defined organisational problems. "The skills include; being able to define significant problems, gather problem information, formulate new understandings about the problem, and generate prototype plans for problem solutions" (Northouse, 2016, p. 48).

Social judgement skills include perspective-taking, social perception, behavioural flexibility, and social performance (Northouse, 2016; Mumford et al., 2000). A leader should possess social skills; they may need to adjust to differences in people's personalities and understand their perspectives and goals. They further assert that "perspective-taking means understanding the attitudes that others have towards a particular problem or solution (Northouse, 2016, p. 50). Social perception is the process by which individuals interpret and understand the behaviour, characteristics, and intentions of others in social situations. Social perception is an essential aspect of human interaction, as it helps us make judgements, form impressions, and navigate social dynamics.

A leader's success depends on his or her ability to acquire and utilise resources effectively during crises. These successes are determined by changes applied by a leader, including redefining culture and structure, resources, the roles and responsibilities of staff and their own, and managing external relations, which are vital in the case of armed conflict. As highlighted above, there is a high prevalence of attacks on schools during armed conflict, with a commonality of death among pupils, teachers, and school leaders. Leaders are expected to respond to these factors by applying the necessary skills to minimise disruption to school operations. Although there is an increasing amount of literature that deals with relationships between education and armed personnel, "there is still a research gap in terms of understanding how Teachers and school leaders experience and navigate through both physical and psychological threats and how they trade off their survival in the context of a protracted conflict" (Pherali, 2016, p. 1).

Methodologies and Methods

The main aim of this research was to explore Somali Headteachers' leadership and management experiences during armed conflict. The paper had made strenuous efforts to understand how conflict impacted their roles. This exploration was needed to further study the role of school leadership in Somalia and to identify variables that could not be easily measured or heard (Murray & Wayne 2001). As highlighted in a study carried out in Somalia by the World Bank (2018), "there is a need to further study the role of school leadership, since leaders have important roles in determining quality through resource allocation, hiring practices, and establishing school guidelines (World Bank, 2018, p. 72).

The qualitative approach was chosen to conduct this study as it was the appropriate method to conduct research when an issue or a problem needs to be explored (Creswell 2013, p. 47–48). Denzin (1989) in Olesen (2004) also gave a similar insertion by describing people's lived experiences, events, or situations that have meaningful social and historical contexts and experiences, and the significance of emotional content to open up the words of whoever or whatever is being studied. The paper used a semi-structured interview as it allowed the exploration of a series of specific questions or issues. This helped the paper probe and ask follow-up questions.

The paper selected 10 participants, and all consented to take part in the study. These were the Head teachers who would provide the richest and most interesting information (Best & Kahn, 2006). The participants of this research were Head teachers of private primary schools in Somalia, and a purposeful sampling method was used to select thirty private primary school Head teachers in Somaliland, Puntland, and Banadir regions. The selection of the ten Head teachers was based on their age, number of years of headship, qualifications, and teaching or non-teaching experience. They had given their consent during the initial introductory meeting, which was held individually. Important information was provided by the Head teachers during this meeting, like their personal data as well as individual profiles charting their career journey.

The interview

As Creswell (2013) recommends, the paper reduced the entire study to a single, overarching central question and several sub-questions. "Drafting this central question took considerable work because of its breadth" (p. 139). To reach the overarching central question, the paper took Creswell's advice to state the broadest question to address the research problem and hence addressed the following main question: What impact has the armed conflict had on the leadership and management of schools?

Participants were presented with a set of questions about their experiences and their four key interview questions were incorporated into the central question the paper sought.

Interview question 1:

Were you a Head teacher before the Civil War? Were you working in education before the conflict?

Was your school in operation during the armed conflict?

Interview question 2:

Were you a Headteacher during the armed conflict?

How has the armed conflict impacted your role as Headteacher?

Interview question 3:

What strategies or managerial responses have you undertaken to minimize any impact?

Interview question 4:

Were there any other challenges in applying these strategies/ approaches?

Findings

The paper has generated a number of key points, and these were taken for the discussion along with the key points presented in the introduction and the literature review section of the paper. Participants were asked to respond to some structured interview questions based on Mumford's Skills Model: competencies and managing environmental changes.

Key points that emerged from interviews

Sixty percent of those interviewed were Headteachers before the civil war erupted. Of that number, 55% are still Headteachers, while 10% have retired. Thirty-five percent indicated that they were not Headteachers before the armed conflict, and only 15 percent of this

cohort were working in education, while 20% of this group were in education or school management.

The vast majority of the participants' serving as Headteachers had experience ranging between 6 to 30 years. Over 80% had served more than ten years as a Headteacher, while 20% were in this role for more than six years. In responding to the question regarding school operation during active armed conflict, only 20% stated that their schools were in operation at the start of the conflict, while 62% indicated their schools were irregular in terms of operation due to school premises being occupied by armed militia or influential people who were not associated with any armed groups.

Sixty-five percent of the participants have indicated that they were Headteachers during armed conflict, after successful re-opening of their schools on an on-off basis due to ongoing conflict. In their responses to the negative impact on school operations, including staff and children's safety, recruiting teachers, and managing teaching and learning resources, participants indicated that their personal skills and experience played a significant role in the way they managed the effect of the conflict. Participants further explained the direct impact of the conflict on their role as Headteachers and stated that these impacts include:

- Reopening of schools
- Concerns about safety to and from school for staff and children
- Safety during school time
- Teacher recruitment and retention
- Lack of means to manage staff performance and support.
- Lack of resources
- Lack of support for Teachers and other staff from outside the school
- Managing and maintaining external relations
- Volatility of the situations and instabilities
- Lack of means to manage teaching and learning assessment

In their responses to the question related to the strategies or managerial responses that participants undertook to minimise any impact of the armed conflict on their roles as Headteachers, their responses varied; some were too generic and less detailed, while others (HT 06, HT 09, and HT 12) provided detailed responses to the question.

Participant (HT06)

"My school was reopened as a result of community-led mobilisation, and this has enabled me to count on the support of the community. I led the school in partnership with the community and like-minded individuals. I think this was the best approach to managing the school during a crisis. Joint planning and organisational management with members of the community have enabled the management of the school to create a protected and positive learning environment for staff and children. Personal qualities and competencies have had a great influence on the way I applied this strategy."

Participant (HT09)

"I believe the effective outcome of a leader during a crisis is influenced by their personal and professional skills in dealing with challenges faced by the school. The skills include how you treat your staff, deal with significant issues, including safety and resources, and manage internal and external disputes. If teachers and staff are not happy, they will leave, and no teacher means no students. There is a high demand for teachers' increased pay and safety in certain areas where conflict may still be active. Shortages of teachers sometimes force school leaders to teach, especially those who possess teaching skills. These staff turbulences have knock-on effect on schools' overall subscription as parents remove their children if a school doesn't have any teachers to teach their children".

Participant (HT12)

"Every school leader must be equipped with skills that help him or her to deal with people who are experiencing many challenges in life, including trauma and different personalities. The school leader must understand the circumstances surrounding the school during a crisis, including the armed conflict. Social skills, knowledge, and spiritual competency are

vital skills for me and for others when it comes to being a leader. My personal experience during the armed conflict was that staff faced repercussions from parents and relatives of students if they failed or gave low marks to their children. In some cases, staff had to choose between life and death situations in assessing students, particularly those whose parents or relatives are part of the militia group. Communities will have greater respect for leaders who hold stronger spiritual competencies, compassion, and knowledge of education.

Discussion and Conclusion

The enormity of the effects on education during and after armed conflict was felt everywhere. These effects included the complete destruction of education in both physical and human forms. One of the main priorities for any parent or community during a crisis is the continuation of education. However noble this effort of reopening schools, this is not without a challenge. Most schools were not used for years during the conflict because they were in areas where armed conflict continued to be active. In responding to the question related to managing external environmental factors and their direct impact on education, some participants were explicit with their responses to the question. The leader's skills in dealing with these changes matter significantly. He or she should have the ability to reconsider the operating systems that existed before the conflict and revisit these systems and their relevance to the changing environment. A significant number of participants were Headteachers before the civil war and felt the negative impact of the conflict immediately. Although participants' responses vary in strategies, they used to continue education during armed conflict, and they strongly agreed that the conflict had a negative impact on schools' day-to-day operations.

There is clear evidence that their approaches to responding to external changes vary, and these are influenced by their skills, experience, personal and professional competencies. These responses link with the statement by Mumford et al. (2000), who state that an effective performance by a leader during a crisis is determined by their capability and skills in problem solving, social judgement skills, and knowledge. These skills include being able to define significant problems, gather problem information, formulate new understandings about the problem, and generate prototype plans for problem solutions" (Northouse, 2016,

p. 48). Defining these problems includes how leaders pay attention to these changes and their impact on school life and work with others and communities to mobilise a collective response. Good social skills, knowledge, and spiritual competencies are vital when it comes to working with people from different entities, such as school staff, parents, and the wider community.

Participants also acknowledge that their main role as headteachers was to ensure normalcy and effective relationships among staff members are maintained by acquiring and allocating resources, maintaining effective external relations, and building a mutually supportive school community. This is what Day and Sammons highlighted earlier: "Headteachers do this through planning the organisational management of the school, planning for effective teaching and learning activities, creating a positive school climate, building a collaborative organisational learning culture, developing staff, and building community leadership" (Day & Sammons 2016, p. 7).

In conclusion, participants agreed with the notion that leaders' successes in leading and managing schools during conflict depend on how they redefine culture and structure, resource management, the roles and responsibilities of staff, and their own, as well as managing external relations, which are vital in the case of armed conflict. Leaders must gain the necessary competencies for effective 'karti,' and these require a set of skills including personal and professional, cultural, and spiritual competencies, as well as experience and knowledge.

Recommendations

The paper acknowledges the uniqueness of Somalia's education system, which has experienced total destruction for more than two decades. The enormity of the effects on education during and after armed conflict was felt everywhere, including in the teacher training provision as well as in the preparation and development of schools and school leaders. The paper makes the following recommendations:

- Further research is needed on the impact of conflict on school management during conflict and what support is made available to them.

- There is a need for comprehensive education policies that guide all stakeholders in the provision of education services that support school leaders.
- Training and development for school leaders
- School owners and the wider community support keeping children, staff, and school leaders safe during crises.
- For the headteachers, they create distributed leadership opportunities for middle managers. This helps middle leaders' step in, in the event of a leadership absence.

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