SCHOOLS AS THEATRES OF WAR: TOWARDS PACIFIC SETTLEMENT OF DISPUTES IN ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Conflicts have become part and parcel of schools' administration world over. This indeed is a paradox because of the amount of energy and resources expended by schools to prevent and resolve conflicts. A total absence of conflict would be unbelievable, boring, and a strong indication that conflicts are being suppressed. Understanding the causes of conflicts may help us resolve current conflicts or even prevent future ones from occurring. The objectives of the study were to identify the causes of conflicts, establish the type of conflicts, find out how conflicts are managed, identify conflict management methods and determine techniques for conflict resolution in schools. The study adopted a qualitative design using a case of Zaka district. The target population was 40 schools in Zaka district with a population of over 400 teachers. Conflicts in Zimbabwe's primary and secondary schools have become a major problem that all stake holders in education should take a great concern. It affects the community, the school administration and the government directly or indirectly. If allowed to continue, it will ruin educational institutions and education itself. This paper recommends pacific settlement of disputes to improve the quality of education in our schools.

Key Terms: conflict, conflict resolution, Pacific dispute settlement

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1.1 Introduction

This paper starts by examining critical terms to the research namely, conflict, conflict resolution, pacific dispute settlement, as well as highlighting global and Zimbabwean schools' experiences with conflicts at the workplace. The paper also gives a description of the research design, presents and discusses findings, draws conclusions and finally makes recommendations.

1.2 Background of study

Cronje and Smit (2002) define conflict as the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values and who the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals. The way a school is organised can create both the root causes of conflict and the conditions in which it is likely to occur. Any school which is organised so that some people are treated unequally and unjustly is likely to erupt into conflict, especially if its leaders do not represent all the members of that society. If an unequal and unjust school is reformed, then conflicts will be rare. If a school department requires information from another department in order to do its job, and the second department does not respond to the request for information, a conflict can arise. Some interdepartmental disagreements might trigger a nonresponsive attitude that can quickly become an internal conflict. When teachers or departments are late in responding to information requests, or they are withholding information on purpose, it is best to address the situation immediately with a personal meeting with both sides to resolve the situation.

According to mediation expert Benjamin (2013) internal conflict can sometimes arise as the result of a simple misunderstanding. One teacher may misunderstand information, and that can trigger a series of conflicts. In order to deal with this kind of situation, it is best to have the person admit her misunderstanding and work with the affected parties to remedy the situation. Taking responsibility for a mistake can quickly defuse a potential organizational conflict.

Organizational conflict might arise from frustration. Benjamin (2013) confirms that, one source of frustration is a lack of accountability. If something has gone wrong, and no one is willing to take responsibility for the problem, this lack of accountability can start to permeate throughout the entire school until the issue is resolved. One way to combat a lack of accountability is to have anyone who comes into contact with a document sign his name to it and include the date. The

paper trail may sometimes find the source of the problem, which can then be addressed. Majority students in the college under study are deployed in Zaka district. Numerous reports through the teaching practice office on conflicts have been filtering prompting the undertaking of this study.

1.3 CAUSES OF CONFLICT AT WORKPLACES

The following are the major causes of conflicts at the workplaces.

- Differences in perception
- Limited resources
- Departmentalisation and specialisation
- Nature of work activities
- Role conflict
- Inequitable treatment
- Individual differences-attitudes, needs, stress ,illness

Adapted from Runyowa (2013) Reformed Church University Peace and Conflict Module HHRM 110

Adapted from Bryan and Cronin (2002)

1.4 Types of conflict in Schools

1.4.1 Affective Conflict

It can be explained as the incompatible feeling and emotions within the individual or between individuals. Interpersonal conflicts as well as antagonism (being in opposition) between groups are examples of affective conflict. According to Brennen (2014), affective conflict is drawn from emotions.

1.4.2. Cognitive Conflict

It occurs when thoughts and ideas within an individual or between individuals or groups are incompatible. Cognitive conflicts can be defined as differences between task-related issues, which in the team context are expressed as disagreements Meijer (2007).

1.4.3 Procedural conflict

Procedural conflict exists when group members disagree about the procedure to be followed. "Procedural conflict" exists when group members disagree about the procedures to be followed in accomplishing the group goal. New procedures may be formulated and a new agenda suggested. Even the group goal may be modified. Procedural conflict, like task conflict, may be productive (Barker et al. 1987).

1.4.4. Relationship conflict

Relationship conflict has to do with problems between people. This type of conflict is usually detrimental to a group's performance, and although it may be inevitable in group settings, it needs to be managed accomplishing the task or goal. Relationship conflict, or emotional conflict, is a perception of interpersonal incompatibility and typically includes tension, annoyance, and animosity among group member Simons and Peterson (2000).

1.4.5 Role conflict

According to Strasburger (1997), this arises over different interpretations of what is; that is discrepancies in the various roles we play. Conflict over basic values is another type of conflict. These conflicts are relatively rare. Most of the day–to–day disagreements are over image perception, or content. Usually not resolvable, but can be handled interpersonally, for instance differences of ideology and religious beliefs, it mainly occurs over fundamental beliefs for example, corporal punishment is necessary in our schools and there is life after death.

1.5 Functional versus Dysfunctional Conflicts in schools

Gibson (2006) defines functional conflict as a confrontation between a group that enhances and benefits the organization's performance. For example, two departments in a school may be in conflict over the most efficient and adaptive method of delivering extra lessons to students. The two departments agree on the goal but not on the means to achieve it. Whatever the outcome, students will probably end up with better educational standards once the conflict is settled. Without this type of conflict in schools, there would be little commitment to change and most groups would probably become stagnant. Thus, functional conflict can be thought of as a type of 'creative tension'.

Gibson (2006) defines dysfunctional conflict as any confrontation or interaction between groups that harm the organization or hinder the achievement of organizational goals. School management must seek to eliminate dysfunctional conflicts. Beneficial conflicts can often turn into bad conflicts. In most cases, the point at which functional conflict becomes dysfunctional is impossible to identify precisely. Levels of stress and conflict that may help create a healthy and positive movement toward goals in one group may prove extremely disruptive and dysfunctional in another group (or a different time for the same group). Dysfunctional conflict can have a negative impact on the performance of individuals, groups, and organizations such as schools.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study will be significant in that the findings may be useful to education researchers, educational planners and other scholars of educational administration as it will hopefully increase their awareness of the values of conflict as well as conflict management methods which are constructive and benefit the school. The findings will help head teachers of primary and secondary schools and other education stakeholders to adopt measures to minimize conflicts. The results of the study will help policy makers and educational planners to make adequate adjustments that enhance performance in management and administration of primary and secondary schools.

1.7 Research Objectives

The study sought to achieve the following specific objectives;

i. To find out the major causes of conflicts in primary and secondary schools in Zaka District.

ii. To establish the type of conflicts common in primary and secondary schools.

iii. To identify conflict management methods which are effective in resolving conflicts.

iv. Determine techniques used for conflict resolutions in Zimbabwean schools.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored in the Group Conflict Process Theory developed by Robbins (2003) which indicates that most organizational conflicts are managed through approaches to conflict management such as negotiations, resolution and stimulation. Robbins (2003) further identifies cooperativeness and assertiveness as the two dimensions in conflict handling intentions. From these two dimensions, he further generates and identifies five conflict-handling intentions as competing, collaborating, accommodating, and compromising. The study is also anchored on the Marxist perspective in Conflict management. The Marxist perspective begins with stability and lack of conflict as the problem. It considers that the existing social and organisational arrangements ought to be eliminated Conflict is seen as one way of instituting revolutionary change. Marxists view the organisations as "theatres of war" on which a struggle is fought. Organisational conflict is thus part of the inevitable struggle between those who own and control the means of production and those who do not: "the history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Angels).

1.9 Definition of key terms

1.9.1 Conflict

Cronje and Smit (2002) define conflict as the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values and who the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals.Conflict involves opposing or incompatible interests between groups or individuals, recognition of these opposing interests, and the belief that by both sides that their adversary has acted, or will soon act to thwart their important interest (Thomas 1992).

1.9.2 Conflict Management

Conflict management involves acquiring skills related to conflict resolution, self-awareness about conflict modes, conflict communication skills, and establishing a structure for management of conflict in your environment.

1.9.3 Pacific dispute settlement

This relates to solving disputes through peaceful ways such as bargaining, negotiation, good offices, conciliation and reconciliation.

1.9.4 Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution means a process of resolving dispute or disagreement. It mainly aims at reconciling opposing arguments in a manner that promotes and protects the human rights of all parties concerned. The term conflict resolution is also known as dispute resolution or alternative dispute resolution. Other methods adopted for conflict resolution includes negotiation, mediation, and diplomacy. Sometimes arbitration, litigation, and formal complaint processes such as ombudsman processes are also referred as conflict resolution.

1.10 Research Design

This research adopts the qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of phenomena. The qualitative design is appropriate in this study for it grants the researcher opportunity to look at context and social meaning and how these affect educators. Qualitative research is grounded in use of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs to describe phenomena.

1.11 Sampling

The main type of sampling employed in this study is purposive sampling. The sample consists of 40 teachers, 60 student teachers and 10 school heads. Mack (2005) states that, information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling. Hoberg (2001) asserts that, the main goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best enable you to answer your research questions. Participants were sampled using Maximum Variation Sampling. Maximum variation sampling, also known as heterogeneous sampling, is a purposive sampling technique used to capture a wide range of perspectives.

1.12 Data Collection

Data were gathered through a combination of formal and informal in-depth interviews with information rich participants and their responses were recorded. Student teachers, teachers and school heads were interviewed on their perceptions about conflicts and conflict resolution in Zimbabwean schools.

1.13 Discussion of major findings

The major findings of this study point out to the fact that conflict is inevitable. Conflict is as old as humankind. Several conflict drivers lubricate the conflict process. The findings revealed conflict as evident between teacher to teacher, teacher and school head, school head and parents, pupil and pupil, pupils and teachers, schools heads and inspectors. Respondents noted to a greater extend, dysfunctional conflicts are inherent in Zimbabwean schools. Teachers expend a greater proportion of their time and energy resolving conflict hence affecting the quality of educational standards.

1.13.1 Inadequate Resources

Some school heads in Zaka district perceived conflicts in educational administration with absence of needed financial resources. Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) support that; shortage of finances makes it hard for the head teacher to forge ahead in educational programmes. Head teachers have been forced to make ends meet in their schools where there is lack of finance and material resources. *"There is no fairness and equity in resource distribution in schools."* The situation is made worse by low student enrolment in some schools. Lack of finance and resources in school sometimes is blamed on the head teacher. Once in a while, parents blame the head teacher for not trying to provide the required learning facilities. Respondents noted that *"there is a serious scramble for resources which fuels conflicts". "Conflicts often arise among staff members especially on areas where critical resources should be committed* Student teachers lamented that they are often left out in resource distribution such as charts and incentives which are enjoyed by senior teachers and administrators. Teachers noted that school heads often have the greater chunk of the cake as they are the once with the final say in the distribution process.

1.13.2 Poor Academic Performance

In school situations, sometimes parents differ greatly from the teachers over academic performance of their children. Ghaffati (2014) states that, parents place a lot of pressure on the teachers claiming that they contribute to poor academic performance of the students. Such parents at times agitate for the removal of the head teacher and transfer of teachers to other schools. *"Conflicts emanating from the community are more dangerous and often difficult to handle".* The students sometimes support the parents in the move and become indiscipline to the extent of physically demanding for the removal of the teachers. This is supported by Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) that poorly performing schools many at times are characterized by a lot of

conflicts by the stakeholders. Poor performing teachers are always at loggerheads with school administration and the parents.

1.13.3 Favouritism by the School Administration

Head teachers sometimes find themselves in problems with the perceptions of the stakeholders that sometimes the head teacher favours the other stakeholders and other students. A case of such favouritism was reported by respondents where a head teacher was accused by the parents that he favours some School development Committee Members (S.D.C) to an extent of allowing their children to remain in school without paying fees. In some cases, some SDC members are allowed to express authority to supply goods to schools at inflated prices. This special treatment results in discontentment among the stakeholders.

Sergiovanni (1980) emphasizes that conflicts are natural and expected in a dynamic school. Conflicts are not abnormal, nor are they necessarily a symptom of a breakdown in the organization. *"Conflicts are considered a natural outgrowth process and indeed seen as a sign of organizational health rather than pathology"*. In the present times, conflict resolution make up the major part of the administrative job. *"There is turmoil surrounding the education sector today in Zimbabwe; as such the role of conflict mediator is an essential part for school administration."*

Teachers and school heads assert that conflicts arise when educators are barred from realizing their expectations, desires and ideals that may not be in line with other people's values within the school. Some values, desires and ideas may also be in conflict with those of the organization. This study revealed that common conflicts in place of work are those between subordinates and the administration. Teachers on the same level can also have conflicts especially if they are competing over the attention of those in the administration. *"Many conflicts in a school are a product of human interaction. It is therefore important to put in place peace making process"*.

According to Robbins (2003) conflict in an organization has got two possible outcomes. This outcome may be functional in that the conflicts results in an improvement in the group's performance or dysfunctional in that it hinders group performance. According to him, if a conflict is dysfunctional, then the parties need to de-escalate it and if a conflict is too low then the parties need to increase it and make it more functional. These are done using conflict management techniques, which use resolution and stimulation techniques to achieve the desired level of conflict.

1.13.4 Unimpressive Conditions of Service

Some schools associate conflicts in their schools with poor working conditions and lack of clear work and remuneration policy by the government. Teachers in Zimbabwe are noted as the worst paid compared to their companions in the SADC region. Some schools face a lot of difficulties in providing the necessary facilities and even teaching materials. Some schools in Zaka do not have basic facilities including staffroom and teaching materials while some head teachers lack even offices to transact official duties. Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) indicate that teachers work in highly de-motivating conditions due to poor pay by the government coupled with lack of clear increments in salaries. Just recently, the Minister of Primary and Secondary education banned the paying of incentives to teachers as well as conducting of holiday lessons. *"These school heads are adamant to pay us our incentives"* refuted one disgruntled teacher. *"It appears the government is in no hurry to amend our conditions of service and this has resulted in a cat and mouse game between government and civil servants."*

1.13.5 Communication procedures

Communication was cited as one of the contributing factors fuelling conflict in Zimbabwean schools. Poor communication can lead to conflict. Mullins (2010) asserts that, misunderstanding of communication, not enough information and too much information can all lead to conflict. The teachers and administrators who were interviewed stressed the significance of communication for any organization to function successfully. If information is not properly relayed across the structures this may cause serious conflicts within the school. Miscommunication and non-communication can contribute to inner-office conflict. When colleagues work with different sets of information and have conflicting personalities and work approaches, it can create tension and lead to misunderstanding and anger. Improving communication techniques and ensuring that colleagues follow shared communication protocols can help alleviate the problem. Poor communication leads to misunderstanding and strife among employees. For instance, misunderstandings can occur if the School head asks one teacher to relay important instructions to the other teachers, but the teacher fails to do so appropriately. Johdi (2012) supports that, conveying wrong information can lead to projects being incorrectly done and to teachers blaming each other for the end result.

1.13.6 Hidden expectations

Sometimes amongst employees, there are hidden expectations which often are not expressed. *"The respondents noted that individuals have issues which are not disclosed because they feel someone is looking down upon them or prejudicing them"*. Every conflict has an element of unarticulated assumptions. Each person has a very closely held belief about "the way things *should* work" or "the way things are" - according to them. Unfortunately, very few people articulate what those assumptions are. When those assumptions prove incorrect, frustration and anger seep in.Kipyego (2009) confirms that, like unarticulated assumptions, unmet expectations are at the root of every conflict. While unarticulated assumptions focus on the way things are done, an unmet expectation is the relied upon outcome. *"When the expected outcome does not happen, people become upset and frustrated then look for someone to blame."*

1.13.7 Unresolved issues from the past

Expectations are transmitted both directly by what we hear and indirectly by what we observe. A hidden issue cannot get triggered in the first place unless an expectation is violated. Jones (2001) states that, studies show that it is more likely that relationships will develop problems when expectations are unreasonable**.** Conflicts caused by unexpressed expectations are very common and unmet expectations can lead to great disappointment and frustration in your relationship. One great clue to expectations is disappointment**.** It is a good habit to stop a minute when you are disappointed and ask yourself what you expected. *"Doing this can help you to become aware of the expectations that may be unconsciously affecting your relationship"*. Disagreements are normal. When they are left unresolved, however, the associated feelings and emotions will remain in force, at least at some level.

When another situation brings this disagreement back to the forefront, these suppressed emotions can erupt with force, usually far in excess of those associated with the original disagreement. Therefore, it is critically important to resolve disagreements as soon as possible and not let them fester.

1.13.8 Emotions

Emotions are attached to history in the subconscious for example the way one grew up. The environment shapes emotions at different stages. The school as a workplace consists of individuals who all have their own perspective of the world. *"Some teachers have strong beliefs, which they are not willing to compromise."* These beliefs can conflict with co-workers, creating

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conflict. For example, if one teacher strongly opposes workplace diversity, he may have trouble accepting other workers different from him. To avoid conflict with these workers, he must try to accept or initiate more tolerance of those with differing values. Emotions play a role in how parties make sense of their relationships, degree of power, and social status. People constantly evaluate situations and events to feel out if they are personally relevant. These understandings and appraisals are infused with various emotions and feelings. Thus, emotion not only serves a side effect of conflict, but also frames the way in which parties understand and define their dispute. When emotions are hidden and disguised, "the dispute becomes a labyrinth, with layers and layers of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours so concealed that the conflict seems inevitable and insoluble." Scheff (2006). People who feel "*unfairly attacked, misunderstood, wronged, or righteously indignant*" are typically overcome with emotion and respond with hostility and aggression. The intensity of an emotion often signifies the importance and salience of an issue and reveals the underlying values of disputants. Thus, the more personally relevant a situation seems, and the more negative feelings parties experience, the greater the potential for destructive conflict.

1.13.9 Personalities

Genetic makeup, inheritance and relationship with parentage make up one's personality. This comes with attitude. Runyowa (2013), states that, humans have different personality traits which may cause conflicts. No two people are exactly alike. Behaviourists like Hobbes insist that, *"men are inherently evil, our ancestors were violent beings and we inherited violent traits from them"*. Therefore, personality clashes in the workplace are unavoidable. One educator may have a reserved personality while another may be more outgoing and forward. Problems arise when the two do not understand or respect each others' inner nature.

One respondent reiterated that, *"For instance, the more extroverted employee may feel slighted if the more introverted worker does not talk to him much"*. He may perceive it as a slight, rather than it simply being the employee's personality. Furthermore, his approach to handling projects may be analytical while hers is intuitive. When the two do not understand and respect each others' approach, conflict occurs.

1.13.10 Issues

Mullins (2010) contends that, challenges and points of differences can cause conflicts at the workplaces. If the employee has problems outside of the workplace, such as marital or parental

issues, she may take them to work with her. Consequently, if she is short and withdrawn from her co-workers, and if they are ignorant about the cause of her behaviour, they will assume that she has an issue with them. Therefore, if she is not willing to divulge her problems to her co-workers, she should leave them at home.

1.14 Recommendations: Towards pacific settlement of disputes in Zimbabwean schools

- Of course, although all efforts should be made to resolve workplace conflict informally at an early stage, there will be many instances where formal disciplinary action should be taken. It is recommended to use official processes in such instances. School administrators should not shy away from using the disciplinary process where an individual's misconduct or underperformance demands it. There statutory regulatory framework such as *Statutory Instrument 1 of 2000* which govern the conduct of teachers and other civil servants should be made use of when the need arises.

- School heads should ensure that all teachers understand the formal disciplinary and grievance procedures that are in place. School administrators should also emphasise that where there are disagreements, efforts should be made to resolve matters informally (wherever possible) and employees should be encouraged to discuss any problems they are having with their job, colleagues or outside work. School heads should therefore, Communicate procedures and policies available to each employee**.**

- Administrators are encouraged to use all available procedures to investigate incidents. Where serious incidents occur such as alleged harassment, bullying or out-of-character outbursts of verbal abuse or physical intimidation, they must be dealt with and taken seriously. Any form of gross misconduct must be properly investigated and dealt with using the formal disciplinary and grievance procedure.

- In some cases, particularly where a junior teacher is involved or is the cause of the conflict ,it may be appropriate to involve a senior teacher in the formal disciplinary or grievance procedure to ensure that the process is seen to be objective. Teachers should also have access to the deputy head or the head who can give them advice about managing difficult situations at work before they escalate to conflicts.

- All administrative educators should have informal mediation skills to allow them to step in and attempt to resolve disputes before they escalate. Senior teachers can help individuals in dispute identify what is at the root of their disagreement, what they need to happen to resolve matters or move forward and any changes or compromises they are prepared to make in their behaviour or attitudes

- School administrators and teachers are encouraged to create a shared goal or super-ordinate goal that cannot be attained without the cooperation of each of the conflicting persons. Such goals would demand the input and cooperation of all stakeholders in the process.

- It is recommended teachers should adopt behavioural change techniques such as human relation training to alter attitudes and behaviours that influence conflict. Holding staff development workshops on human relations is vital and kingpin to successful human relations at the workplace.

- Where possible, administrators should change the formal organization structure and the interaction patterns of the conflicting parties through job redesign, transfers, creation of coordinating position and the like.   Where possible conflict causers should be reported and transferred to distant schools.

- Authoritative command can be employed when the school management uses its formal authority to resolve the conflict then communicates its desires to the parties involved.

- Avoidance can be utilised and this involves withdrawal from, or suppression of the conflict.

- Compromise works well when each party to the conflict gives up something of value. This creates a win-win platform for the disputants who are ready to give up something as a mechanism to move forward or restoration of industrial peace.

- Conflict is caused by the scarcity of resources. For example money, promotion opportunities and office space then expansion of the resource can create a win-win solution. If resources would be adequate, then conflicts would be fewer.

- Problem solving involves face-to-face meeting of the conflicting parties for the purpose of identifying the problem and resolving it through open discussion.

- Smoothing can also be used and entails playing down differences while emphasizing common interests between the conflicting parties. Robbins (2003) also identified four conflict stimulation techniques as: Communication involving use of ambiguous or threatening messages to increase conflict levels.

- Bringing in outsiders involves adding employees to group whose background values, attributes or managerial styles differ from those of present members. Bringing an outsider may entail using a mediator, conciliator, arbitrator, good offices or ombudsman. Involvement of a third neutral party may reduce conflicts escalating to unprecedented levels.

- It is also recommended to restructure the organization. This is realigning workgroups, altering rules and regulations, increasing interdependence and making similar structural changes to disrupt the status quo. Appointing a devil advocate which involves designating a critic to purposely argue against the majority positions held by the group.

1.15 Conclusion

From this research it is evident that conflicts are a part of life and are inevitable. Schools should be devoted to building a culture of peace and trust, promote functional conflicts and find pacific means to settle dysfunctional conflicts .Dysfunctional conflicts if not properly managed have the potential to disrupt provision of quality education in Zimbabwe. If conflict levels are too high or too low, this can result in stagnation and kills the zeal of creativity and achievement of high quality results.

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