



An Investigation into the Causes of Conflict in Zimbabwean Schools: A Case Study of Muzarabani District

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Abstract: The present study sought to investigate the causes of conflict in selected Zimbabwean schools with particular reference to Muzarabani District. This article draws on a qualitative inquiry of factors contributing towards various conflict situations in schools using a sample of 30 teachers and heads of schools from Muzarabani in Zimbabwe selected by means of purposeful sampling. The research adopted a qualitative methodology using a case study design. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. Views of the respondents were audio-taped, transcribed and became the primary data for analysis. The findings indicated that most respondents felt that conflict affected the productivity of the members of the organization. Participants indicated that lack of communication; interpersonal relationships within the schools as well as procedural issues were the major causes of conflict. The study concluded the conflict amongst educators in Zimbabwean schools is endemic. It went on to conclude that the work mate, poor communication, incompetence in the work place, alcohol abuse, favouritism, power struggles, and lack of compensation for work done. The study recommends that school should have agreed mechanism in place for groups of people who may be antagonistic to collectively discuss and resolve issues.

Keywords: School, conflict, circuit, disputes, conflict management.

1. INTRODUCTION

When turning the other cheek fails, many people are at a loss in dealing with conflict (Moore 2012). The consensus strategy (a strategy based upon agreement by the total group), employed by many organizations leaves community leaders ill-prepared to deal with those persons or organizations who refuse to concede without a struggle (Umstot 2008). The potential for conflict exists whenever and wherever people have contact (Barker 2009). As people are organized into groups to seek a common goal, the probability of conflict greatly increases. This equally applies to schools as well. Conflicts are a natural part of life and therefore a natural part of school life. As Umstot (2008) observes managing conflict at school has been an age-old challenge for educators. For an organization to be effective and efficient in achieving its goals, the people in the organization need to have a shared vision of what they are striving to achieve, as well as clear objectives for each team / department and individual (Francis 2011). It is therefore imperative that leaders need ways of recognizing and resolving conflict amongst people, so that conflict does not become so serious that co-operation is impossible. Madziyire (2010) states that conflict in schools is inevitable because like any other human beings teachers have opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values or goals. Therefore, as Gundiza and Namusi (2012) argue, conflict may escalate and lead to non productive results, or it can be beneficially resolved and lead to quality final products. Therefore, learning to manage conflict is integral to a high performance team (Winfield 2009). Conflict management is the principle that all conflicts cannot necessarily be resolved, but learning how to manage conflicts can decrease the odds of nonproductive escalation (Umstot 2008). In Zimbabwe conflict is inexistence in schools as barely a month passes without either the head conflicting with the teachers or the teachers amongst themselves (Moore 2012). Adhiambo and Samatwa (2011) established that causes of conflict between teachers and administration were academic performance, difference in opinion, negative attitude towards each other, disciplining of students, intimate relationships between teachers and administration, irresponsibility on the part of all the parties, lack of time management and improper lesson planning by teachers. It is on account of this information that this study set out to explore the causes of conflict in schools and how conflict can be managed.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study sought to find out the major factors that led to conflict situations amongst educational personnel in the Zimbabwean schools. Disputes occur in situations where there is competition for resources such as power, prestige, finances and time resources. It seems that generally, most schools experience various conflict situations on a daily basis. Conflict may lead to non-productive results in the schools and there is need to investigate its causes so as to come up with mediatory strategies.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to investigate the causes of conflict in the Zimbabwean school system so as to come up with strategies to either minimize or utilize the conflict situations.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the prevalence of conflict in schools?
2. Which are the most common forms of conflict in schools?
3. How does conflict affect production in the schools?
4. What mechanisms can be put in place to manage conflict?

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The importance of this study stemmed from the fact that it sought to expose the major factors that lead to conflict in the schools. A clear understanding of the causes of conflict amongst educators in the schools is necessary so that some mitigatory measures can be devised to reduce the conflicts so that educators expend their energies on their core-business and not on fighting. It was also hoped that education authorities and the Government of Zimbabwe would use the findings to improve conditions in the schools so that conflicts are minimised.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited to those factors that contribute to conflict in the Zimbabwean schools using a very small sample. The study is thus, no more than a snap shot of the factors that create conflict amongst teachers in the schools. Clearly, the finding cannot be generalized but they alert one to some of the causes of conflict in the schools.

7. DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The researchers delimited the study to the factors that contribute towards conflict in one circuit in Muzarabani District of Zimbabwe. The respondents were teachers and heads. Other stakeholders like parents, pupils, education officers, School Development Committee Members as well as Trade Union representatives were outside the preview of this study.

8. LITERATURE REVIEW

Disputes occur in situations where there is competition for resources such as power, prestige, financial materials and time resources (La Monica 2009). Nyamajiwa (2000) has identified some causes or sources of conflict within an organization. These include inadequate information, role conflict / collision, and differences in goals, values, and competition for limited resources, responsibility, personnel, space, tools and equipment and access to superiors. In an organization such as a school, a number of these sources of conflict could be applicable to school heads and teachers (Makaye and Ndofirepi 2012). In most cases, unresolved conflicts result in communication breakdown affecting the smooth running of the school (Kreps 2011). In Zimbabwe in extreme cases, heads and teachers physically fight each other over certain issues (Makaye and Ndofirepi 2012). Such situations disturb the tone and climate of the school and ultimately the performance of both teachers and pupils is negatively affected.

According to Madziyire (2010) causes for workplace conflict can be personality or style differences and personal problems such as substance abuse, childcare issues, and family problems. Organizational factors such as leadership, management, budget, and disagreement about core values can also contribute. Gray and Starke (2012) state that managers must be able to recognize the signs of

conflict behaviours and with the conflict in a forthright fashion. On the other hand Garton (2007) advises that approaching conflicts as opportunities to improve departmental policies and operations rather than ailments to be eradicated or ignored will result in a more productive workforce and greater departmental efficiency.

Another cause of conflict in organizations (Including schools) is what Anderson (2009) calls “office romance”. Public displays of affection can make co-workers uncomfortable and accusations of favoritism may occur, especially if it is a supervisor-subordinate relationship (Anderson 2009). If the relationship goes awry, one party may seek to exert revenge on the other. Griffin (2012) states that poor performance, that is, when one or individuals within a work unit are not performing or not working up to potential; and this is not addressed, conflict is inevitable. Griffin (2012) further states that opposing positions, competitive tensions, power struggles, ego, pride, jealousy, performance discrepancies, compensation issues, just someone having a bad day and so on. From this list of causes of conflict, it appears as if everything creates conflict. However, as Winfield (2010) argues, the reality is that the root cause of most conflict is born out of poor communication or the inability to control one’s emotions. Clear concise, accurate, and timely communication of information will help to ease both the number and severity of conflicts. Griffin (2012) states that another common mistake made in workplace communications which leads to conflict is letting emotions drive decisions. As Kreps (2011) argues, the very bane of human existence which is in fact human nature itself, will always create gaps in thinking and philosophy and no matter how much we all wish it wasn’t so...it is. So the question then becomes how to effectively deal with conflict when it arises. Gorton (2012) posits that it is essential for organizational health and performance that conflict be accepted and addressed through effective conflict resolution processes.

Gray and Starke (2012) that while having a conflict resolution structure is important processes is ultimately dependant upon the ability of all parties to understand the benefits of conflict resolution, and perhaps more importantly their desire to resolve the matter. Winfield (2010) posits that organizational leaders are responsible for creating a work environment that enables people to thrive. If turf wars, disagreements and differences of opinion escalate into interpersonal; conflict, the leader must intervene immediately (LaMonica 2009). Kreps (2011) suggests some of the actions that should be avoided in conflict situations: conflict should not be avoided thinking that it will go away; do not meet separately with people in conflict; do not believe; for even a moment that the only people who are affected by the conflict are the participants.

Winfield (2009) states that most employers have conflict resolution policies in places often times there are a series of steps that an employer will recommend that an employee take when dealing with problems they are encountering in the workplace. Since employee conflict can affect so much more than what’s going on just between two people, employers want to ensure that any problems between employees or within any one specific department are dealt with quickly or in a way where both parties feel accepted and heard (Kreps 2011). Where one failed to resolve a conflict by speaking directly to the other person or through the supervisor, employers usually have a chain of command where the conflict can be taken to search for a solution.

Some authorities like Griffin (2012); Anderson 2009; Winfield 2010 and Moore (2012) conflict has positive aspects. Griffin (2012) for example argues that conflicts stimulate team and organizational performance and he terms this ‘functional conflict’. According to Griffin (2012) moderate levels of conflict can have a positive influence on the team and the organization. Anderson (2009) states that conflict can stimulate creativity. Team members can come out with differing approaches on achieving goals so that at the end the decision is a creative compromise that was not obvious before (Anderson 2009).

According to Griffin (2012) conflict can improve communication as people feel they are in a position where they feel they need to voice their opinions and this results in the setting up of formal conflicts channels to deal with future conflicts. In the workplace, schools included there is need to be aware of the inevitability of conflict. There is also need to manage conflict so that it does not adversely affect the performance of the team members. In the wake of the above causes of conflict that were studied in other countries other than Zimbabwe, save for Gundiza and Namusi (2012), Madziyire (2010) and Nyamajiwa (2000), the current study sought to find out the degree to which such observations obtain in Zimbabwean school situations with specific reference to Chipinge South District.

9. METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative methodology and made use of a case study research design. The methodology and the design were selected because they afforded the teachers the opportunity to live their experiences in their daily operations. The population consisted of all teachers in the Muzarabani District in Mashonaland Central. A district is an education administrative area under the jurisdiction of a District Schools’ Inspector in Zimbabwe school system. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 30 teachers. Purposive sampling was chosen because as Anderson (2011) observes, its advantage is that the researcher can use his/her research skill and prior knowledge to choose respondents. In the interests of this study, the participants were assumed to be information-rich such that they would be ready to provide research-sought data.

10. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews lasting twenty minutes using an interview guide. All interviews were audio-taped transcribed and became the primary data source for analysis conducted by the researcher (Blumberg 2008). The aim was to understand experiences from the participants’ point of view (Babbie 2012). No attempt was made to generalize the findings or prove hypotheses. A transparent disclosure of the role of the researchers and his or her relationship with the participants, the ‘volunteering’ of participants and description of the conflict situations teachers experience was done to contextualize the research and to allow for the impact of the researchers’ role and participant selection on findings. The use of a small sample is common in qualitative research, where the aim is depth and not breadth.

11. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study sought to investigate the causes of conflicts in Zimbabwean schools. This section is presented in two parts; namely biographical data and actual findings.

Demographic Data

Table1. *Distribution of participants by sex (N=30)*

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	14	47
Female	16	53
Total	30	100

Table 1 above reveals that 53% of the respondents were female and 47% were male. The datum was considered statistically significant to the extent that it confirmed the hypothesis that more teachers in Zimbabwean school of the female gender.

Table2. *Composition of participants by approximate age (N=30)*

Age in years	Frequency	Percentage
Below 30	12	40
31 – 40	13	43
41 – 50	3	10
51 and above	2	7
Total	30	100

From table 2 above, 40% of the respondents were below 30 year of age, 43% were from the 31-40 years age-group, while 10% belonged to the 41-50 years age group and 7% were 51 years and above.

Table3. *Composition of participants by professional qualifications (N=30)*

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Certificate in Education	3	10
Diploma in Education	17	57
Teaching degree	6	20
Non-teaching Degree	4	13
Total	30	100

Table 3 shows that the majority of the respondents were in possession of the Diploma in Education qualification (53%) a few held the Certificate in Education (10%) those with teaching degrees constituted 20% and those who were in possession of non-teaching degrees constituted 13% of the respondents. As Miskel (2012) observed people with diverse educational backgrounds are likely to differ on a number of issues resulting in conflict.

12. ACTUAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

According to international literature schools like other human organizations are prone to one or other type of conflict. Conflicts are neither constructive nor disruptive but the ways these are handled make them either positive or negative. In this study it was found that some of the factors that contributed to conflict in the schools, effects of conflict on production in schools and mechanism to manage conflict in schools are raised in the subsequent three sections.

13. COMMON FORMS OF CONFLICT AND PREVALENCE OF CONFLICT IN SCHOOLS

In their first two free responses, participants highlighted common forms of conflict in their schools and to a large extent the prevalence of conflict in their schools. Chief among common forms of conflict in their schools were competition for resources like cottage accommodation, classroom space, furniture and equipment as well as stationery; gossiping or spreading malicious rumours about a work mate; poor communication; incompetence; drunkenness; favouritism by authorities; clashes of student disciplining; power struggles; and lack of compensation for doing school work outside formal time like going for sports during weekends. These causes are related to those highlighted by Adhiambo and Samatina (2011) who established that causes of conflict amongst educators centred around academic performance, differences in opinion, intimate relationships, and lack of time management. These common forms of conflict obtaining in the studied schools clearly demonstrate the prevalence of conflict in the schools.

14. HOW CONFLICT AFFECTS PRODUCTION IN SCHOOLS

In their third response the participants indicated the extent to which conflict affects production in their schools. Most of the participants also admitted that at their school almost every week the school disciplinary committee handled one or two cases of a conflict nature thereby affecting the smooth functioning of the school. This tallies with findings by Moore (2012) who argued that in Zimbabwe conflict is endemic in the school system as barely a month passes without either the head conflicting with the teachers or the teachers amongst themselves. Under such circumstances, the school head may be perceived to be overly prescriptive rather than being partneristic. Prescriptive heads are viewed as autocratic, task-oriented and rigid. They are hardly democratic, teacher-oriented and flexible. Such heads' relationship with teachers is likened to that of military trainer-cum-instructor with his/her recruit soldier/trainee soldier. As a result of such attributes of these heads, they often face varying degrees of resistance ranging from passive resistance to confrontation. In that regard, conflict becomes inevitable. Production in schools is compromised in a number of ways. Instructional supervision time is cut short since heads will be concentrating on resolving conflict at the expense of helping teachers to teach better and help learners to learn better. Heads fail to supervise learners' exercise books and teachers' scheme-cum books and class record books that reflect how learners' are progressing cognitively, socially, morally and physically. Teachers on the other hand, tend misdirect their energies to conflicts at the expense of the actual teaching, the job they were employed for. They do not plan, prepare media, teach well, mark pupils' books and remedy learners, and regularly test them. If conflict prevails, it is common cause that the quality of education suffers.

The study also revealed that unfair internal promotion criteria caused conflicts among teachers. An example was given where a teacher was promoted after working for a short period of time in a school when there was another teacher who had stayed longer at that school and was eyeing the same position. This was said to be a perfect recipe for conflict. This falls under Griffins (2012) observations that power struggles, competitive tensions, ego, pride, jealousy and favouritism can cause conflict in a school. School heads and teachers who practice favouritism are catalysts of conflict in any given school. They trigger otherwise avoidable conflict if deserving, more qualified and experienced teachers are sidelined in terms of promotion or rating on the annual performance appraisal or results-based performance forms. Unfair heads tend to disempower competent teachers at the expense of quality education.

The findings also indicated that where there was a married couple teaching in the same school and there were suspicious of infidelity or cheating by one of the married teachers with other teachers, particularly with senior members of staff there was a high likelihood of conflict. As Anderson (2009) argues, where there are suspicious of “office romance” co-workers become uncomfortable and this may ignite dangerous antagonistic relations within the school. It is our conviction that matures school heads need to desist from any form lust that involves their workmates or even learners as this practice is one of surest passports to conflict escalation in the schools. Heads should be viewed as the surrogate parents of their teachers and learners. It is within such thinking that they should always lead by example for doing good things in search of not only conflict prevention, but quality production and education in their schools.

15. MECHANISMS THAT CAN BE PUT IN PLACE TO MANAGE CONFLICTS IN SCHOOLS

With regards to mechanisms that can be put in place to manage conflicts in the selected schools, the study also revealed that the majority of the teachers felt that heads of school should not take sides or be partial, but should be fair and firm when managing conflicts. The majority of the teachers also highlighted that conflict management should be one of the core courses in the curriculum of teachers at teacher training colleges and universities to equip teachers with skills for handling conflict in their work places. We are of the opinion that such knowledge would equip teachers and school heads with technical, human, conceptual and diagnostic skills to enable them to manage, resolve and handle conflict among themselves, learners, and let alone the community at large.

However, it was also established that most of the respondents thought that although in most cases conflict was disruptive in the operations of their schools, it nonetheless was essential in helping teachers and heads to identify their strengths and weaknesses. They indicated that teachers were likely to tell each other the truth in a conflict situation than they would under normal circumstances. As Madziyire (2010) urges, conflict can be used as a medium through which problems can be cured and solutions found. We now concur with Madziyire (2010) on the grounds that not all conflict is bad for organizations. We feel that it can be one of the healthy pathways for organizational growth, advancement and development if it is situationally managed properly.

16. CONCLUSIONS

Consequent upon the above findings, we hereby put forward the following conclusions.

- Conflict amongst educators in Zimbabwean schools is endemic. It is inevitable and both healthy and unhealthy.
- The major causes of conflict in schools include the following: competition for resources, gossiping or spreading malicious rumours about a work mate, poor communication, incompetence in the work place, alcohol abuse, favouritism, power struggles, and lack of compensation for work done.
- Poor internal promotional mechanisms can cause conflicts amongst teachers. Such mechanisms are divisive and practice at the expense of unity among staff members and the pursuit of quality education.
- Illicit affairs were also a major cause of workplace conflicts. Such affairs are immoral and bent on destroying the corporate image of the schools that societies and teachers are usually proud to be associated with.
- Heads of schools should be able to manage conflicts within their schools by being professionals who practice high degrees of integrity, honesty, fairness, responsibility, accountability, trustworthiness, diligence and morality all the times.
- The majority of the respondents admitted that conflict was functional in thee school as it helped teachers to solve problems. In practice, when teachers are faced with local conflictual problems, they are ignited to undertake action research to not only to improve their classroom performance and learner performance, but contributing to conflict resolution as well.

17. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings and conclusions of this study, we would like to make the underlying recommendations.

- In-service for teachers and administrators on conflict identification and management to equip them with necessary knowledge and skills in dealing positively with conflicts in the schools.
- School heads should develop or improve their collaborative skills such that they would enlist the services of some of their teachers in identifying conflict especially at the emergency stage.
- Educational administrators should communicate transparently about issues affecting teachers in the schools.
- Conflict in the workplace should be included as a topic for staff development sessions.
- School disciplinary committees should not wait for conflicts to arise among teachers but should launch pre-emptive strikes by guiding and counseling teachers on various issues that may precipitate conflicts.

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