**STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY EDUCATION MANAGERS IN MANAGING AND**

**RESOLVING CONFLICTS IN BULAWAYO METROPOLITAN PROVINCE**

**SCHOOLS, ZIMBABWE**

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**Abstract**

Conflict is an integral part of school management and its existence must not be shunned as it stimulates creative and innovative ways of thinking which enhance organisational growth and performance. The purpose of this study reported on here was to investigate how education managers executed the Thomas and Kilmann’s Model in managing and resolving conflicts in schools to avert anarchy and chaos with the ultimate intention of enhancing productivity. A constructivist, inductive grounded theory utilising a qualitative approach was employed. Qualitative data was generated using a semi-structured interview protocol from 4 information-rich education managers who were purposively selected. The inclusion criteria for the participants were age, experience, professional qualifications and the sample was determined by theoretical saturation. Data generated was thematically analysed. The study revealed that the conflict management and resolution Model utilised in schools by education managers was contingent to their environment and perception. Besides, it also revealed that conflict was innovative and stimulated thought processes. Resultantly, schools must recruit education managers who are transformative, democratic and equipped with the appropriate strategies for managing and resolving conflict if teachers’ morale is to be boosted and productivity enhanced.

**Key words**: Accommodating; avoidance; collaboration; competition; compromise; inter-group; intra-personal; Karl Marx.

**Introduction**

In group dynamics, more than two people form an organisation and naturally when such people try to co-exist, conflict becomes a natural, essential and unavoidable human phenomenon due to incompatible personal/group interests (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). Conflict as a concept itself is equivalent to the history of humanity (Richard, 2021). Its inevitability effectuates innovation in organisations (Isabu, 2017). However, when mishandled, conflict might be destructive while the constructively managed one could lead to organisational growth resulting in strengthening the bond between two people, promotion of new beliefs, principles and rules (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). Therefore, when conflict occurs, it must not be prevented or ignored (Richard, 2021). Instead it demands managing and resolving for the benefit of the organisation, hence, the need to have superordinates that are knowledgeable about how conflict occurs so as to minimise any negative effects engendered in the educative enterprise (Shanka & Thuo, 2017). Noteworthy, conflict must not be absolutely eliminated as it is an integral part of a school management system (Ntho-Ntho & Nieuwenhuis, 2010). In that regard, this study sought to investigate the strategies which education managers employed in managing and resolving conflicts in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province Schools.

Background

Traditionally, conflict was viewed negatively and considered symptomatic of bad school management which was supposed to be suppressed (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). However, contemporary scholars view it as an inevitable evil which ensures high performance in schools (Richard, 2021). Furthermore, Tjosvold (1991, in Dogan, 2016:200) views it as “an important part of thinking, watching, performing and managing an organisation”. Similarly, Cobanoglu, Kaya, and Angay (2015) view it as a healthy stimulant which galvanises people into action. Generally, teachers work in pursuance of self-interests and conflicts of interests arise when such engagements occur, more so that human beings are the face of an organisation (Iqbal, Khalil & Khan, 2017).

Karl Marx believes that human existence would be a non-event without conflict, since society is in a state of perpetual conflict due to competition for limited resources (Chappelow, 2019). This assertion is premised on the basic conflict theory which indicates that individuals/ groups within society work to maximise their own benefits (Chappelow). It is through conflict that creative ideas of trying to resolve it emerge (Iqbal et al., 2017). Without it, life would be monotonous.

Social conflicts which involve differences/disagreements between two or more individuals or family units (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022) are abundant in the Bible. The disguised Jacob stole Esau’s birth right, encouraged by his mother who had eavesdropped, the conversation between Isaac and Esau (Gen 27). When Esau arrived from hunting game, he prepared a delicious dish as requested. While on the verge of receiving a blessing from his father, he discovered that his younger brother had deceitfully stolen it. In anger he vowed to slain Jacob at the demise of his father. When Rebekah overheard this outburst, she intervened to avert bloodshed by suggesting that Jacob goes and resides with his uncle Laban for a while to cool off Esau’s anger. Her astute mediation resolved the conflict.

Such social experiences made Seval (2006, in Dogan, 2016:200) liken conflict to: “furiousness, fear, tension, anger, disappointment, distrust, hostility, damage, destruction and discussion.” Resultantly, conflict earned negative descriptors such as inhibition, inconsistence, incongruent, disagreement, opposition and resistance (Cobanoglu et al., 2015). However, solace is drawn from the manner in which the brothers’ conflict was resolved as it bred “an opportunity for personal development, intellectual revolt, excitement and encouragement” (Cobanoglu et al., 2015:20). Such experiences according to Karl Marx drive change and development in schools (Chappelow, 2019). Therefore, its presence in organisations in the 1920s led the USA and world over to train personnel meant to minimise related problems (Dogan). Such experiences imply that schools cannot be conflict-free zones as they are populated by individuals with different perceptions. Little wonder that, the fundamentals of conflict resolution is learning the skills of conflict resolution since when unresolved it leads to chaos and anarchy (Cobanoglu et al., 2015). Therefore, when conflict becomes a plague in the school, it needs nipping in the bud before it escalates.

Objective of the study

The study was meant to discover how education managers executed the various strategies of managing and resolving conflict in schools so as to avert chaos and anarchy with the ultimate intention of enhancing productivity.

Literature Review

*Concept of Conflict*

Robins and Judge (2013, in Cobanoglu et al., 2015:35) describe conflict as “a process that begins when one party perceives another party has or is about to negatively affect something the first party cares about.” Combatively, Iqbal et al. (2017:157) define it as “a situation of falling out, chaos, and turmoil or antagonism or when two parties or individuals are engaged in some protracted fight, struggle or quarrel with each other.” Similarly, Aja (2013:2009) views it as “an opposition or competition between two or more forces arising either from the pursuit of incompatible goals or a class of rival opinions.” These definitions imply that conflict arises when individuals/groups differ in opinions, ideas, perceptions, attitudes or cultures as they try to co-exist. This scenario is prominent in schools when teachers compete for the limited resources in pursuit of either personal/organisational goal. It is such tone contradictions which if not aligned to the institution’s common goals, might turn schools into perpetual battlefields of unsettled scores. Such wars if not heeded might compromise the attainment of organisational goals, hence, the need to manage or resolve them decisively for the learners’ benefit. In the process, debates and disagreements must be viewed as necessary ingredients for effective decision making (Mullius, 2010).

*The Difference between Conflict Management and Conflict Resolution*

The terms ‘management’ and ‘resolution’ need clarification to avert confusion within this discourse. Ramani and Zhimin (2010) describe conflict management as a long-term strategy which entails limiting its negative effects while maximising its positive aspects without the intention of eliminating it in its entirety, whereas, Doe and Chinda (2015:148) view conflict resolution as “a reduction, elimination, or termination of all forms of conflict.” Resolution strategies in their perception bring to the fore negotiations, bargaining, mediation and arbitration. Noteworthy, is Iqbal et al. (2017) who view it as an intellectual and deductive process which demands scrutiny to get an insight about it with the intention of bringing the disputants to a decisive stage through productive communication. Resultantly, a decision reached would be seen as reasonable by the conflicting parties through sacrifices from their objectives (Dogan, 2016).

In both instances, the third-party interventions strategies are meant to restore the friendly relations which existed before the conflict surfaced. Therefore, in order for education managers to manage or resolve conflict as perceived, it needs detection, investigation, determining alternative ways of managing it, applying the most appropriate alternative, following the result and getting feedback (Shanka & Thuo, 2017). In the process, education managers must be alive to the fact that plentiful or meagre conflicts may damage the organisation. Noteworthy, is Cobanoglu et al. (2015) who suggest that moderate conflict which is maintained at reasonable levels is beneficial for the existence of organisations.

*Causes of Conflicts*

Causes of conflicts are as numerous as the organisations are and conflicting scenarios are different too, hence, the need to examine conflicts when detected if appropriate strategies of managing and resolving them are to be adopted. Studies conducted by Msila (2012, in Shanka & Thuo, 2017) and Uchendu, Anijaobi-Idem and Odigwe (2013) in Nigeria classified potential causes of conflicts in three categories although some factors might overlap. Both studies revealed that conflicts may be caused by *institution* related factors such as unfair distribution of scarce resources and goal incompatibility and among *staff members*; personality factors and formal and informal group opposition. Finally, are *leadership* related ones such as favouritism and unfavourable leadership style.

Furthermore, Bano, Ashraf and Zia’s (2013) study unearthed sources of conflicts which resonated well with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs while that conducted by Salleh (2013) in Malaysia also revealed that insufficient resources such as finances, heavy workload and dissatisfaction with management were some of them. With the conflict source identified, education managers must not be concerned with winning political battles; instead, with what would give them a competitive edge over their rivals (Isabu, 2017). They must know that successful conflict resolution involves listening and providing opportunities to address the needs of all parties and adequately addressing their interests to find a win-win outcome of parties involved (Ramani & Zhimin, 2010). Most important is that every conflict is linked to the past.

*Types of Conflicts*

Bano et al. (2013) and Isabu (2017) identified four basic types of conflicts which might exist in schools, namely; intra-personal, inter-personal, intra-group and inter-group/organisational conflicts.

*Intra-personal Conflicts*

Durojaye (2010), claims that such conflicts may occur within an individual and may be caused by goal differences, interests and ethical questions.

*Inter-personal Conflicts*

George and Jones (2000, in Isabu, 2017) view such conflicts as those which arise between individual members of the organisation and usually occur due to goal incompatibility within the organisation. Polatov and Pavlovets (2022) further postulate that such conflicts arise due to differing work roles and workloads, individual differences in values, goals/needs and individuals competing for scarce resources to either gain promotion or accomplish tasks.

*Intra-group Conflicts*

Griffin and Moorhead (2007, in Isabu, 2017) state that such conflicts arise within a group, department or team. They can also occur between persons, members, or factions belonging to the same group (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). These could emanate from differences/disagreements among group members/sub-groups regarding the goals, functions or activities of the group (Kipruto & Kipkemboi, 2013).

*Inter-group/Organisational Conflicts*

These are conflicts which arise between the school and community or government bodies in the community. They can also occur between/among different groups of society (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). Such conflicts develop when there is an ‘us against them’ attitude between departments and groups perceive each other as enemies (Ramani & Zhimin, 2010). The existence of such hostilities decreases positive relationships. The identification and classification of the sources of conflict as described must lead to seeking strategies of managing or resolving it.

*Conflict Management and Resolution Model*

Research demonstrates that conflict is prevalent in workplaces and superordinates spend close to 2/3 hours a week in it (Dogan, 2016). In most cases, the outcomes are unsatisfactory and lead to fall outs, disharmony and distractions from the real purpose of work, resulting in lost production and human pain (Bano et al., 2013). Furthermore, it breeds stress and discomfort in the workplace due to fear of the unknown, hence, a depressing and frustrating condition between the parties involved (Adhiambo & Enose, 2011). However, when it occurs, schools must have clear cut policies and mechanisms which guide its management and resolution (Bano et al.). As aforementioned, superordinates must know that the fundamental of conflict resolution is learning the skills of conflict resolution if they are to keep their personal and professional relationship strong and growing (Isabu, 2017). That can be achieved by learning the 1970 conflict management and resolution model proposed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann [KTRK] (Dogan). The model though old, has been found to be user-friendly.

The KTRK Model is premised on the assumption that people in any conflictual situation choose to be either assertive or cooperative (Richard, 2021). Assertiveness is the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy his own concerns while cooperativeness is the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person’s concerns (Richard). Since subordinates respond differently to conflicts, the education manager must understand all the five suggested conflict management/resolution strategies below, as circumstances might demand different dosages of these or a synthetic approach (Dogan, 2016), if productivity in schools is to be enhanced.

*Avoidance*

Also known as withdrawal style and is both unassertive and uncooperative. The conflict is sidestepped or the individual withdraws from the conflict situation when discomfort of the confrontation exceeds the potential reward of resolving it (Isabu, 2017). Put in another way, when the situation at hand is threatening, the parties involved diplomatically ignore or postpone it until tempers cool down (Richard 2021). After that, both parties pretend as if the conflict never existed at all (University of Notre Dame [UND] 2019). The avoiders adopt a ‘wait and see’ attitude thinking that the conflict may die a natural death without their engagement (Dogan, 2016). Conflicts if unresolved might escalate to unprecedented levels.

*Competing*

Also known as defeating/forcing/dominating/obliging/win-lose situation style and is assertive but not cooperative. It calls for contestants to stand up for their rights, defending a position which they believe is correct, or simply trying to beat the other side (UND, 2019). It also uses institutional authority/power, reward/punishment, bribery or even physical force to achieve desired goals (Isabu, 2017). What the contestants are interested in is winning at all cost regardless of how the other party feels about it (Richard, 2021). However, users of such a strategy must know that employing it offers a short-term relief which may be detrimental to the organisation’s future health (UND, 2019).

*Compromising*

Also known as bargaining/negotiation/reconciling/agreement style and is moderately assertive and cooperative. Compromisers value fairness and in doing so, anticipate mutual give-and-take interactions and are prepared to make concessions until a reasonable and respectable agreement is reached which is acceptable to both parties (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). In that way, both sides get something not everything on the notion of half-a-sixpence is better than none. However, compromisers need to be aware of passive or aggressive tactics which might mislead the other party (UND, 2019).

*Accommodating*

It is also known as yielding/giving-in/smoothing/suppression style and is both assertive and cooperative. It occurs when goals are incompatible, but interactions are not considered important to overall goal attainment (Isabu, 2017). It further encourages selfless generosity or charity and giving-in to another’s point of view (Richard, 2021). This is what makes it derive satisfaction from meeting the needs of the others with the intent of having general concern for maintaining stable, positive social relationships. It is this aspect of preserving a friendly relation at the expense of appraising the issues critically and protesting personal rights which makes it dysfunctional (Isabu).

*Collaboration*

Likewise, goes by several monikers too: integration/cooperation/win-win situation/problem-solving style and is both assertive and cooperative. The style assumes that when two parties are at loggerheads, they must be brought to the table, listened to and their areas of disagreement/agreement must be discussed amicably with the ultimate intent of satisfying both (UND, 2019). Usually collaborators think creatively and try to satisfy their goals without making any concessions. Instead, they resolve their differences in such a way that both parties are left better off (Isabu, 2017). Collaborators view conflict as a creative opportunity towards organisational growth and invest time and resources in their attempt to find a win-win solution (Lu & Wang, 2017). For that reason, they are admired and respected (Isabu, 2017).

*Theoretical Framework*

According to Karl Marx, the competition for limited resources has put society in a state of perpetual conflict (Chappelow, 2019). The scarcity of resources does not imply impoverishment but is a global phenomenon and schools are not an exception too, regardless of their geographical location (Isabu, 2017). It becomes worse when one group/individual is favoured in the allocation of resources. The favoured group would be viewed as enemies by its counterparts and becomes hostile in turn which would lead to the decline of positive relationships in the organisation (Ramani & Zhimin, 2010). Coincidentally teachers too, in schools, compete for such favours leading to conflict sometimes. Furthermore, Marx asserts that social order is maintained by domination/power rather than consensus/conformity (Chappelow). This means that those teachers who have access to the limited resources become dominant/powerful, while those without feel inferior and subdued. The teachers, who have access to the scarce resources, are considered as wealthy and in turn try to hold on to the resources by any means possible, chiefly by suppressing the ‘have-not’ and powerless (Chappelow). Such a scenario, according to Oboegbuleni and Alfa (2013:91), breeds “a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals.” The teachers in question become connected to management and assume power over others for them to continue enjoying such privileges at the detriment of the organisation’s health (Chappelow).

The basic premise of conflict as propounded by Marx is that individuals/groups within society work to maximise their own benefits since society is divided along economic classes between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (Chappelow, 2019). This portrays a negative picture of what a human being is: selfish, self-centred and egocentric. In Marx’s perception, the school’s management system with its legitimate power and authority represents the bourgeoisie and the teachers the proletariat. Furthermore, the conditions of service differ between the two economic classes.

Management on behalf of the parent Ministry procure resources which they rationally distribute among subordinates. The scarcity phenomenon coupled with the human element, results in an unfair distribution of resources. Well-resourced individuals/groups feel elevated and those without outwitted. Then the economic classes Marx envisioned begin to surface (i.e., the elite vs inferior), and competition prevails. The latter scenario strengthens the economic lines between the haves and those without. The prevailing inequalities, are aggravated when haves become more creative and innovative than their counterparts (Isabu, 2017). On the basis of their performance, they become better candidates for promotion (Kipruto & Kipkemboi, 2013). These social inequalities emanating from the sharing of limited resources and the emergent classes are core to the concept of the conflict theory as they are drivers of change and development (Chappelow). Schools in such disequilibrium born out of the competition for the limited resources become tools for the struggle between the elite and inferior classes (Chappelow). Such a development demands the astuteness of a superordinate with sufficient training in conflict management and resolution strategies as averred by Thomas and Kilmann (Dogan, 2016) to reconcile the prevailing tone contradictions before calamity befalls (Olubunmi, 2014).

Finally, Marx asserts that the bourgeoisie possess the means of production and the state machinery to oppress the proletariat (Chappelow, 2019). Education managers as implementers of the aspirations and expectations of the ruling elite to which they are answerable to, have legitimate power and authority to use the numerous regulatory mechanisms crafted by the appointing authority to deal with dissenting voices caused by inequalities in the distribution of resources (Tshabalala & Maphosa, 2013). They further use physical threats/force to subdue and suppress their subordinates (Isabu, 2017). Marx perceives such social structures in schools, laws, and traditions as meant to support the superordinate’s dominance while preventing subordinates to join their ranks (Chappelow). The imagined worsening conditions of teachers would lead to a collective consciousness which would bring inequality to light and potentially resulting in a revolt (Chappelow). Therefore, such animosities emanating from parties that would be working in opposition to each other would need to be dealt with decisively (Denisi & Griffin, 2005).

**Methodology**

The epistemological perspective which informed this qualitative study was constructivism (Khan, 2014) as it sought to answer the following research question: “*How do education managers manage and resolve conflict in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province Schools?”* The approach adopted was meant to understand the meanings education managers construct in the utilisation of conflict management and resolution strategies in schools as they try to make sense of their experiences in their natural settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).It is from this perspective that the researcher was convinced that participants would develop subjective meanings of their experiences as they sought to comprehend the world in which they lived and worked (Creswell, 2018).

Research Methods

Since the study intended to build concepts and theory based on the data collected, a constructivist, inductive grounded theory research strategy was deemed appropriate in an attempt to understand the phenomenon under investigation from the participant’s perspective (Khan, 2014).

Research Participants and Sampling

Towards that direction, professionally qualified and experienced education managers aged above 40 were purposively and theoretically selected with the view of making the data credible, dependable, transferable, conformable and authentic (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

**Table 1** Biographic data for the participants

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | | | |
| **Description** | **EMA** | **EMB** | **EMC** | **EMD** |
| **School** | P1 | P2 | S1 | S2 |
| **Gender** | Female | Female | Male | Male |
| **Age in years** | 54 | 59 | 55 | 49 |
| **Qualifications** | MED | MED | MED | MED |
| **Experience in years** | 9 | 18 | 10 | 15 |

**Key:** MED = Master in Education Management EM = Education Manager

Table 1 reveals that two male and female education managers participated in this study giving a sample of 4. Initially, the researcher intended to interview 5 participants, one from each District, but data saturation and Coronavirus-19 restrictions confined the study to 4. A small sample adopted was on the belief that an in-depth interview would provide a unique opportunity to uncover rich and complex information from the seasoned education managers investigated (Khan, 2014). The oldest was EMB and the youngest was EMD. All the participants were holders of a MED degree of which two managed High Schools (S1 and S2) and the other two, Primary Schools (P1 and P2). Their experience in the post varied with EMA having served for 18 years, EMD 15 years, EMC and EMB 10 years apiece.

Research Setting

S2 is a Christian Private School located in the leafy suburb of Bulawayo. Its catchment area comprises affluent families who can afford the high fees charged. Parents drive learners to and from school and its staff compliment is 60 and has an enrolment of 580. Contrarily, S1 is a Government School located in the low-density suburb and was recently constructed. Its school fee structure is cheaper than the former as these are stipulated by Government. Most of the parents residing in this area are hustlers. It has a staff compliment of 32 and an enrolment of 884.

Similarly, the P2 is a Municipality School located in the low-density suburb and was constructed at post-independence. Its geographical location and catchment area are similar to S1. It has 44 teachers and 1 659 learners. Within the same radius and about 5 km away is a P1 Government School with 42 teachers and an enrolment of 1 688.

The major difference among the schools investigated is the tuition fees. In Private and Municipality ones, fees are determined by the responsible authority and submitted to the Government for approval. On the contrary, Government regulates fees paid in public institutions with affordability levels of parents and equal access to education which is a fundamental right, a priority (Constitution, 2013). Little wonder that public schools are characterised with higher enrolments.

Data Generation

Qualitative data was generated from the four consenting education managers of the carefully selected schools where interviews were conducted using a face-to-face semi-structured protocol in an attempt to demonstrate how conflict management and resolution strategies would be employed. The protocol was pilot tested on 5 non-participants and adjusted accordingly to minimise ambiguity. Interviews were conducted for an hour which allowed the researcher to observe non-verbal communication, to clarify the ambiguities and the necessary points (Khan, 2014). The preliminary findings were emailed to the participants for verification (Creswell, 2018). Where contradictions arose, follow up questions were conducted telephonically for clarity in an attempt to come up with rich, thick descriptions which would represent their sentiments and make the data transferable to similar situations (Creswell).

Data Analysis

An interactive research method was used in the inductive thematic analysis compatible with the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Data generation and analysis processes were merged to determine sample size and data saturation (Khan, 2014). Textual data was systematically reviewed (i.e., units of texts, words or paragraphs), emergent themes were identified and hand coded, their structure and content were interpreted and relationships established (Creswell, 2018). This process was repeated continuously, punctuated with the ‘constant comparison method’ (i.e., all segments of text were systematically compared and contrasted with each other) until the data generation was completed. The output from this thematic analysis of interview data along with the literature reviewed facilitated the development of conceptual thinking and theory building on which recommendations were made (Khan).

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the UNISA College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (Ref#: 2020\_CRERC\_002 (FA)). Furthermore, permission to conduct the research within the jurisdiction of Bulawayo Metropolitan Province was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and Provisional Education Director respectively. Thereafter permission to conduct the research in the sampled schools was also sought from the education managers who participated in this study. The participants were briefed about the benefits of the study and the psychological harm which would befall them. Those who volunteered to participate were made to sign consent forms and were advised that if discomfort was experienced, they were free to withdraw their participation at data collection stage. In the process, privacy, human dignity, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

**Findings**

The data analysis yielded six thematic areas, namely: the concept and the conflict management and resolution strategies.

Concept of conflict

From the definition of EMC and EMB two perspectives clearly emerged, inter-personal and intra-group conflicts. The former reported that *“It is a situation where two people working together clash due to different opinions/values resulting in disharmonious organisational operations”* while the latter concurred as revealed in *“ when organisational members are not getting along well resulting in objectives not being achieved.”*

Similarly, inter-personal, inter-group/organisational conflicts were implied by EMD who pointed out that conflict was *“serious disagreements or arguments between staff, staff and parents, staff and education managers/parents, education managers and parents.”* Likewise, EMA observed that it *“is where by some individuals are having some tensions, differences and misunderstandings between each other or cliques.”* The fact that EMC acknowledged that conflict disrupted *“organisational operations”* vis-a-vis EMB who viewed it as hindering the attainment of *“organisational objectives”* implies that conflict really needs a remedy when it rocks the boat.

Sources of Conflicts

Before conflict could be dealt with, it was incumbent on the participants to identify its sources. EMD’s sources were inter-organisational as noted in parents being at loggerheads with teachers over *“losing in a sporting activity’ or ‘poor academic performance.”* Such a scenario could be resulting from parents’ high expectations of their children since they paid more and wanted value for their money. Related to this phenomenon were the raging wars between the school and parents over the *“non-payment of fees.”* The only inter-personal conflict EMD mentioned was *“teacher gossip.”*

On the contrary, those highlighted by EMA, EMB and EMC were premised on the following: *“unfair allocation/distribution of the limited resources”, “regionalism”, “tribalism”, “lack of respect among members of staff”, “poor communication”, “favouritism by management”, “bullying”, “harassment”, “role conflicts” and “dress code”*. In EMD’s fashion, EMA hinted on organisational conflict brought about by the organogram which exists in her school. It seems top management make crucial decisions on procurement of materials and other professional issues only to be revised/ reversed by the Bursar because she is a Municipality employee, to which she is answerable to.

Strategies to Manage and Resolve Conflicts in Schools

Having identified the sources of conflicts as they occur in schools, what was left was for the participants to demonstrate how they would utilise the KTRK Model to manage/resolve conflicts.

*Avoidance*

EMA, EMB and EMC agreed that not every conflict which occurred in schools demanded the intervention of management as some could resolve itself at departmental level as evidenced in *“some are so trivial such that they do not affect the attainment of organisational goals.”* Moreover, *“teachers as professional adults have the capacity to resolve conflicts amicably.”* However, *“where minimal intervention is required, let it be.”* To prove how delicate the intervention could be, EMC cited a situation where the school had to decide who attends a NGO or government sponsored workshop. In the former attendants were highly remunerated as compared to the latter. He therefore concluded that *“whatever rational formula is used to choose attendants, teachers will always be sceptical.*” However, EMD who claimed “*to deal with economically empowered and an enlightened community’*” strongly believed that no conflict was too little to be ignored. In his opinion, avoidance:

*is not applicable because it does not solve the conflict but conceals it. As long as it is reported to my desk I face it head on. I institute investigations and report to the complainant timeously. However, if the school has faulted in the management of the conflict, I quickly apologise to the stakeholder.*

*Competing*

Participants seemed to be confirming Chappelow’s (2019) notion which asserts that society is in perpetual conflict over limited resources as noted in the manner teachers were always trying to outwit each other as individuals/teams/departments in competition for them. In concurrence, EMA cited an experience which was solved by the intervention of management as manifested in:

*A basketball and hand ball coach were at loggerheads when their timetables clashed as to who would use the only pitch available. Left on their own, none wanted to badge as battle lines were drawn. The conflict was resolved by the intervention of the Sports master. The hand ball coach was advised to move to an empty space which was available since his goal posts were movable.*

In corroboration, EMD vividly recalled an incidence which almost turned nasty in his school as portrayed in:

*My two teachers were at each other’s throats over coaching duties. Teacher A felt that Teacher B was playing truancy. Little did he know that Teacher B on the day in question was writing exams? I averted the conflict by re-assigning Teacher B to hockey which operates on the same principles as soccer. At first he was hesitant but is now posting wonderful results.*

Similarly, EMB weighed in by reporting that teachers in the Infant Department were allocated a box of chalk per week. She asserted that had she not intervened to rationalise the sharing process, the pieces of chalk would have been history by the end of the day.

*Compromising*

Generally it appears all the participants employ this style as noted by EMC’s sentiments in: *“I have used this strategy effectively. Subordinates will take time to digest the causes of conflict and in most cases they appreciate my effort in trying to resolve it. Normally subordinates felt valued and appreciated”.* His sentiments were equally echoed by EMD who said: *“This, I use a lot as in some cases the conflicting parties have to give-and-take and move on. If parties do not reconcile then the conflict may escalate.”* Similarly, EMB highlighted that where shortages were pronounced, *“teachers are encouraged or motivated to improvise.”* EMA complimenting this discourse reported that:

*Our teachers have keys to the classroom storerooms where they secure their valuables. Likewise, grounds men have keys to the same classrooms. However, some locks to the classrooms are malfunctioning. When teachers started missing their valuable possessions, the grounds men were the prime suspects. Tension grew between the warring parties until I intervened. A stakeholders’ meeting was called where angers were vented out through me by each party. At the end of the day each party realised its mistake and apologies were made. That is how I extinguished the fire.*

Similarly, EMD remarked that despite the hyper-inflationary environment schools were operating in, he demanded that his teachers arrive at 0700 without fail. Although his teachers never remonstrated, their facial expressions betrayed them. So as a compromise:

*I sourced fuel in drums from garages we have good rapport with. Instead of letting our teachers spending their precious teaching time queuing at garages or hunting for it, each teacher was allocated 20 litres of fuel regardless of whether one has got a car or not. Those without were encouraged to sell it and argument their transport money.*

*Accommodating*

All participants claimed that they had used this style but at different levels. EMC claimed that wherever he used it, the conflict was never resolved fully as it resurfaced. He cited a situation in double-sessions where some teachers overlapped while others did not. Those who overlapped felt abused although derived solace from the professional growth they realised in the end. Additionally, EMA reported that she preferred to engage the combatants separately in productive communication, praise where it is due and reprimand as well before bringing the two parties to the negotiation table.

By the same token, EMB claimed that she used it for the organisation’s benefit. She cited a case where a lady teacher was phoned by her husband informing her of their injured child who was schooling elsewhere and had already been taken to hospital. To her surprise the teacher wanted to leave instantly. On engaging the teacher highlighting to her the core business of the school versus private one, she obliged. Furthermore, EMD strongly believed that being accommodative must not compromise the academic standards of the school. He mentioned parents who always wanted to use their political or economic dominance to secure a safe passage for their children to A-level classes regardless of whether they had passed the five prerequisite subjects at O-level or not. He only accommodated those who agreed to have their children re-sit the failed subject by May of the issuing year, failure of which his answer was a *“BIG NO”*.

*Collaboration*

All participants unanimously agreed that collaboration was the best style which was applicable to educational institutions as it afforded both warring parties the due process. Disputants were brought forward to the negotiating table where their misunderstandings were clarified and attempts were made to come up with a win-win solution (Cobanoglu, et al. 2015). In that way, participants thought the warring parties would learn to respect and value each other as they aligned their energies towards common goals.

When asked to advance any other comments on the phenomenon, schools appeared to have grievance handling committees chaired by deputy education managers which dealt with complicated disagreements. This committee counselled and guided teachers as it tried to manage or resolve all the conflicts within their capabilities. Where they failed or reached a stalemate, such cases were handed over to the education manager for finalisation. So far, no case known to them was handed over to the Provincial Disciplinary Committee for arbitration.

**Discussion**

Judging by the calibre of the participants as well as the multitude of teachers within their jurisdiction, the researcher was convinced that the findings may be transferable to other similar contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Similarly, education managers in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province seem to have ably handled any form of conflict which mushroomed in their schools in a professional manner guided by the KTRK Model as none of the grievances dealt with were referred to higher authority for arbitration.

Amazing though was that the sources of conflicts in the investigated Private School were not linked to financial resources at all because the affluent parents in the proximity could easily afford these, thus, contradicting Marx’s theory which claims that society was in perpetual conflict due to scarcity of resources (Chappelow, 2019). However, this phenomenon seemed to be vividly dominant in Government and Municipality Schools due to the different economic statuses of parents residing there.

From the participants’ definition of conflict, the researcher inferred that generally, conflicts prevalent in schools were either inter/intra-personal or intra/inter-organisational concurring with the dominance theory propounded by Marx (Chappelow, 2019). The latter featured mainly in Municipality and Private Schools. Besides, in former schools, there was need to synchronise the organogram as reporting and accountability systems seemed to be conflicting. This was what made the Municipality appointed Bursar appear to be more powerful and dominant than the school management when it came to decision making.

Unfortunately though, in Private Schools, it appeared the elite parents trying to seek self-satisfaction, exerted undue pressure on the school management. Perhaps, due to the high-fees they were paying, they confidently demanded more accountability from teachers in both extra and core-curricula activities. This revelation demanded that education managers in such a school must not ignore whatever conflict came their ways as it could be destructive (Shanka & Thuo, 2017) which in the long run could affect the enrolment, just because affluent parents were their sacred cows when it came to resource mobilisation. On the contrary, education managers in Municipality and Government Schools seemed to solve conflicts selectively.

While the findings also revealed that all education managers used the KTRK Model in its totality to manage and resolve conflicts in their schools, EMD did so sparingly. Instead, he employed the Shanka and Thuo’s (2017) strategy effectively by first conducting an investigation before giving feedback to the complainant compelled by circumstances within the environment. Interesting to note was that departmental managers tried to solve minor conflicts at that level and major ones were referred to the grievance committee for negotiations, bargaining, mediation and arbitration (Iqbal et al., 2017). In such instances, education managers usually played the role of chief arbitrator in resolving conflict, as the buck ended with them.

Limitations

The findings are applicable to the sites to which the research was conducted although transferability is left to readers in a similar context.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, conflict in schools is no longer inevitable but a reality. Therefore, education managers armed with the appropriate management and resolution software informed by the KTRK Model to deal with it are needed when it arises to avert chaos and anarchy in schools. However, despite its negative face, conflict is innovative and must be viewed as a stimulant to thought processes as both parties (i.e., combatants and arbitrators) seek viable solutions which would energise them towards goal accomplishment and harmony.

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