

## **VOICES OF STAKEHOLDERS ON CONFLICTS IN SCHOOLS: A STUDY OF SELECTED SCHOOLS IN MASVINGO DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Conflict is inevitable in all social settings. Based on this realisation this study sought to investigate the effects of conflicts in the schools as social settings. The systems theory guided the study. The research adopted a qualitative methodology using a case study design. The population covered all school heads, teachers, learners and parents who were regarded as the stakeholders of the school system. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires. The study established that conflict does not occur in a vacuum but is influenced by inadequate resources, gossiping, poor communication, and favouritism. Findings indicated that conflict has both negative and positive impact in the school environment. The study recommended that to reduce conflict in schools, conflict resolution committees should be established. It is also recommended that school heads should ensure equitable and transparent distribution of resources.*

**Keywords:** conflict, relationship, interpersonal school, negotiation, disciplinary committee, learner

### **INTRODUCTION**

Conflict is a common phenomenon from time immemorial. It is a social phenomenon that occurs between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings (Opoko-Asare, Takyi and Owusu- Mensah 2015; Sompa, 2015). There is no known institution that is exempt from it. A total absence of conflict in any organisation would be unbelievable, impossible, undesirable, and a strong indicator that such conflict is suppressed (Affol – Broni, 2012).

Conflict may be described as a disagreement or incompatibility in wants, values and aspirations of two or more persons or groups (Meek, Heit and Page 2005; Afful-Broni, 2012). According to Ramani and Zhimini (2010) conflict may be viewed as occurring along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling) and behavioural (action) dimensions. The conflict can be intrapersonal (within a person), interpersonal (between two or more persons), intragroup (between people belonging to same group and intergroup (between two or more groups of people (Scott, 2001 cited in Sompa, 2015).

Schools are considered as places for nurturing of innovative ideas that transform the technological, economic and social dimensions of people's lives towards development, and therefore one would not expect to find conflict in schools (Sompa, 2015). However, the schools as organisations cannot escape conflicts as they are made up of individuals (Opoko-Asare et al, 2015). Conflict is an ever-present reality in human relations. Conflicts manifest in

schools as quarrelling, fighting, verbal abuse, excessive punishment, heated arguments, and bullying.

The school community has its fair share of a variety of conflict such as between school heads and teachers, among teachers, between teachers and learners, between teachers and parents, and among learners. In a study carried out by Opoko-Asare (2015) 99, 2% (119) of 120 teachers, 30 school heads and 130 pupils all described conflict as a daily occurrence. Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert and Van Damme, 2009 cited in (Larson, 2012) in their study found out that children who experience teacher- student relationships with conflicts, demonstrated lower achievement in Mathematics. In South Africa Msila (2012) in a study on conflict management all participants maintained that conflict was not an aspect that was needed in schools for it tends to stall progress. They expressed that schools that experienced conflicts will never prosper since their energies will be directed at ending the conflict.

Makaye and Ndofirepi (2012) carried out a study in Masvingo District of Zimbabwe on conflict and found out that barely a month passes without the school head conflicting with teachers or the teachers among themselves. The same results were also found in a study done in Zimbabwe in Nkayi district by Mapholisa and Tshabalala (2013). According to their findings cases of conflict are inevitable with the school head dealing with one or two cases of conflict weekly. This study set to explore the dynamics of conflict so as to minimise its negative outcomes in the school context.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Interpersonal conflicts within schools have remained persistent in most schools. The conflicts have contributed in hampering the smooth effective running of the teaching and learning process. The causes and effects have remained uncertain. The subject of conflict is large and complex. Conflict if misdiagnosed can lead to a spiral of antagonistic interaction and aggravated, destructive (Msila, 2012). Therefore this study sought to establish the causes and effects of conflicts among school stakeholders.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- i. What are the causes of conflict that exist in Masvingo district school system?
- ii. What are the effects of conflicts on teaching and learning in selected schools of Masvingo district?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

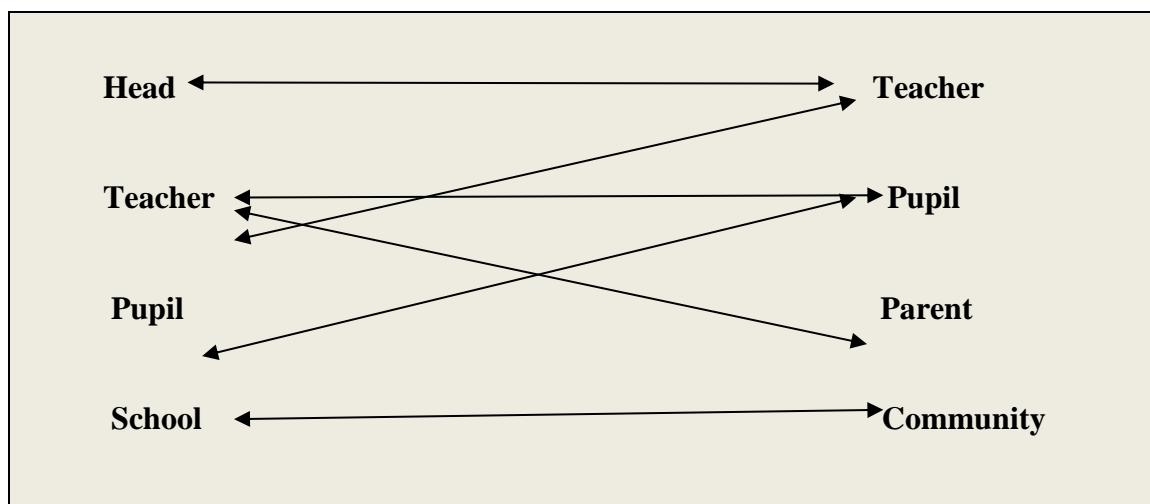
The researcher anticipates that once the study is done findings will provide educators with knowledge and skills necessary to resolve conflicts in schools. The study can also be an eye opener to peace education in Zimbabwean schools. The study is significant to educators who want to understand school dysfunctionality and teacher morale.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was guided by the systems theory. A system is an interrelated set of elements functioning as an operating unit (Lunenburg and Ornstein, 2011). The parts are connected to each other around a common purpose. The systems theory was relevant in that it can assist in placing the issue of conflicts among stakeholders in the school in a clearer perspective within the educational system.

Awuso-Mensah (2007) asserts that a school is a system in which several networks of individuals interact and which interacts with the wider social and economic environment. The

school system is made up of people like school heads, teachers, and pupils. The community is made up of adults, men, women and children. These people interact in one way or the other for a common goal. As an example, school heads interact with teachers, teachers interact with each other and pupils interact with parents, pupils interact with pupils and school also interacts with the community members. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction.



**Figure 1: Interpersonal relationships in the school system**

A system such as a school consists of 5 basic elements namely inputs, a transformation process, outputs, feedback and the environment (Lenenburg and Ornstein, 2011).

### **Inputs**

According to Ballantine and Spade (2008) organisations receive inputs such as information, raw materials, personnel, and finances from the environment. Physical or material resources such as equipment, desk and books as inputs can lead to conflicts between teachers if they are scarce. A school which lacks the necessary inputs that are required for the healthy execution of activities faces a high probability of encountering conflicts.

### **A transformation process**

The school administrator’s job involves combining and coordinating the various resources to attain the goals of the school which should be learning for all (Lunenberg and Ornstein, 2011:20). Some components of the system of operational management include competence of school administrators, their plans of operation. Dictatorial decisions and strict supervision of teachers by school heads create fear, pressure and resentment in teachers and prevent them from sharing innovative ideas and being committed to school activities (Gyima, 2013).

### **Outputs**

Outputs are the attainment of goals of the school. The outputs of the educational system are for example learners in the form of educated people (Magwa, 2015). An inefficient school system where there is interpersonal conflict between for example teachers and pupils damages the learners’ social emotional adjustment resulting in low academic performance.

### **Feedback**

A key aspect of a system model is feedback (Ballantine and Spade, 2008). This process implies that an organisation’s leaders are constantly learning about and adapting to changes and demands in the environment as a result of information it receives. To be effective and efficient a system needs feedback that can ascertain whether the outputs of the system are what they should be (Magwa, 2015). Through feedback, possible discrepancies between

intended outputs and actual outputs can be compared. If it is evaluated that some learners do not reach their full potential on academic performance, social and emotional development due to conflicts between them and teachers, and between themselves, then appropriate modifications need to be effected.

### **Environment**

A school as a system is strongly influenced by its environment (Lunenberg and Ornstein, 2011). The school head, teachers, pupils, parents and other groups like nurses, policeman living in the school area of the location form part of the school community. Lack of coordination among these stakeholders can result in conflicts. Deliberate, coordinated efforts on the part of the involved stakeholders at various levels, make it possible to achieve the goals of learning in a conflict free environment.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study was a qualitative research that attempted to accumulate data on causes and effects of interpersonal conflicts within the school system. Cresswell (2009) emphasizes that a qualitative researcher is naturalistic as he/ she examines the place where the events are naturally occurring. The researchers in this study deeply immersed in the natural setting of the phenomenon getting close to the participants so as to understand their viewpoints. Thus, the researchers opted for a qualitative approach because the study deals directly with people.

The researchers apprehended a case study design to be the most appropriate for this study as it is suitable to answer what, how and why questions (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010; Yin, 2009). The study was a case of Masvingo district secondary schools.

The population of the study comprised school heads, teachers, pupils and parents. Purposive sampling was used for it allows selecting people considered to be critical for production of valuable data (Magwa and Magwa, 2015; Robson, 2002). Four secondary schools were selected on the basis of specific characteristics that were considered to offer diverse and all-embracing information on the topic of study. The study sample consisted of 4 school heads, 24 teachers, 8 parents and 24 learners bringing to a total of 60 participants.

A mixture of data gathering methods namely; interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires was adapted to obtain meaningful, accurate, and comprehensive data (De vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delpart, 2005). Open ended questionnaires were found to be appropriate to gather in-depth information about topic under study since they provide a relatively simple and straight forward approach ensuring complete anonymity and confidentiality for respondents. Teachers completed the questionnaires. Semi structured interviews were opted for since they directly meet the dynamics encountered in human interactions (Yin, 2009). These were carried with school heads and parents. In focus group discussions researchers interview participants with common characteristics or experience for the purpose of eliciting ideas, thoughts and perceptions about specific issues linked to an area of interest (Holloway and Wheeler, 2012). In this study learners were opted in the focus group discussions.

Ethical issues are always of primary concern when working with human research subjects (Magwa and Magwa, 2015). Participants were made aware of the purpose of study. With insights from Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) participants were assured of their liberty to willingly participate or withdraw from participating in the study at any point without any obligation. Participants' rights to privacy were respected. All open ended questionnaires were completed anonymously and the recording of the interviews (semi-structured and focus-groups) were safely stored. No names were indicated when the data was transcribed and reported, but a number was been assigned to each participant.

The bulkiness of the data was handled by coding and summarising into pertinent themes (Patton, 2002). The data was transcribed and then reading proceeded resulting in reading the same transcription several. After all the data were read, the codes were written down and grouped into similar categories. The data were then presented, with each category explained as a qualitative narrative (Creswell, 2009).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study sought to investigate the causes and effects of conflicts in secondary schools of Masvingo district. The results are presented and discussed basing on the two research questions guiding the study.

### **Research Question 1:**

#### **What are the causes of conflicts in Masvingo district secondary schools?**

All the participants were asked on their views pertaining to causes of conflicts in schools. One cause established by the study was incompetence. It was noted that wrong managerial skills where some school heads display poor leadership qualities create conflicts between them and teachers. Low performing teachers were also said to create conflicts between themselves, school heads and parents. These findings are also in line with findings by Adhiambo and Samatwa (2011) who established that causes of conflicts amongst educators centre on poor management skills such as dictatorial decisions and poor academic performance.

Conflicts in schools were also said to be as a result of lack discipline among students. Bullying, leasing and theft were identified as sources of pupil-pupil conflicts. Favouritism and unfriendliness by teachers as established by the study, results in conflicts with students. The following statement written by one teacher participant illustrates the views of majority of the participants:

*When school heads for example show favouritism to some teachers such as unfair classroom allocation, and responsibilities not being fairly shared head-teacher conflicts can occur. The affected teacher will be demotivated and as a result will not perform his/ her duty wholeheartedly leading to poor overall development of learners.*

In the same vein Omboko (2010); Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) assert that due to favouritism by authorities towards some teachers and favouritism among students by teachers conflicts can erupt.

Another cause of conflicts within schools established from questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews was lack of sufficient resources. Majority of the participants mentioned that competition for scarce resources such as furniture, and books lead to conflicts among teachers and among learners. One school head interviewee had this to say:

*Limited resources like time, space and equipment can cause for example teachers to compete for the insufficient resources. Even when students are allocated few resources such as text books they may end up in conflict as they will be trying to compete for the scarce books.*

Similarly in Ghana Affol-Brani (2012) carried out a study on causes of conflicts in Ewotu district high schools and established that competition for scarce resources is a major cause of conflicts in schools. Literature indicates that in most organisations resources are scarce and limited, which leads to individual and groups to scramble or compete for their share ( Owusu-Mensah ,2007: Hoban, 2004).

Personality clashes as established by the study cause conflicts between school head and teacher, teacher and teacher, pupil and teacher, parent and teacher to be experienced at school level. It was said that conflicts occur when decisions are made by people who have different beliefs and standards. Hoban (2004) asserts that a clash of personalities in the education system can occur when for instance an intense and highly energetic teacher has to work in the same environment with a slow and less intense teacher. In this case the one who is a hard worker becomes irritated by the sloppiness and laziness of the colleague. Whetten and Cameron (2005) and Argon (2009) contend that because individuals bring different backgrounds in an organisation there will always be conflict based on personal differences. Disagreements on what is factually right, easily turns to a bitter argument over who is morally right.

## **Research Question 2:**

### **What are the effects of conflicts on teaching and learning?**

From the findings it emerged that conflicts have a negative as well as positive side. The learners however, were mainly aware of the negative effects of conflicts.

#### **Negative effects**

Participants expressed that conflicts can cause great stress and unhappiness on the affected. One participant wrote:

*Conflicts can take a toll on the mind causing emotional stress. If relations are not cordial say between head and teacher, the teacher becomes demotivated and this has devastating effects on school activities. Poor health mentally and physically can cause educators to absent themselves from work resulting in children not getting the best.*

One parent had this to say also:

Kukonana pakata pemubereki nemudzidzisi kwakaipa pakuti mudzidzisi anotsivira shungu dzose pamwana. Mukirasi mudzidzisi anoshaya hanya nokudzidza kwemwana asingatarisi basa rake, zvinoita kuti mwana asabudirira muzvidzidzo zvake. (translated):

*Conflict between teacher and pupil is very damaging to the learner. The teacher will divert the anger he/she has towards the parent to the pupil. The teacher will ignore the pupil in class and can avoid marking the pupil's work leading the child not to succeed in school.*

This attitude of ignoring the child by the teacher will not allow the child to reach his/her full potential. Pupil will not benefit fully.

Literature also ascertains that conflict in the school environment has adverse effects on the academic environment, including the morale of educators, and the pace at which they work (Ozgan, 2015; Jennings and Wattam, 2004). Conflict develops into hostility which causes people to withdraw both physically and emotionally. Literature reviewed has ascertained that negative conflict results in unhappiness leading to non-realising of an organisation's goals, the breakdown of relationships among colleagues (Scott, 2010; Rahim, 2011).

#### **Positive Impact**

The qualitative inquiry managed to identify the positive aspects that could emerge as a result of conflict. Teachers, school heads and a few parents noted that in spite of the negative connotations, conflicts in schools can be beneficial resulting in learning correct behaviour after realizing one's mistake, better understanding of one another, and creating a democratic environment where stakeholders are free to express their concerns. The following quotation by a school head portrays these results:

*Conflict when amicably resolved leads to improved relationships and attitudes among people within the school. Learning becomes a success in such an environment.*

Similarly, Robbins (2000) asserts that a certain amount of conflict in an organisation is healthy as it prevents the organisation from stagnating and from producing myopic decisions. It is a pivot around which change takes place in workplaces. In affirmation, Bipath (2008) states that conflict can lead to creation of better solutions to problems, and clarification of personal differences, and improved teamwork.

## **CONCLUSION**

Conflicts are natural part of human life. Conflict refers to all kinds of antagonistic interactions (Meek, Heit and Page, 2005). In school conflict is a daily occurrence between head and teacher, teacher and teacher, teacher and pupil, teacher and parent, pupil and pupil and school and community. Limited resources, lack of communication, different beliefs, and dictatorial decisions create conflict. The notion that conflict has negative effects does not wholly give the right impression. Too much conflict can have adverse effects on pupils, teachers heads like physical (absence) and psychological (alienation indifference). Conflicts on the other hand, can simulate change and problems and inefficiencies in the system will be highlighted.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the basis of the study findings the underlying recommendations are made:

1. Conflict resolution bodies such as disciplinary and Guidance and Counselling committees should be strengthened to help all stakeholders in handling conflict.
2. Classroom management should emphasize ways to development and maintain a positive classroom environment that supports teaching and learning.
3. Teachers, parents, school heads, pupils and communities should be made aware of long and short term negative effects of conflict on teaching and learning.
4. Strategies such as multicultural teaching methods, positive discipline and social and emotional learning for example through dramatization and films should be put in place by the school leadership.

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