

## “Untie our hands”: Teachers’ and parents’ social representations of school arson in Kenya

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### **Abstract**

*School arson, primarily burning down dormitories in boarding schools, is common in Kenya, leading to intense discussions among opinion makers such as government officials and newspaper columnists. Publications thus far have not reported the views of teachers and parents. This paper explores teachers’ and parents’ understandings of school arson through an inductive thematic analysis of focus group discussions held with 32 parents and 32 teachers in Kenya. Discussions focussed on the broad issues of contemporary Kenyan society rather than on the specific incidents of arson in particular schools. A central concern was the perceived role of international practices in undermining effective African parenting and disciplining strategies, with a broader commentary on what it means to be Kenyan, or an African, in the current postcolonial context.*

**Keywords:** Kenya, arson, thematic analysis, African identity, schools, childrearing practices

### **INTRODUCTION**

School violence grabs international attention when it involves school shootings with multiple deaths (Finley, 2014). School violence involving arson, and which is perpetrated by learners, is not as “highly mediatized” (Muschert, 2013) as school shootings in America and Europe. However, in Kenya, this form of school violence is a recurrent problem, and it results in the destruction of property, and sometimes results in loss of human life (Kinyanjui, 1976; Malenya, 2016).

News of school fires is often received with shock, anger and condemnation expressed through media reports as well as national and international debate on what would drive such young children to act so violently (Authors). In 2016, the school fires crisis seemed to have reached a tipping point with more than 120 secondary schools set on fire. Most of these schools were boys’ secondary schools.

Finley (2003) has noted that existing research into school violence ignores teachers' insights into school violence, and (Ricketts, 2007) has argued that teachers' insights into school violence are critical to understanding the problem and finding solutions. In the Kenyan context, discussions on school unrest/school fires crisis are often carried out in the print media. The crisis has also been a subject of four government taskforces that have generated reports. In both print media and government reports, the discussions have centered around finding the underlying causes of the problem and attempts to make recommendations on how to deter recurrence. However, these discussions have been carried out by people outside the school system (journalists and taskforce members appointed by the ministry of education to generate government reports) and whose views are not based on lived experiences. Therefore, we adopt the position that newspapers and government reports provide an 'outsider' view of school unrest and arson. We argue that the people who live through the experience (teachers, parents and students) would provide an 'insider' view of the problem.

The objective of this study is to explore the different understandings of school arson among parents and teachers revealed in focus group discussions. We propose a shift in methodology in the way research into school arson is carried out: from looking for causes and solutions to adopting a constructivist approach of exploring the different understandings of school arson. We use the social representations theory (Moscovici, 2001) to achieve this objective. Social representations theory provides a means through which we can examine how individuals within social groups make sense of the world around them and how these understandings change, develop and interact (Flick et al., 2015). Crucially, social representations theory allows for competing, even contradictory, meanings of reality to exist in the same community, culture and individual (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Moscovici, 2001; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). We explore the different understandings of school arson among teachers and parents selected from four boys' secondary schools selected using extreme and typical case study sampling. Two schools had experienced deliberate incidents of school arson and two had not.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

We used purposive sampling because it allowed us to focus on the characteristics of the population that were of interest and which were

relevant to the research question/s (Nieuwenhuis, 2007), and that would help us achieve the objectives of the study.

We used two types of purposive sampling to select the sample: typical case and extreme case sampling. Typical case sampling is used when the aim is to focus on the normality or typicality of the cases (Collins, 2010). The term typicality, in this case, was applied to select a typical boys' secondary school in Kenya that had experienced incidents of arson. Findings from such a school can be compared to similar samples. However, the burning of schools in 2016 in Kenya brought to the fore two incidents that attracted more attention than the other cases: one school was a national school, and another school (a county school) had seven dormitories burnt in one night. The two schools helped meet the criteria of extreme case sampling, that is, cases that demonstrate the phenomenon of interest in an extreme or in an unusual way (Collins, 2010).

A national school admits top students who scored grade A in the national examination from across the country. A county school, on the other hand, admits grade B students from across the country but reserves about twenty percent of the vacancies for students from within the county. For comparison purposes and to increase the sample, two schools of equal status (national and county) that did not experience incidents of arson were also included in the sample. In total, four schools were included in the sample. The sample was further stratified before the final selection of focus group participants. The teaching staff and parents were divided into two groups: male and female before a sample of eight teachers (four male and four female) and eight parents (four male and four female) were drawn purposively from each school. A total of 32 parents and 32 teachers were interviewed in focus groups comprising eight participants.

### **Focus groups**

Focus group discussions were held with parents and teachers in order to explore their understandings of school arson. Focus groups were scheduled and conducted by the first author.

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya. Further permission was sought from the respective County Directors and sub-county directors of education depending on the location of the school. Access to the schools was provided by the headteachers who appointed a link person (Senior teacher or Dean of Studies or Deputy headteachers)

who liaised with the first author to locate key informants from among the teachers and parents. The teachers were recruited on school days during their free time (lunch break or after classes at 4 pm Monday to Friday). The first author interacted with the teachers and explained the nature of the study before selecting key informants. The selected teachers signed consent forms before the focus groups were scheduled.

The parents were recruited on the days when the Board of Management meetings were scheduled in some schools or during visiting days in others or parent-teacher consultation days. The link persons helped in the recruitment especially in helping identify the parents who were too new in the school to have adequate information about the school fires. The parents who were recruited also signed consent forms before the focus groups were scheduled. The focus groups discussions were held in the school libraries or boardrooms depending on availability. The focus group discussions lasted two hours on average. The longest focus group discussion lasted two hours and fifty-three minutes.

The focus group discussions were conducted between October 2017 and February 2018. The discussions were transcribed in March 2018 and uploaded onto ATLAS.ti version 8 for coding.

### **Ethical considerations**

The research participants were assured of confidentiality during the focus group discussions. The problem of school arson is sensitive. School communities that experience arson are sometimes forced to live with the enduring stigma. It is for this reason that the identity of the respondents will be strictly protected and any information that may reveal a respondent's identity will be anonymized in the results section. Ethics permission to conduct the study was also obtained through Stellenbosch University Ethics Committee.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis; a theoretically flexible method of organising, describing and interpreting qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012a, 2022) The choice of social representations theory, based on its flexibility, allowed for the inductive exploration of the teachers' and parents' constructions of meaning and the meanings attached to school arson. Besides allowing for inductive exploration of meaning, it provided a tool with which we could "...illuminate the process of social

constructions of meaning” (Joffe, 2012) through coding and theme development.

The focus group transcripts were grouped in ATLAS.ti according to the type of school (national or county), according to whether they had experienced arson in 2016 or not (arson vs non-arson schools) and according to the category of participants (teachers or parents). The transcripts were read for the first time to check for typographic errors and misspelling of participants' names. The transcripts were then read a second time while listening to the audio recordings to check for accuracy in the transcription process. The third round of reading was done to anonymize the participants' identity before the transcripts were uploaded onto ATLAS.ti version 8 for coding.

In ATLAS.ti, the transcripts (further referred to as the data) underwent two cycles of coding. The first cycle of coding generated initial codes using phrases and words drawn from the participants and the researchers' interpretation of the data. The second cycle of coding involved checking for repeated codes and deleting them and checking for typographic errors.

The final list of codes was then grouped and merged into sub-themes and themes based on similarities and common words (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The sub-themes ranged from students protesting against bad school living conditions to management failures to teachers' failures to teenagers behaving badly due to hormones as well as lack of corporal punishment. The sub-themes were re-examined to identify the meaningful patterns that were relevant to the research question.

A further review of the sub-themes helped to generate preliminary/broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) or “... tentative and temporary” candidate themes (Terry, 2015) such as possible causes, suggested solutions, emotional reactions towards school arson and school cultures that make student unrest more likely. The review of themes involved combining smaller repetitive themes and renaming others to ensure that they represented the data (Clarke & Braun, 2015). For instance, the sub-themes *'parenting the modern child'*, *'liberal parents'*, and *'conservative teachers'* were merged to create the main theme *'Influence of Western culture on family structure/parenting'*.

The process of combining sub-themes to create the main themes was repeated until all the themes that helped to meaningfully answer the research question and coherently represent the views of teachers and parents were defined and named. They are discussed below.

## **RESULTS**

The focus group discussions revealed that the focus for both parents and teachers was on finding out why children are engaging in such violent acts and what can be done about it.

In this section we explore the three main themes that we developed:

- i) *Influence of Western culture on family structure/parenting*
- ii) *Crisis of authority*
- iii) *To cane or not to cane*

### **Influence of Western culture on family structure/parenting**

In line with many studies on parenting and child care in African contexts, this study revealed the many tensions that arise between modernity and traditionalism in childcare practices. There was also the question of the role of Western culture parenting styles that emphasise individualism as opposed to the collectivism of African culture. Teachers and parents reported that the problem of school fires goes beyond the usual problems of children protesting maltreatment by the school administration, insufficient food and bad living conditions. The teachers and parents expressed fear that the society, especially the structure of the family, seems to have changed due to the influence of Western culture. The quotation below captures this shift from communal family structure to more nuclear family structures:

And when you sit down and think deeply, I talked about the 19th and the 20th Century kind of, you know, the African child was brought up in a community of a family, large family, that was in the 80s, 90s, 70s. But now we are talking of a nuclear family where people live in maybe self-contained houses, each child from age 2 or even 1 has a room... (Ken, teacher in a school that experienced arson)

The teacher's reference to a nuclear family structure points towards a view that this change comes with attendant problems such as the emergence of a generation of children who are not grounded in African culture and values. This implies that the breakdown in communal living that facilitated the teaching of African culture and values has resulted in children who are not

well-behaved and who engage in gross misconduct. This is illustrated by the quotation below:

... our students don't come from the same kind of family setup. Some come from single parents, others are orphans, some parents are separated, absent parents. So, these issues of family are coming back to school because the real parent is absent... (Kanini, parent in a school that did not experience arson)

Parents in another focus group discussion expressed the view that the generation of parents that is bringing up children is equally affected by Western culture. This generation has lost touch with their African roots, and therefore, they have nothing much in terms of African culture to pass on to their children. The discussions alluded to the fact perhaps students who set buildings on fire had not been taught about the cultural implications of setting a house on fire. A parent summarized the view in the quotation below:

It's a kind of...it's a generational lifestyle that we want to blame on our children... Some of us, you don't even know about your cultures anymore, we ignored them like they are saying when you put on a house on fire, it's like you are killing someone. There is a child somewhere who does not even know what that means, and they are within this community. So, you see, it's a lot. It's a lot of other things. What we need to come down and tell ourselves is that the present parenting generation, after the 70s, has failed. (Jeniffer, parent in a school that experienced arson)

Besides influencing family structure, Western culture also seems to be an underlying factor in the conflict between how parents and teachers manage children's behavior. Therefore, the support that teachers expect from parents in managing children's behaviour is not forthcoming. The focus group discussions revealed that teachers ordinarily try to enforce rules but parents seem to adopt a more Western 'liberal approach' of reasoning and negotiating with children instead of demanding strict obedience. The parents seem more tolerant of the "modern child", but teachers hold the view that the child may be modernized but the society has not quite changed and parents need to maintain the more traditional African approach of raising children. The quotation below captures this conflict:

The "modern" child. And I have also put it in quotes that we tell them they are modern, but all the same, we should know the norms in the society have never changed. They have never changed. And even parents, when they bring their children to school, they expect that child, once they go home, they at least manifest that change which the teacher has instilled: good morals. At the same time, they are not supporting us while the child is at home. So, we find ourselves in conflict trying to bring out a child, the best

out of this child. But once they are out of school, that everything is lost.  
(Chengo, teacher in a school that experienced arson)

The view put forward by the teachers is that the liberal approach that parents have adopted has resulted in children who are out of control and whose behavior can only be managed by teachers. Consequently, the lack of support from parents in managing children's behavior overwhelms the teachers as expressed in the quotation below:

Interviewer: Parents stand accused?

Respondent: Yes. So, we really are carrying burdens ... There are also those parents who their sons wrong them at home during the holiday, "You wait until you open school, I am going to report you to the teachers." So, they say when schools open, I am going to report you to the teachers ... So, they feel like the child has grown out of their hand; it's only the teachers who can handle them ... (Wesley, teacher in a school that did not experience arson)

Underlying the position expressed by the parent above is the practical challenge brought about by industrialization, urbanization and the structure of paid labor. These changes have forced parents, sometimes both parents, to work outside the home for long hours. As a result, continuous monitoring of children's behavior is not possible.

### **Crisis of authority**

Closely linked to the influence of Western culture on family structure is the loss of authority. The discussions revealed that the changes, occasioned by the influence of Western culture, on the structure of African lifestyles and cultures have brought about a crisis of authority. Both teachers and parents suggested that they are no longer in control of how children behave. According to the teachers and parents the crisis has been caused by the emergence of the internet and the enactment of the Children's Act 2001 (Government of Kenya, 2001). We note here that The Children's Act 2001 was enacted in 2001 in Kenya to safeguard children's welfare and it was based on the UN Convention on The Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

This theme constitutes two sub-themes discussed below:

#### *Powerless teachers and parents*

Teachers, for instance, report that they find themselves powerless in the way they teach. The knowledge they possess is challenged by what children can access through the internet. The influence of technology directly

challenges the authority of the teacher as the “repository” of knowledge that children should learn. The quotations below illustrate this problem:

Respondent: They [children] are more hands-on on technology than the old media of reading books and all that. So, kind of, as a teacher, you are helpless. You cannot teach the skills which are required now by the kids, and which have a lot of interest ... So, kind of we are in a 19th Century world with 21st Century kids. (Chengo, teacher in a school that experienced arson)

Respondent: I still blame openness or unlimited access to information, especially on social media. (Allan, parent in a school that did not experience arson)

Respondent: Because students, I think, had a healthy regard for teachers then than they do now.

Interviewer: They have changed?

Respondent: They have changed.

Interviewer: Why? How?

Respondent: One, they don't think teachers are solely the stepping stone to a better future; they seem to have other ideas, especially with technological advancement. So, there was a time students highly regarded teachers and they felt that with the teacher, they would go places. But now there are different views, students have a different approach. (Agnes, teacher in a school that did not experience arson)

The authority of parents has also been challenged. The parent's word is no longer the law:

Respondent: I think they are way, way ahead of us and even if you sit down with a million parents you will find that there's a gap.

Interviewer: So even as you grapple with “what is the problem”, you are in different worlds?

Respondent: Yeah. Seriously there is a gap.

Interviewer: There is a gap between you and your children?

Respondent: There is. (Janet, parent in a school that experienced arson)

The views above bring to the fore the key question of what exactly is authority in contemporary Africa and how does it differ from authority in pre-colonial Africa?

### *Children's rights*

The second cause of this crisis of authority is the enactment of the Children's Act 2001 (Kenya, 2001) which outlawed the use of corporal punishment to protect children from physical harm. However, both parents and teachers are in agreement that the outlawing of the use of corporal punishment is not African, and it is an affront to the authority of the teacher

and the parent. The Children's Act "tied their hands" and they are therefore helpless in the face of gross misbehavior by children such as school arson. This is illustrated by the views expressed in the quotations below:

Respondent: [Translated from Kiswahili] And what has mainly brought about this problem is denying the child corporal punishment. (Sammy, parent in school that experienced arson)

Respondent: This is something you need to tell them, let the child be a child. I am saying this because, in my observation, the laws which as a country we are adopting, my colleague has just mentioned that maybe in the UK, in the US, their law has really permitted the child a lot of freedom and they are facing a lot of challenges in dealing with these teens. Now, we as a country, instead of learning from their mistakes, we want to follow the same route, go through the same problems they are going through, yet they are trying to come out of it, but we are encouraging ourselves to go into the problems. Why are we not in a position to avert these problems and let the Kenyan child be the Kenyan child? (Alice, teacher in a school that experienced arson)

Respondent: I want to mention something ... the government has also brought in issues that have widened the gap between the kids and their parents ... it is very sad that you as a mother when you talk to your child ... and they tell you about children's rights, you cannot cane me anymore ... if you send me to go to the market, it's child abuse ... (Sylvia, parent in a school that experienced arson)

Respondent: ... the new Act talks so much about rights and as opposed to values. Now, if you suppress the values and you have rights, then you are going to have a child who will not respect you because of "I have my rights" ... But school is more of training and mentoring; we teach them more of values than rights; respect your grownup, the teacher is a grownup ... (Charles, teacher in a school that did not experience arson)

According to teachers, the Children's Act (2001) protects the child but not the teacher. The fact that the Act proposes punishment (fines and imprisonment) for any adult found using corporal punishment makes teachers vulnerable:

Interviewer: You think the Act doesn't help the teacher?

Respondent: It is more friendly to the child and not the teacher. Actually, they don't protect the teacher at all. (John, Teacher in a school that did not experience arson)

The teachers felt that the Children's Act "ties their hand" to the extent that even in the face of attack from students, the teachers cannot defend themselves. These sentiments are captured in the quotation below:

Respondent: Yes, I think our hands are tied.

Interviewer: The teacher's hands are tied?

Respondent: Are tied completely ... That's why the primary kids in Samburu caned the teachers in broad daylight. There is no respect, by the way. Sometime back, these kids used to have some fear which I equate to some respect. It's no longer there. So, they do mistakes and there is nothing we can do. (**Oscar**, teacher in a school that experienced arson)

### **To cane or not to cane**

The discourse surrounding school arson in Kenya is often accompanied by attempts to find solutions to the problem. This was also the case in the focus group discussions with teachers and parents. Parents and teachers held the view that corporal punishment is the best way of managing misbehavior by children/students. Hence, when asked what solution they propose to end the school arson problem, both teachers and parents proposed a review of the Children's Act to allow for the return of corporal punishment. The quotations below capture this sentiment:

Respondent: Kiboko ni lazima. (*Corporal punishment is a must.*)

Interviewer: Kiboko ni lazima? (*Corporal punishment is a must?*)

Respondent: Hata Biblia inaruhusu (*even the Bible allows corporal punishment*). (**Anderson**, parent in a school that experienced arson)

Interviewer: What do you do when your child misbehaves at home?

Respondent: I cane him. I am guided by the Bible. So, I instil discipline the Bible way. (*Laughter from other respondents*)

Interviewer: But the Children's Act 2001 outlawed the use of the cane?

What about the children's rights that we have just talked about?

Respondent: I have heard about them, but I think the cane works. (**Janice**, parent in a school that did not experience arson)

Respondent 1: The thing is, withhold that kiboko (*the cane*).

Respondent 2: And you know what the Bible says about that kiboko.

Respondent 1: Spare the rod.

Respondent 3: Not even that: foolishness is bound in the heart of a child.

Respondent 2: And to remove ...

Respondent 1: Only a *kiboko* (*cane*). (Malack (1), Allan (2) and Emma (3), parents in a school that did not experience arson)

To illustrate why corporal punishment is favored, a teacher explains how ineffective guidance and counselling (the alternative to corporal punishment suggested by the ministry of education) has been. In this school, the teachers had quietly reintroduced the use of corporal punishment. Another teacher recommends "guided caning". The quotations below aptly capture these views:

Respondent: We have tried G & C (guidance and counselling) and I can tell you for free that it is not working. What these students fear is the use of the cane.

Interviewer: *You're sure?*

Respondent: Yes. And in our first meeting this ... this term, we actually decided that if possible, we should re-introduce the cane quietly (Laughter by all). But you know our hands are tied. (Nancy, teacher in a school that experienced arson)

Respondent: They should also bring this issue of guided caning kidogo (just a little bit).

Interviewer: You want the cane back in school?

Respondent: Guided caning. You know even before, when it was there, it was specifically done by the headteacher, even the cane that the head could use, it had specification on how it was being done. (Michael, teacher in a school that did not experience arson)

The fact that both teachers and parents are in agreement that there is need to bring back corporal punishment in order to manage students' misbehaviour, and school arson in particular, raises a more fundamental question about the difficulty of fully complying with the UN convention on the rights of the child in African contexts.

## **DISCUSSION**

The three central themes point to one critical issue: a perceived underlying problem of loss of African identity and culture. The loss of African identity and culture that parents and teachers allude to in the focus group discussions brings to the fore the history of Western education in colonial Africa. (Healy-Clancy, 2013) has noted that Western education was a joint venture between colonial administrations and missionaries, whose main agenda is summarized below:

... '[t]he best education of youth born heathen, ... must be given through the instrumentality of missionary institutions in their respective countries', although 'under the paternal care' of American missionaries there. (p. 20)

Similarly, (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006) have summarized the aims of the introduction of Western education in colonial Africa, thus:

Colonial administrations and the missionaries attached so much importance to education that it had to be organized to inculcate the values of western civilisation in the minds of those who were to loyally serve the occupying power. The advantages to be gained by Africans were not primary objectives of colonial education. A foreign culture was imposed through Christianity and education." (pp. 189–190)

The statements above support the view that colonial education directly affected the structure of African societies because the values introduced

were far removed from African culture. Independent Africa did not overhaul colonial culture. In Kenya, for instance, the current structure of schools, including boarding schools, is a carry-over from the structure put in place by the British colonial government. In his memoir, (wa Thiong'o, 2012) explains his experience of schooling in a typical elite Kenyan boarding school:

In general, the Alliance classroom of our times abstracted knowledge from local reality. There were no attempts to mine local knowledge. In literature classrooms for instance, ... English texts were the norm and Europe the cultural reference. (p. 63)

It is, therefore, not surprising that in present-day Kenya parents and teachers would lament about the loss of African identity and culture among children and point out that there is "acculturation" of young children through Western education. They further point out that this "acculturation" is a possible major cause of school arson. (Healy-Clancy, 2013) makes a comment that resonates with this view:

Like educated elites throughout much of Africa in the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, mission educated Africans in South Africa found the skills and expectations they had forged in the classroom clashed radically with the constraints facing them outside ... (p. 1)

A perceived change in African culture occasions a crisis because it challenges the dynamics of the relationship between adults and children. According to (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006), destroying social systems, breaking up extended families and encouraging individualism were some of the aims of Western colonial education. It is this breakdown of the African society that has affected the upbringing of children in Kenya and occasioned a crisis of authority. The extended family is no longer involved in the communal duty of bringing up children, and the parents are overwhelmed due to the pressures of modern living.

It is probable that the involvement of the extended family in bringing up children was beneficial, but literature is scanty on whether children engaged in violent behavior in pre-colonial times and what, if any, measures adults employed to deal with misbehavior.

One consequence of colonialism and the introduction of Western education was that Kenya became a more open liberal society that has become a party to international charters and treaties. However, these international charters and treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Nations, 1989) advocate for rights such as a ban on the use of

physical punishment which seems to go against deeply held beliefs about the upbringing of children. Results of an assessment of violence against children in Eastern and Southern Africa regions by (Zuberi, 2005) revealed that there is a shared belief by almost all countries that children should be submissive and that physical discipline is seen as an important and necessary element of child rearing.

For parents and teachers, a ban on corporal punishment has precipitated a crisis of authority. When teachers and parents express a sense of helplessness in managing children's violent behavior, they are alluding to the conflict between their deeply held belief of using physical punishment to manage misbehavior and the advocacy for children's rights that prohibits the use of corporal punishment on children. (Sarrica & Contarello, 2004) have noted, in reference to the social representation's theory, that it is possible for different groups within the same cultural framework to take up distinct positions in the representational field. Although the government passed the Children's Act (Kenya, 2001) and banned corporal punishment to protect the rights of children, parents and teachers consider the passing of the Act an affront to their authority. Perhaps as (Miamingi, 2022) has argued, there is a need, in the Kenyan context as well as in Africa, to pay attention to "...issues of legitimacy, particularly cultural legitimacy within the regional context in view of existing philosophies and cultural heritage on childhood in Africa" when domesticating international charters such as the charter on child rights.

The need to find a solution to the problem of school arson was central in the focus group discussions. The parents and teachers suggested that the Children's Act (Kenya, 2001) be amended to make room for the reintroduction of corporal punishment. The irony of this suggestion is in prescribing a violent solution for a school violence problem. The increased need to re-assert their authority through advocating for the reintroduction of corporal punishment is akin to what (Wojciechowski, 2005) refers to as the "syndrome of endangered authority" which is characterized by an increased need to maintain authority through the use of domination and force.

Straus (2009) has noted that "corporal punishment is so widespread that it is part of growing up for most children in most countries of the world" and that it is "taken for granted as part and parcel of the lives of parents and children" (p. 11). It is considered "normal"; therefore, it is not surprising for the teachers and parents to consider it a default solution to school arson

in Kenya. Straus (2009) further notes, "...those who advocate for corporal punishment also believe that the family is in jeopardy and society is in ruin because of permissiveness in bringing up children" (p. 15). The focus group discussions raised the issue of bad parenting that has brought about a new phenomenon of a "modern child". Part of the explanation for the emergence of a "modern child" is that the Kenyan society is getting more and more Westernized and urbanized and affecting the upbringing of children. As a consequence, teachers are dealing with children who are not well brought up, who are defiant and disrespectful towards teachers, hence the school arson crisis.

Adams (1998) posits that one of the reasons corporal punishments persists is that it is so rooted in the culture and history that it becomes difficult to eradicate, despite legislation (p. 121). Secondly, the widespread use of corporal punishment is a result of its biblical foundations. Those who advocate for it often use the Bible to justify it: "He who spares the rod hates his son..." (Proverbs 13: 24). Many of the teachers and parents in the focus group discussions referred to this verse.

## **CONCLUSION**

A significant feature of the parents' and teachers' talk about school arson is the fact that in all discussions, talk moved rapidly to focus on broad issues about contemporary Kenyan society rather than on the specifics of what has happened at particular schools. It is difficult to discern why our participants, consistently and across different groups, with whom we interacted all spoke about these broader social concerns rather than about specifics. We could speculate, for example, that parents and teachers may feel overwhelmed and at a loss as to how to respond to school fires, and hence broaden the discussion, or that the talk may be emblematic of broader discussions about contemporary Kenyan identity. From the experience of the first author, who is herself a Kenyan educator, the discussions are indeed similar to broader discussions in Kenya, but the question of why in our study the focus of discussions became so broad is not possible to answer definitively. Secondly, adopting the social constructivist approach to study the lived experiences of the 'insiders' has helped demonstrate that school arson in the Kenyan context is not a linear problem of finding causes and solutions as presented in the media and in government reports. It is a more complex problem that requires that we look beyond students' behaviour and interrogate the social-cultural, the historical and the legal aspects, as well as the broader issue of children's rights in understanding the problem.

What is also clear is that discussions about school arson did indeed constellate these broader discussions about what it means to be a Kenyan, or an African, in the current postcolonial context. Throughout the talk there is the invocation of a supposed split between a constructed (and possibly idealized) past in which everyone knew their place and parents and teachers could exercise authority in a culturally appropriate way, and a contemporary Kenya in which appropriate cultural authority and discipline methods have been undermined by views and practices which originate in the West. The question of authority and how it is legitimated in contemporary African and other postcolonial education contexts is clearly an important issue for further research.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study is based on interviews with 32 teachers and 32 parents; it is not possible to generalize the results to a larger population. Secondly, the respondents were from boys' school primarily because the study focused on school fires that happened in 2016 most of which happened in boys' schools. There is need for further research on the experiences of parents and teachers from girls' schools. Thirdly, the data is more than seven years old and conditions may have changed. For instance, one of the schools included in the study as a non-arson school experienced arson before the study was completed. However, school fires, and especially deliberate firesetting, continue to be experienced in Kenyan schools and the problem has not been comprehensively solved.

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### **Declaration of interest**

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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