

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES IN NIGERIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

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### ABSTRACT

Conflict is an unavoidable phenomenon in any given organization including the school system where there is human interaction. It is also a fact that there is likelihood that personal likes and dislikes are bound to manifest. Social class inequality is deeply rooted in all spheres of life and educational system is not an exception as the institutions are prone to one or other forms of conflict. In view of the foregoing, this paper examined conflict management techniques in Nigerian school system. The concept of conflict was explored and the types of conflict in school system were looked into. Besides, conflict promoting factors as well as the effects in educational industry were consecutively overviewed. Also, the management techniques for ameliorating the phenomena called conflict in schools were meticulously examined. The paper concluded that conflicts are inevitable phenomena in school administration which are neither constructive nor disruptive but the ways they are handled make them either positive or negative. It was suggested among others that: conflict should not be allowed to escalate within the school system to enhance effective teaching and learning, conflicting parties should channel their grievances appropriately and genuinely, synergy must be established among relevant educational stakeholders for the maintenance of peace, stability and progress in educational system and seminars, conferences, workshops and symposiums should be periodically organized for school managers, teachers, non teaching staff and students to equip them with effective strategies for managing conflicts in the school system.

**Key Words:** Conflict, Conflict Management Strategies, School System

### INTRODUCTION

Globally, conflict is an inevitable phenomenon which occurs every day in human life. It is often said that no organization (both private and public) can effectively carry out its day to day activities without encountering conflict (Edet, Benson & Williams, 2017; Owan, 2018). United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (2005) emphasized that conflict when not deals constructively often explode into violence. Conflict should not be totally seen

as evil, but rather a challenge to effect change. Schools like other human organizations are prone to one or other type of conflict. They are neither constructive nor disruptive, but the ways these are handled make them either positive or negative. Ubogu (2016) claimed that schools are made up of people with different attitudes, beliefs, abilities and personality, therefore conflict is inevitable. Conflict in school settings is a daily occurrence simply because a consensus of opinion concerning rules governing the school occasionally exists among the participants (e.g. administrators, students, teachers/lecturers, parents and other stakeholders in education). These parties, particularly students and administrators, see one another as adversaries, not as those working to ensure a common goal and that is why there is potential for conflict in practically every decision which the administrator must make.

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Conflicts in Nigeria educational establishments have been traced mostly to communication gap between staff and school management on one hand and between students and school management on the other hand. Specifically, it is often said that when there is delay by school authority to involve students and staff in decisions making, this might lead to conflict and in fact lead to breakdown of laws and orders (Dike & Dike, 2017). For instance, in November 2019, a case of conflict was reported in one of the secondary schools in Osun State, Nigeria where some students and teachers in the school engaged in physical fight, wielding cutlasses and sticks, a situation that caused tension in the area. This made the State Government to close down the school with immediate effect. The crisis led to destruction of school properties and created tension within the vicinity of the school (November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, Sahara Reporter). In June 2019, the management of Ekiti State University, Nigeria closed the school due to crisis caused by the students. The students in their large number gathered at the satellite gate of the institution where they chanted solidarity songs. It was gathered that in a bid to dissuade the students from going ahead with the protest, the school management hurriedly summoned the officials of the student Union to an emergency meeting, but it appeared that the efforts of the management was ignored by the students who had already occupied the main entrance to the campus (June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Vanguard Newspaper).

Flippo (2008) affirmed that total absence of conflict would be unavoidable, boring and strong indication that conflicts are being suppressed. The inevitability of conflict in schools was also established by Kenza (2009) when he asserted that conflict is part of change in the school system and therefore inevitable. The nature and types of conflicts that occur in administration of schools vary from one school to another. The common types of conflict often occur between students on one hand and the school authority on the other hand. According to Faleti (2013), the higher levels

of conflict include those that involve Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU), Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), Academic Staff Union in Colleges of Education (ASUCOED), Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), Students' Union Government (SUG) and the Government. Therefore, it is the commonest, general and widespread phenomenon.

Conflict continues to be a factor in academic life. Schools frequently appear to be centers of tensions and on occasions they are perhaps a manifestation of problems in the community. The economic downturn in Nigeria in the last two decades has led to poor salaries and wages for staff and inflation has produced great dissatisfaction and agitations among Nigerian teaching and nonteaching staff which has often resulted in industrial disputes and conflicts in the educational sector. This has become a major concern for school administrators and consequently dampened the morale of teachers and other educational workers. To accumulate a series of conflict without devising appropriate management strategies, is like sitting on a keg of gun powder which could explode at any time (Enaigbe & Igbino ghene, 2016). In view of the foregoing, therefore, the focus of the study is to examine the conflict management techniques in Nigerian school system.

## CONCEPT OF CONFLICT

The term conflict carries plethora of definitions depending on the usage and the context of its usage. According to Rahim (2005) conflict is an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or differences within social entities. Simon (2002) viewed conflict as any divergence of interests, objectives or priorities between individual, groups or organizations that do not conform with requirements of a task, activity or process. Ibrahim (2007) perceived conflict as a situation in which two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature and have not been agreed upon.

Uya (2002) defined conflict as a situation in which there are incompatible goals, cognition or emotion within or between individual and groups that led to opposition. In a nutshell, it is an activity that takes place when conscious beings wish to carry out mutually inconsistent acts concerning their wants, needs and obligations. Mutiullahi (2013) elucidated that conflict is an attempt of actors that make use of a threat or coercion to exterminate opponents in order to have access to scarce resources. In the opinion of Onwachekwa (2007) conflict is defined as steaming form that the fact that parties must share scarce resources or work activities which create various status, goals or values.

Amazon (2007) described conflict as form of socialization in that organizations have goals that employees need to adopt at the expense of their interest. Therefore, conflict come into existence whenever the interest group find it practically impossible that their needs are like to be fulfilled or actualized. Obi (2004) affirmed that conflict is an action by a person or group of people which in some way makes it less likely that the desired action of another person or group of people is actualized. In this sense, whenever two or more group of people involve in a struggle towards the realization of their goals, conflict is bound to occur. Ughamadu (2013) conceptualized conflict as disagreement over an issue which may be positive or negative in nature. Conflict is positive or functional when it creates opportunities for eclectic solutions to challenges which will in turn ensure creativity or when it brings real peace or truth out of any situation. Conversely, it is seen as negative as an evitable phenomenon when it has a devastating effects like: vandalization of life and valuable properties, defamation of character or blackmailing, steeping into another shoes, sarcasm, termination of appointments, demotion, marginalization and violence killing (Faleti, 2012).

A critical analysis of the definitions of conflicts revealed that it is a struggle over resources or ideas between two or more

parties caused by the perceptions of the contending parties when they cannot have their desire. UNICEF (2005) posited that conflict is not necessarily synonymous with violence and that conflict occurs not only in violent situation, but inevitably occur between people over ideas, values, positions and perspectives on a range of issues. Although conflict may impede the attainment of one goal, the consequence may be beneficial if they produce new information which in turn enhances the decision making lengthy delays over issues that do not importantly affect the outcome of the project or disintegration of the new team efforts.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The study is anchored on conflict theory propounded by Karl Marx, who sees the society as an arena of social conflict. Conflict theory argues that the social class within the society has different routes to material nonmaterial resources and that the more powerful group exploits the weaker ones which result to class clashes, disagreement or ideological differences. The theory emphasizes that tension and conflicts arise when resources, status and power are not equitably shared among groups in the society and conflicts become the engine for social change (Andres, 2019; Omer & Jabeen, 2016). The theory claimed that the society is in the state of perpetual disagreement because of competition and class struggle for limited resources. Karl Marx affirmed that conflict rather a peaceful growth is an engine of development. It holds that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than consensus and conformity. According to the theory, social institution (educational system) strengthens existing class system that comprises the two major classes: the capitalists, haves or the bourgeois and proletariats, have nots or the poor. The capitalists run the social institution by controlling the means of production and distribution, while the proletariats sell their labour at cheap rate in order to survive (König, Rohner, Thoenig & Zilibotti, 2017)

The crux of the theory revolves around how the institutions in the society including education promote the differential privileges of some groups at the expense of others.

Based on this theory, educational institutions make provision for the manpower to bourgeois. The ruling class ideology is disseminated through the educational industry that establishes the status quo. This resulted to the development of two types of schools in the society: Public and private Schools. The former is for those that cannot afford exorbitant fees and wish to send their children to common masses schools, while the latter is meant for children whose parents are financially buoyant (Andres, 2019). Gentis (2013) substantiated that education reproduce the attitudes and behaviour for division of labour. As Marx claimed that education system is reproducing social classes and that students passed out from the public schools have atleast social mobility. The suitability of applying the theory into educational industry is premised on the fact that conflict is a fundamental component of the school system critical in the reproduction of social inequality, class conflict and racial stratification.

Educational system has turned into an enterprise which gives birth to breeding ground and apparatus for the reproduction of similar social thought over the generations (Greaves, Hill & Maisuria, 2007). Conflict theorists posited all spheres of life are subject to class disparity and education is not an exception. Educational system is being flourishing in Nigeria with a mushroom growth of private owned schools which prominently indicate that disparity in educational opportunities on the basis of income. Highly paid schools maintain certain educational standard and associated elites in the society, while in government schools quality is linked with availability of teachers and resources (Bari & Ginits, 2013). The less privileged people due to financial constraints send their children to government schools, while the rich send their children to private schools.

This resource distribution in the society is exploitative as the rich have access to resources and improved standard of living than the poor who have limited access to resources and minimum life chance. Ray (2006) emphasized that contemporary educational system is an extension of the previous elite's prejudice system and working class is still the determinant of educational opportunities for individuals.

## TYPES OF CONFLICT

Ughamadu (2012) identified the following types of conflict:

- 1. Interpersonal conflict:** this refers to a conflict between two individuals of different personalities, incompatible choices and opinions. It arises when group members have interpersonal clashes characterized by anger, frustration and other negative feelings. For instance, conflict between staff and students in school setting.
- 2. Intra-personal conflict:** this is the type of conflict that is psychological in nature and involving individual's thoughts, values, principles and emotions. It occurs when social entities differ in their values or ideologies on certain issues.
- 3. Intra-group conflict:** this is the type of conflict that happens among individuals within a team as a result of incompatibilities, misunderstanding, interpersonal disagreement among members which leads to tension or difference in views and ideas.
- 4. Intergroup conflict:** this takes place when misunderstanding arises among different teams within an organization. It may arise as a result of varied set of goals, group interest, competition, rivalry or the boundaries set by a group to others which established their own identity as a group.
- 5. Conflict of interest:** this is defined as an inconsistency between two parties in their preference for the allocation of a scarce resource. This type of conflict occurs when each party sharing the same understanding of the situation

prefer a different and somewhat incompatible solution to a problem on decision making.

6. **Substantive conflict:** this type of conflict is characterized by disagreement among group members, ideas and opinions about the task being performed, such as disagreement regarding an organization current strategic position or determining the correct data in a report.

## DISCUSSION

### Conflict Promoting Factors in School System

George (2010) elucidated the following causes of conflict within the school system:

1. **Communication barrier:** conflict arises in the school system when the school management withholds official information, sending improper messages, inhibit feedback and permit environmental noise or distraction. This can transform into animosity, workplace gossip and incorrect assumption which bring about conflict between employees and educational managers.
2. **Paucity of resources:** inadequacy of fundamental resources required for effective service delivery account for conflict in educational enterprise. If staff, students physical and other vital resources needed to do their job are in short supply, competition will arise and those who are unable to obtain what they need to perform their duties will begin to reprimand the management for the lack of germane resources.
3. **Personal relationship:** academic environment can be stressful place and made worse when personal differences begin to manifest among staff. Schools comprise people that come from different backgrounds, experience and Personal relationship can be counterproductive when staff, students and school management are unable to accept personal differences like: race, religion, tribe and cultural background.

4. **Competition:** unhealthy competition in academic environment discourages teamwork, promote individualism and create a hostile workplace. When salary or wages are not proportioned to output in educational industry, institution of learning may experience strong competition among staff and this could account for conflict.
5. **Differential in values and lifestyles:** the values of personnel in schools differ from one another and may result in conflict especially when they fail to accept the differences, character and experience. When insults occur based on ideological difference, aggressive actions, sexuality and risky behaviour, the conflict intensifies until the right solution is offered and accepted.

Other causes of conflict in schools as identified by Ghaffar (2011) include: misappropriation and embezzlement of school fund; indiscipline on the part of staff and students; goals divergence; different in perception; competition for scarce resources; youthful exuberance; favoritisms; nepotism and Godfatherism; increased demand for specialists; unimpressive conditions of service; administrative incompetence of school administrators; personality clash, and negligence of duty.

### Consequence of Conflict in the School System

1. Disruption of academic programmes
2. Inadequate staffing due to unplanned transfer
3. Suspicion and withdrawal from active participation in school activities
4. Hostility
5. Examination Malpractices

### Conflict Management Techniques in Nigerian School System

The better educators and students understand the nature of conflict, the better they are able to manage conflicts constructively. Conflict management refers to the process of identifying and handling

conflict sensibly, fairly and effectively (Adeyemi, 2006). It equally connotes management strategies to control or regulate conflict through internal mechanisms. Moran (2012) opined that it is a philosophy and set of skills that assist individuals and groups to better understand and deal with conflict as it arises in all aspect of their lives. Oluwole (2009) views conflict management as process, programmes and internal mechanisms adopted by school administrators' demands appropriate style which is more of transformational leadership. Managing conflict in schools has been an aged long change for educators, among which are:

1. **Behavioral Management:** Teachers and school administrators remain ultimately responsible for promoting acceptable and successful behaviour in students that fit within the established acceptable standard.
2. **Negotiation:** This is a situation where two or more parties who have common and conflicting interest, state and discussion propose specific term of a possible agreement. It is a deliberate process conducted by representatives of the group deciding to reconcile their differences and reach agreement by consensus.
3. **Mediation:** This happens when two disputing parties work together and assisted by a neutral third party called mediator to resolve their conflict. It is a form of problem solving process where a neutral third party assists disputants to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. It proves as an effective method because it involves a democratic and structured process that enables disputants to resolve their own conflict with the assistance of trained peers (Bentley, 2006 ).
4. **Orientation:** This encompasses values, beliefs, attitudes and propensities developed through teaching activities to promote cooperation, justice, fairness,

tolerance and reduce prejudicial behaviour

5. **Right Information:** Provision of rights information is panacea to conflict resolution as deficiency of information enhances disparity of opinions and social differences.
6. **Collective bargaining:** This is a situation where the representatives of each group come together with a mandate to work out a solution collectively.
7. **Arbitration:** This is a situation in which an independent person acts as an adjudicator or judge in dispute to decide on the term of settlement. Both parties in the conflict have to agree with whom the arbitrator will be binding on all concerned.
8. **Competing style:** This is characterized by assertiveness and uncooperativeness that occurs when the parties involved work for their respective at the expense of opposite party. This style is described as powerful focused style of conflict management.
9. **Curriculum approach:** This is the integration of peaceable classroom approach that reinforces cooperative behaviour and encourages the acceptance of diversity into the curriculum and overall management of classroom. Conflict resolution educational programme attempt to instill problem solving skills and equip educators with necessary tools to teach the students how to resolve conflict in non violent ways.

## CONCLUSION

It can be said that schools like other human organizations are prone to one or other type of conflict due to day to day human interactions. Conflict management techniques are essential ingredients for peaceful coexistence in the schools because school administrators are adversely affected by lack of knowledge on conflict management. The fact that most of the school administrators were not

knowledgeable in conflict management techniques coupled with the absence of laid down procedures for conflict resolution contributed to the high rate of industrial action in the educational institutions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made:

1. Conflict should not be allowed to escalate within the school system to promote effective teaching and learning;
2. Conflicting parties should channel their grievances appropriately and genuinely;
3. Synergy must be established among relevant educational stakeholders for the maintenance of peace, stability and progress in educational system;
4. The limited available resources in the school system should be equitably distributed to avoid havoc in the system; and
5. Seminars, conferences, workshops and symposiums should be periodically organized for school managers, teachers, non teaching staff and students to equip them with effective strategies for managing conflicts in the school system.

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