



Contemporary Approaches to Conflict Management and Resolution in Nigerian Primary Schools: The Strategic Role of the Head Teacher

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Abstract

A school is a complex organization with a diverse population; each group having conflicting needs that demand attention. If conflicts are not properly managed and resolved, they can lead to the loss of property, lives, and valuable academic hours. The Head teacher serves as the primary conflict manager, and their knowledge of effective conflict management strategies is essential for maintaining a conducive learning environment and achieving educational objectives at the primary level. This paper examines the current state of conflict management, its consequences, and strategies that Head teachers can adopt for effective conflict resolution to enhance educational outcomes in primary schools.

Keywords: *conflict management, conflict resolution, Head teacher, education, primary school*

Introduction

Organizations, by nature, experience internal conflicts due to their complexity, and primary schools are no exception. The primary school environment is diverse, consisting of individuals from different family backgrounds, interests, attitudes, goals, age groups, and natural abilities. Additionally, every individual and group within a school desires recognition, identity, dignity, security, equity, and participation in school affairs. When these needs are not met, frustration arises, leading to conflicts that can disrupt the school system.

Conflict is an inherent part of human relationships and, consequently, a natural occurrence in schools. As various groups within a school interact, each with different behaviors, goals, interests, values, and access to limited resources, there is a need for synergy to achieve the primary school's objectives. The absence of such synergy fosters hostility, resentment, and misunderstandings among stakeholders. Therefore, for a school to function effectively, conflicts must be managed and resolved efficiently.

According to Amie-Ogan and Eziri (2021), conflict management encompasses strategies such as compromising, avoidance, and collaboration to effectively handle various forms of conflict, including interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. These strategies aim to mitigate the negative impacts of conflict and enhance the positive outcomes within the school's organizational structure. In the school setting, administrators dedicate a significant portion of their time to resolving conflicts. The Head teacher, in particular, plays a crucial role as the primary conflict manager in a primary school. He/she is to bring about changes and positive results in the conflict episode. Thus, his/her knowledge of the strategies for the management of conflicts is a necessity for a conducive work environment towards the achievement of educational objectives at the primary level of education.



This paper sets out to address basically, school-based conflicts and strategies for effective management of conflicts in Nigerian primary schools, with focus on the role of the head teacher. Primary school-based conflicts in organizations are likely to emanate from different sources. These sources may include insufficient information, variety of goals, inadequate resources as well as facilities, inadequate information, role conflict/collision and differences in goals, values and competition for limited resources and inaccessibility of superiors.

Sources of Conflict

i. Poor Communication: Ineffective communication between head teachers and staff can lead to misunderstandings and mistrust. When information is not clearly conveyed, it may result in confusion regarding roles, responsibilities, and expectations, thereby fostering conflict (Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Ofojebe, 2022; Ede & Anyaegbunam, 2023).

ii. Role Ambiguity and Lack of Clarity: Unclear definitions of roles and responsibilities can cause overlaps or gaps in duties, leading to disputes among staff. When teachers and head teachers are uncertain about their specific functions within the school, it can result in conflicts over authority and accountability (Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Ofojebe, 2022).

iii. Leadership Styles: The leadership approach adopted by head teachers significantly influences the school climate. Authoritarian or indifferent leadership styles may lead to dissatisfaction among teachers, as they may feel undervalued or excluded from decision-making processes (Okoye, 2021).

iv. Resource Allocation: Conflicts often emerge from the competition for limited resources, such as teaching materials, classroom space, and funding. When resources are perceived to be distributed unfairly, it can lead to resentment and disputes among staff members (Ajayi, 2022).

v. Pupil Indiscipline: Managing pupil behavior is a significant challenge that can lead to conflicts between head teachers and teachers. Disagreements may arise over disciplinary measures, with differing opinions on how to handle indiscipline, leading to strained relationships among staff (Yusuf & Ajibade, 2023).

vi. Cultural and Ethnic Differences: Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape means that schools often comprise individuals from various ethnic backgrounds. Misunderstandings or biases related to cultural differences can result in conflicts among staff and between staff and the community (Ajayi, 2022).

vii. Decision-Making Processes: Exclusion of teachers from decision-making can lead to feelings of marginalization and discontent. When head teachers make unilateral decisions without consulting their staff, it can create a sense of disenfranchisement, leading to conflicts within the school (Mekonnen, 2022).

viii. Unrealistic Expectations and Workload: Setting unattainable goals or overburdening teachers with excessive workloads can cause stress and burnout, leading to conflicts. Teachers may feel overwhelmed and unsupported, which can strain relationships with head teachers and affect overall school performance (Adeyemi & Olatunji, 2024).



Types of Conflicts

a) Student-teacher disagreements: Educators influence the learning atmosphere within the classroom. Exhibiting favoritism, mockery, exclusion, or deliberately unkind behavior toward learners may result in disputes. Additionally, students might develop aversions toward a teacher, possibly due to the nature of assignments they are given, continuous classroom tasks, or the approach taken when posing questions, they struggle to answer. Such aversion could escalate into conflicts that are challenging to settle.

b) Intimidation: Harassment is another major cause of discord in a school setting. Some learners habitually intimidate their peers, engaging in actions that range from teasing to physical aggression. When such behavior becomes prevalent, the victims feel disheartened and emotionally drained. As a result, this struggle begins to influence different facets of their lives. The repercussions manifest in their academic performance, personal growth, confidence, and social interactions. The affected student often feels frightened and reluctant to report the situation to educators or guardians. This ongoing tension among pupils, if left unaddressed, can lead to anxiety about attending school, oppression, and diminished self-esteem.

c) Teaching approach: This pertains to how a learner processes knowledge and responds to the educator's instructional method. A reserved child may struggle with a teaching style that demands engagement in highly interactive or social activities. When there is a misalignment between a student's learning preference and the instructor's methodology, conflicts may arise. The student may feel incapable of grasping the subject, leading them to withdraw from participation in class activities. This disengagement can result in poor academic performance, lack of focus, or apparent disinterest, ultimately making the child lose enthusiasm for the subject. Conversely, educators may experience frustration if their instructional techniques fail to facilitate academic progress in the learner. This also breeds conflict, particularly when the teacher does not recognize the student's difficulty or take steps to address it.

d) Uprisings against leadership: Many school administrators receive strong support from a small group of loyal followers, face ongoing resistance from another small faction, and are met with either acceptance or indifference from the majority. These varying levels of opposition, neutrality, and approval can trigger minor or major disputes within the school system.

e) Interpersonal connections: Disagreements may arise due to personal relationships or management styles. Effective academic interactions can often be improved by clearly outlining expectations, identifying specific needs, and documenting guidelines for all involved parties to adhere to. In many cases, individuals remain unaware of their responsibilities, making it difficult for them to adjust their behavior. Without clarity on what is expected, meaningful change becomes unlikely.

f) Belief systems: Disputes may also stem from differences in principles and ideologies when opposing parties hold conflicting value systems. A person's values shape their moral judgment and provide an ethical framework for navigating life successfully. Harmonious coexistence becomes challenging when individuals within an organization uphold diverse sets of values. Consequently, these differences may serve as a source of discord.

g) Financial constraints: Conflicts frequently emerge due to a lack of or limited availability of resources, particularly monetary funds. Often, various departments or groups compete for a restricted budget.

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Failure to fairly allocate available resources to satisfy the demands of all concerned parties can result in disputes among those seeking a share.

h) Psychological factors: Many individuals seek fulfillment of emotional needs such as the desire for influence, recognition, affection, and authority. When these needs remain unfulfilled in their interactions with others in the school environment, tensions may arise. Conflicts occur because people perceive situations differently despite being part of the same educational community (Sagimo, 2002). The problem may not necessarily be the conflict itself, but rather the distress and discomfort it generates. Whenever individuals or groups clash over shared interests, the consequences can be extensive. If not effectively handled, these tensions may result in decreased efficiency, diminished self-esteem, persistent disputes, and inappropriate conduct. Delayed resolution of conflicts in educational institutions could lead to disruptions in academic schedules, ultimately causing both economic and psychological strain (Biutha, Zachariah, Beth & Nyabisi, 2013). Additionally, unresolved conflicts can break down communication, breed suspicion and distrust, increase the urge for retaliation, lead to loss of valuable assets, create indecisiveness, fuel resentment, promote disengagement, and hinder overall development (Afful-Broni, 2012).

Nevertheless, although conflicts are often perceived as harmful, if properly handled, they can also be beneficial and serve as an essential aspect of constructive interpersonal interactions, fostering problem-solving abilities. Disputes can help uncover and address challenges, motivate individuals to focus on the most relevant tasks, and assist people in recognizing conflicts while gaining valuable insights from their differences. Therefore, as stated by Afful-Broni (2007), conflict is essential for genuine participation, empowerment, and democratic engagement.

Even though conflict is a natural occurrence in a school environment, it is frequently regarded as a negative experience due to the particularly challenging situations that may arise for those involved. This perception influences how individuals react to conflict scenarios. Webne-Behrman (1998) identified various ways individuals respond to conflicts, which include:

- **Emotional responses**, referring to the feelings that arise during conflicts, such as frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, and perceived threats.
- **Cognitive reactions**, which involve the thoughts and ideas formed during conflicts, often manifesting as internal reflections on a given situation.
- **Physical effects**, which pertain to the body's response to conflict, including heightened tension, increased physical strain, excessive sweating, narrowed focus, rapid breathing, repulsion, and accelerated heartbeat.
- **Emotional and academic stress**, particularly affecting children.

When conflicts are logically and efficiently resolved within the school system, the environment becomes more conducive to productive teaching and learning. Teachers can dedicate sufficient time to instructing students, while students, in turn, can concentrate more on their academic activities. Consequently, developing effective problem-solving techniques, especially in primary schools, is crucial for adopting positive approaches to conflict management and resolution.

For successful conflict management and resolution in primary schools, the Head teacher must pinpoint the root causes of disputes, understand different conflict-handling strategies, and evaluate their impact. As the administrator of a primary school, the Head teacher plays a vital role in mitigating the adverse

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effects that conflicts typically bring. To accomplish this, they must be well-versed in the essential techniques required for managing and resolving conflicts effectively.

Conflict Resolution Styles and Emerging Trends in Nigerian Primary Schools

Conflict resolution occurs when those involved, or those in charge, listen attentively and create opportunities to address the concerns of all parties, ensuring that each side feels appeased. However, some disputes are so intricate that they are not easily managed or entirely eliminated. Therefore, conflict management is essential to prevent disputes from escalating into more severe issues. The approach taken to handle a conflict is crucial, as it can lead to either positive or negative consequences that may influence the well-being of individuals within the school community and beyond. Each conflict resolution style has its own outcomes. The following are five major approaches to resolving conflicts, as outlined by Kampbell, Corbally, and Nystrand (1983), as well as Johnson (2003). The possible effects of these methods, particularly in the context of managing educational conflicts in Nigeria, are also examined.

1. **Competing/Dominating:** This approach to conflict resolution involves prioritizing one's own interests over those of others. It follows a **"win-lose"** strategy, where one party demonstrates a strong concern for themselves while showing little to no consideration for others. This method is often forceful in communication, disregards the long-term impact on relationships, and frequently relies on coercion. Individuals who adopt this style fear losing out in the dispute and, as a result, seek to control all discussions surrounding the issue.

This strategy may not be acceptable to all parties involved in the conflict. Despite its perceived drawbacks, this approach is commonly observed in many Nigerian primary schools. The Commissioner for Education and officials from the Ministry of Education issue directives and mandates, often accompanied by threats, to head teachers without considering their viewpoints. In turn, head teachers pass down these instructions to teachers and students, also using intimidation, without regard for their emotions or reactions, irrespective of the circumstances. Whether or not the directive aligns with the interests of the school community is of no consequence. Subordinates are simply expected to comply without question.

As a result, teachers and other school staff frequently find themselves at a disadvantage. This pattern of conflict resolution may be a contributing factor to the worsening conditions in Nigerian primary schools, where teachers consistently clash with head teachers; head teachers voice their frustrations about Ministry of Education officials, and students express dissatisfaction with their teachers. The consequences of this unresolved tension are often damaging, sometimes escalating into industrial disputes.

This method of handling conflicts relies on authority and aggressive behavior to fulfill personal grievances. Such actions disregard the rights and emotions of others, often displaying antagonism and skepticism. It involves imposing one's perspectives, ideas, and choices on others without their consent.

1. **Yielding/Complying/Conciliating:** The yielding, complying, or conciliating approach is a method in which individuals sacrifice their own interests to accommodate those of others. The hallmark of this conflict resolution technique is **diplomacy**. It follows a **"lose-win"** model of conflict resolution, where one party prioritizes the concerns of others over their own. Individuals who



adopt this method are often willing to pacify the opposing party, particularly when they feel relatively powerless in the situation or when preserving a good relationship is deemed more valuable than asserting their stance on a particular issue. The downside of this approach is that the accommodating party becomes easily exploited by those instigating conflicts.

Teachers in schools, as well as their employers, frequently resolve disputes using this approach. Staff members comply with the decisions of the school authorities or their employers to avoid jeopardizing potential career advancements. This conflict resolution method is particularly relevant in Nigerian primary schools. In disputes with school administrations, subordinates often resort to compliance to secure promotions and keep their jobs. They surrender their entitlements without resistance.

However, when one side consistently submits to the other, the balance in their relationship may become so skewed that it triggers major changes. For example, teachers who continually yield to administrative demands on issues they deem significant may eventually decide to resign or take steps toward forming a union. This leads to frequent **industrial strikes** and the **exodus** of professionals from the school system. Despite the persistent need for more teachers, the dissatisfaction among existing educators results in mass resignations as they seek alternative careers in more rewarding fields. Therefore, maintaining a balance in conciliatory strategies is crucial for **effective conflict management** in schools.

- i. **Evading:** Evading is a common reaction to the negative perception of disputes. In this approach, the parties involved simply disregard or refuse to engage with the issue. As a result, when concerns and opinions go unexpressed, the conflict tends to escalate until it becomes impossible to ignore. This situation often leads to uncertainty, with individuals struggling to understand what went wrong in a relationship.

On the other hand, the tendency to withdraw may stem from a genuine belief that the issue is insignificant, a dislike for the methods proposed for conflict resolution, or a feeling of helplessness. Such a mindset hinders the exploration of alternative solutions in the school environment and limits the growth of collaborative relationships.

This form of conflict response is frequently observed in matters concerning the employment conditions of Nigerian primary school teachers. Even though they are dissatisfied with their working conditions, many educators choose to overlook the issue despite their frustration. The government, in turn, acts as though addressing the problem is unnecessary. With persistent avoidance, frustrations continue to build, ultimately leading to teachers resigning in search of jobs with better employment terms. The final outcome is an ongoing shortage of teachers within the school system.

4. Compromising

This is a method of handling disagreements where individuals gain and concede through a sequence of mutual adjustments. This technique is grounded in the notion that disputes can be resolved by allocating each party a portion of what they seek. It follows a "both parties win and lose to some extent" principle.

Compromise is evident at all levels of school structures, from the playground to the boardroom. This approach seeks an outcome that, at the very least, partially meets the needs of everyone involved. It

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proves beneficial when the repercussions of a dispute outweigh the consequences of making concessions, when equally strong opponents reach an impasse, and when time constraints demand a swift resolution.

Failure to compromise in such circumstances often leads to deadlocks in disagreements. A notable example of the difficulties in applying this approach to conflict resolution is the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike of 2013 in Nigeria. ASUU refused to budge, while the Federal Government stood firm on its position. As a result, university education in Nigeria remained at a standstill for over one hundred days, further worsening the system. It was only when a middle ground was reached that the industrial action ended, allowing academic activities to resume on campuses.

Conclusion

Conflicts are inevitable in primary schools due to the variety of viewpoints, needs, priorities, abilities, age differences, and aspirations among members of the school community. However, efficient and thoughtful management of these conflicts can help create a harmonious and orderly environment that is conducive to effective teaching and learning.

Recommendations for Effective Conflict Resolution

The following are proposed strategies for successfully resolving disputes in primary schools:

1. **Staff Meetings:** The head teacher can leverage staff meetings as an avenue for resolving issues, including potential disagreements. If these gatherings are perceived as unwelcoming, ineffective, or unsafe, they will be replaced by gossip, side conversations, and backbiting, which may disrupt school operations.
2. **Dialogue:** Engaging staff in open discussions when a dispute is anticipated or needs resolution provides an opportunity for collaboration, ensuring that all stakeholders feel valued and included.
3. **Guidance and Counseling:** Every school should have a functional guidance and counseling unit responsible for individual and group interactions to ensure effective conflict resolution.
4. **In-House Workshops and Seminars:** Schools could organize training sessions and seminars on recognizing conflicts and employing resolution techniques to promote a healthy school atmosphere. This heightened awareness would encourage all members of the school community to either prevent disputes or actively participate in resolving them.
5. **Collaborative Leadership:** School administrators should refine their teamwork skills, empowering teachers, parents, and students to identify and address conflicts at their early stages.
6. **Government Intervention:** The government should proactively address concerns that, if ignored, could turn schools into unstable environments, leaving teachers frustrated and insecure, while students remain agitated and unsettled.

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