



Exploring the Conflict Management Strategies Used by Administrators: A Case Study of Selected Mission Schools in Monze District, Zambia

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the way in which administrators at selected mission schools in the Monze district in the Southern Province of Zambia manage conflicts. A case study design was utilised to execute the research purpose. The total sample size used in this study was 22 administrators comprising the school leadership. The participants in this study were purposively sampled and the instruments used to collect data included a focus group discussion guide, a one-on-one interview guide and a documentary review. The results of the study indicated that fighting for promotion, jealousy, favouritism, selfishness and the personalisation of the institution were the main causes of conflict found in the selected mission schools. It was also evident that in conflict resolution in these schools, dialogue was the most common strategy utilised, followed by mediation and then arbitration. The study also found that head teachers had in the recent past reported a reduction in

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disruptive and violent behaviours, chronic school absenteeism, disciplinary referrals and suspensions at many schools. This indicates the positive steps mission schools have taken towards conflict resolution and the importance with which this is regarded in order to create an enabling and conflict-free environment for both learners and teachers.

Keywords: Exploring; conflict; management; strategies; administrators; Zambia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict is known to be an effect of human interactions [1]. Schools are places where humans interact exhaustively to the extent that members of such institutions tend to hurt each other's feelings, either deliberately or unconsciously, resulting in conflict (Bass, 2007). Conflict can be either constructive or disruptive, depending on the way in which it is handled (Gaffer, 2016). The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [2] postulates that "conflicts when not dealt with constructively often explode into violence".

Managing conflict in schools is an age-old challenge for educators [3,4]. Therefore, this problem, when associated with management in schools, is of great concern. This study examined in particular the conflict management approaches that are used by head teachers in mission schools, as such institutions are very careful when it comes to upholding their reputation.

In Monze, many conflicts have been reported to the District Education Board Secretary's (DEBS) office. According to statistics (DEBS office of Monze, 2016), the causes of conflict include absenteeism, absconding from work, insubordination, and drunkenness among others. Some of these cases have gone so far as to result in transfers for both teachers and head teachers, while some teachers have been surrendered to the DEBS office by their head teachers owing to conflict that could not be resolved in their respective schools. These causes were reported to have arisen in almost all of the schools in the district.

Considering that the nature and types of conflict that occur in secondary schools seem to vary from one school to another [5,6,7], it was important to conduct a case study of mission schools to establish the nature of conflict and the conflict management strategies in place, hence the need to carry out this study.

Some schools face many difficulties in providing the necessary facilities and even teaching-

learning materials. Various studies in Zambia have shown that major sources of conflict in both mission and public schools are as a result of some schools not having basic facilities including staffrooms, office space for head teachers and teaching materials. Added to this is the hostile attitude of some teachers towards their colleagues as well as misconduct in their work [5,8] (UNDP, 2001; Mwanachanya, 2018). Other forms of school related conflicts were linked to un-democratic elements among school governing bodies [9,10]. A more recent study, however, established that the main form of school related conflict was rooted in contradictory interests between parents and school administrators over girls' early marriages [9]. It was thus deemed necessary to establish how school management at mission schools manages to settle conflicts in their schools.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research applied a case study design, and the target population included school administrators. The sample comprised 22 school administrators from three different mission schools, consisting of head teachers, deputy head teachers, heads of department, and members of school disciplinary committees. Purposive sampling procedures were used to sample the secondary schools that had recorded conflict at a certain point. The researcher targeted schools that had been established for more than five years, as they were likely to have rich information with regard to the various types of conflict and possibly a great deal of experience in resolving such conflict. A semi-structured interview guide, a focus group discussion guide and document review were the research instruments utilised for data collection. Data were analysed using themes, with common themes being identified and clustered to categorise the data. Relevant information was labelled and grouped into categories. Anonymity was assured throughout the process as a high level of confidentiality was observed in conducting the research.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the research findings based on responses from people in administrative positions in order to obtain a clear picture of how conflict is managed; what factors are faced in conflict management; what methods are used in resolving conflict and alternatives to conflict management strategies.

3.1 Participants' Perception of the Term "Conflict"?

Participants were invited to demonstrate their understanding of the term *conflict*. In view of this, a question was raised: What do you understand by the term *conflict*? In response to this question the participants had the following knowledge of what conflict is:

One head of department from school A stated:

Conflict is when there is a misunderstanding between or among parties

Another head of department from school C added that:

Conflict is a misunderstanding between people, tribes or nations.

One head teacher from school B defined conflict as:

Conflict is when there is no agreement with other people....

The head teacher from school A said:

Conflict is an act of disagreement, argument or misunderstanding

Another headteacher, from school C, added that:

Conflict is the difference in opinions during decision making

The above quotes reveal that the participants understood what conflict meant as they were able to explain what it is all about.

3.2 Participants' Views on the Causes of Conflict at the Selected Mission Schools in Monze

The second research question required participants to give their views on the causes of

conflict in their respective secondary schools. The participants' responses are given in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Main causes of conflict

Main causes of conflict	Frequency
Fighting for promotion	5
Favouritism	4
Selfishness	4
Personalisation of the institution	3
Jealousy	6

Table 1 above indicates that the main causes of conflict found in the selected mission schools in Monze district, as indicated by the 22 participants, include fighting for promotion which was proposed by five participants, favouritism as proposed by four participants, selfishness as proposed by four participants, personalisation of the institution as proposed by three participants, and jealousy as proposed by six out of the 22 participants.

One participant said:

I don't think it's fair, I felt like I should have been promoted. I didn't understand why someone else got promoted. I had been at that work place longer and have more experience. Am very upset because you promoted somebody else when I deserved the promotion.

Another participant added to this, saying:

I don't know what else I can say, my place of work has a lot of jealous and selfish people I have never seen

Another participant said:

My head teacher does not seem to like some of us. He favours a particular group of people in this school. It is like those who accept anything the head teacher says are given more attention than those of us who question his decisions and actions.

One participant further stated:

There is usually a difference/s in opinions during decision making between the old teachers (those who have been at the school for long) and the new teachers (those who were recently posted here) leaving one group of teachers upset and not in agreement with the decisions arrived at. The old teachers are usually resistant to change

while the new ones are open to change. The old teachers behave as though the school is theirs!

From the above quotes, it is apparent that the main causes of conflict found in the selected mission schools in Monze district are jealousy, which was supported most, followed by fighting for promotion, favouritism and selfishness, while personalisation of the institution was the least supported.

3.3 Nature of Conflict Management Strategies Used by Administrators in Mission Schools in Monze District

The third research question sought the participants' views on the types of conflict management strategies used by administrators in mission schools in Monze district. Table 2 presents the types of conflict management strategies used in mission schools in Monze district.

Table 2. Types of conflict management strategies implemented at school A

Type of conflict management strategy	Frequency
Mediation	2
Dialogue	3
Arbitration	1

Table 2 above shows that two participants indicated mediation as a type of conflict management strategy, while three candidates indicated dialogue and one participant indicated arbitration.

Table 3 below presents responses to the types of conflict management strategies found at school B.

Table 3. Types of conflict management strategies implemented at school B

Type of conflict management strategy	Frequency
Mediation	1
Dialogue	6
Arbitration	1

Out of eight participants who responded to the above question at school B, one was in favour of mediation while six opted for dialogue and one indicated arbitration. In terms of ranking, dialogue was the most supported while mediation and arbitration had the same amount of support.

Table 4. Types of conflict management strategies implemented at school C

Type of conflict management strategy	Frequency
Mediation	2
Dialogue	4
Arbitration	2

School C had a total of eight participants of whom two opted for mediation, four went for dialogue while two supported arbitration. Mediation and arbitration both received two votes, while dialogue was greatly preferred at this school.

Table 5. Summarised presentation of the types of conflict management strategies

Types of conflict management strategy	Frequency
Mediation	5
Dialogue	13
Arbitration	4

Table 5 above gives a summary of views from the three schools that participated in the study. Out of 22 administrators, five indicated mediation, 13 participants were for dialogue while three opted for arbitration as the types of conflict management strategy used in mission schools in Monze district. It is clear that of all the participating schools, arbitration was least supported, while mediation was second, while dialogue was most supported, with 13 people opting for it.

The third research question sought the participants' views on the types of conflict management strategy used by administrators in mission schools in Monze district. Below are the views of the participants:

One administrator said:

I find it helpful to use mediation as a strategy of resolving conflicts as the warring parties are brought together in the presence of a third party listen to each other, in order to reach a common understanding of the problem and come up with their own solutions to the conflict.

On the other hand, 13 participants out of 22 identified dialogue as one of the reliable strategies for conflict management in the selected secondary school. Dialogue was found to be the most used conflict resolution strategy in

schools, gauging by the number of people who were aware of it and used it.

One administrator had this to add:

Dialogue was a better strategy as it allowed a genuine interaction through which the involved human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Results indicated that 3 administrators out of 22 pointed out that they often use arbitration in resolving conflicts at their places of work.

Adding to this, another administrator said:

More often than not, as a leader at my place of work, I end up becoming an arbitrator in trying to solve conflicts among the members of staff. I find arbitration easy to use I have to simply listen to each party's argument and consider their points carefully then examine the evidences and arguments presented. From this information am able to issue a decision.

The findings of the study revealed that dialogue was the most common strategy used followed by mediation then arbitration in conflict resolution in the mission schools. It appears that many school managers were not aware of the various methods of conflict resolution, as they only mentioned these three methods.

3.4 How Effective are the Conflict Management Strategies Found in Mission Schools?

The fourth research question sought the participants' views on the effectiveness of the common conflict resolution strategies used by administrators in mission schools in Monze district. The administrators were asked how effective they rated the common types of conflict resolution strategies using a scale of "effective", "fairly effective" and "very effective". Table 6 below presents the responses of the participants in regard to the effectiveness of the common conflict resolutions they use.

Table 6. Effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies at school A

Effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies	Frequency
Effective	2
Fairly effective	2
Very Effective	2

Table 6 shows the views of participants at school A. The table indicates that two participants opted for the response "effective" in regard to the conflict resolution strategies at the school, two opted for "fairly effective", while two regarded them as "very effective". The responses from this school were well distributed with two opting for each category.

Table 7. Effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies at school B

Effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies	Frequency
Effective	1
Fairly effective	5
Very effective	2

At school B, one participant opted for "effective", while five participants opted for "fairly effective" and two for "very effective". It is clear that strategies were generally regarded as being "fairly effective" as this received the highest rating and is ranked in position number one, followed by "very effective" with two participants, while "effective" is in third position with one.

Table 8. Effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies at school C

Effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies	Frequency
Effective	2
fairly effective	3
Very effective	3

Table 8 shows that two participants found such strategies to be "effective", while three rated them as "fairly effective" and another three rated them as "very effective". In terms of ranking, "fairly effective" and "very effective" received the same rank, while just two participants rated the strategies as "effective".

Table 9. Summary of the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies at the three schools

Effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies	Frequency
Effective	5
Fairly effective	10
Very effective	7

Table 9 above summarises the responses from the three schools on the effectiveness of the conflict resolution strategies they utilise. Out of

22 administrators, five indicated that the strategies they use are “effective”, ten out of 22 indicated that they were “fairly effective” and seven indicated that they were “very effective”. It is therefore clear that most participants rated the strategies as “fairly effective”, followed by “very effective” and just five found them to be “effective”.

The following are the verbatim responses from some of the administrators on the effectiveness of the conflict resolution strategies utilised at the three schools.

One administrator said:

It's important that we learn how to deal with conflicts as administrators so that our efforts in conflict management are effective. One thing for sure is that conflict is part of everyday life and it's not going to go away. We just need to sharpen our conflict management skills as administrators in order to manage conflict.

Another administrator added the following:

In the recent past, head teachers have reported a reduction in disruptive and violent behaviours, chronic school absences, and disciplinary referrals and suspensions at many schools as these conflict resolution strategies seem to be well implemented.

From the above quotes, it can be said that the aforementioned conflict resolution strategies have helped schools improve their conflict management skills. This is so because many institutions have reported a reduction in the number of deviant behaviours. It can further be mentioned that the conflict management strategies the schools are employing have increased self-esteem, self-confidence and self-respect.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Conflict Management Strategies

This research study established that dialogue, mediation and arbitration are the most common strategies utilised in resolving conflict. This finding is in agreement with the findings of Acta (2017), which points out that alternative dispute resolution (ADR) methods could be used. Arbitration, mediation, negotiation and adjudication are a few examples of ADR and, if understood correctly and implemented

effectively, ADR could prove beneficial to all parties involved in disputes. Acta further states that arbitration, mediation, negotiation and adjudication are some of the alternative methods that are used when resolving disputes. In a study done by Nduka-Ozo [11] on the counselling implications of conflict and conflict resolution in secondary schools in Ebonyi State, it was found that Ebonyi State secondary school principals employ sanctions more than dialogue, arbitration or third party conflict resolution in the school system. This finding is contrary to the findings of the current study. It appears that what may be workable/popular in one place may not be so in another place or it could be that there is no awareness of the various methods of conflict resolution.

The research results indicate that the participants were able to define conflict with the use of words such as an act of disagreement, argument or misunderstanding between and among parties. This research finding is in line with what Ifeanyi [12], who points out that conflict is a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in serious disagreements or arguments. Conflict is a necessary process of life. This opinion does not mean that conflict cannot be managed. He adds to this, saying that if properly handled, conflict can bring a positive change in the original situation, as well as lasting peace.

The school management team members such as the heads of department, deputy head teachers and head teachers have been identified in this research as the people who are involved in resolving conflict at schools. This result is in agreement with the results of tutorials.istudy [13], which show that managers spend as much as 25 to 40 percent of their time working to resolve conflict in the workplace. In addition, all those involved in conflict resolution must ensure that they develop the skills, knowledge and confidence that will enable them to address conflicting issues with staff, pupils and parents. School teachers and students need to resolve their intrapersonal problems as these could affect their self-concept and their perceptions of their concomitant interpersonal relationships with others.

The results of this research show that the common types of conflict resolution used in mission schools in Monze district were effective. Using the dialogue method to resolve conflict in the workplace will help to improve respect and open workplace communications. It will also help

build a person's trustworthiness and credibility as a leader.

Brown and Marriot (1993:288) state that arbitration is a suitable method of ADR, because a neutral third party with highly specialised knowledge on the subject matter makes a final and binding award. Some benefits of using ADR methods include the saving of time and costs, the active participation of parties, as well as the fact that such methods are confidential, and no courtrooms are involved.

4.2 Effectiveness of Conflict Management Strategies

The fourth research question sought to ascertain the participants' views on the management strategies used in schools, using a scale of "effective", "fairly effective" and "very effective". This research found that the common types of conflict resolution strategy are effective, as they helped reduce conflict at schools, with four administrators indicating that such strategies are "effective" [14]. A further ten administrators rated the strategies as "fairly effective", while seven rated them as "very effective". It is therefore clear that, overall, the strategies were rated most as "fairly effective", followed by "very effective" and lastly "effective". This finding is similar to Acta Structilia (2017), which found that a middle school reported a 50 percent decrease in suspensions the year after a student counselling peer mediation programme was established.

5. CONCLUSION

This research study established that dialogue, mediation and arbitration are the most common strategies utilised for resolving conflict. Arbitration, mediation, negotiation and adjudication are a few examples of ADR and, if understood correctly and implemented effectively, could prove beneficial to all parties involved in disputes.

Using the dialogue method to resolve conflict in the workplace helped to improve respectfulness and increase open workplace communications. The use of the dialogue method to resolve conflict helps in building trustworthiness and credibility among leaders. Other benefits of using these methods include time and cost efficiency, active participation of parties, confidentiality, and the fact that no courtrooms are involved.

The findings revealed that conflict management strategies utilised in schools were effective. Evidence shows that in the recent past, head teachers reported a reduction in disruptive and violent behaviours, chronic school absenteeism, and disciplinary referrals and suspensions at many schools. Accordingly, these conflict resolution strategies seem to be well implemented.

This research identified challenges faced in implementing conflict management strategies such as parties not committed to the resolutions made, different levels of education and some members being over emotional. Furthermore, the study findings revealed three alternative conflict management strategies, including counselling, suspension and expulsion, as provided by the participants. These measures deter would-be offenders.

Despite the many factors and issues identified, head teachers have in the recent past reported a reduction in disruptive and violent behaviours, chronic school absenteeism, and disciplinary referrals and suspensions at sampled schools; hence, the conflict resolution strategies seem to be well implemented. Consequently, these can be mentioned as the positive steps mission schools have taken to create an enabling environment for both learners and teachers.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the above conclusions made from the findings, the researchers made the following recommendations: There is need to conduct workshops in order to educate students, teachers, guidance counsellors, administrators, school board members and parents about conflict management initiatives in order to have peer mediation at all school levels. This would reduce the number of conflicts at the school as it would equip everyone with better conflict resolution skills.

This research found that counselling is an important aspect that could help administrators, teachers and pupils to know how to handle issues such as managing emotions, conflict, anxieties, frustrations, fears, poor self-concepts, indecision, alcohol and drug abuse, unwanted pregnancy, suicide, dependence on other people, inability to change and unsuitable behaviour. Therefore, this study recommends that every school should have a well trained and

equipped counsellor as a matter of urgency and necessity in resolving school conflict.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As a way of considering ethical matters, before going into the field the researchers obtained ethical clearance from the University of Zambia School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Clearance Committee.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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