CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF PRINCIPALS FOR SUSTAINABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Schools are prone to conflicts and breakdown in communication especially in an age where all role players are aware of their rights. School based conflicts can be ignited by a number of aspects. Yet school principals as managers are expected to be able to creatively address conflicts in their schools. The study was designed to identify the principals level of utilization of conflict management strategies to manage these conflicts. The strategies are integrating, dominating, compromising and avoiding strategies. Four research questions addressed the study. A 16 item questionnaire was used to generate data. A sample of 9 principals were randomly selected from a target population of 19 principals in secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. Tables were constructed, frequency counts, percentage and mean computed to provide answers to the research questions. The result revealed that the principals uses the integrating and compromising strategies more than the other strategies in the management of conflicts in their school. Based on these findings, the paper concluded that school administrators (principals) are beginning to understand that conflict is inevitable in the school system and they have appreciate the fact that it could be managed through various strategies. It was recommended that, relevant institutional framework should be appropriately put in place to enable the principals further appreciate the emerging ideas and innovations concerning teacher and students conflict management in schools.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict resolution involves the reduction, elimination or termination of all forms and types of conflicts. While conflict management is a method with which is used to facilitate a positive or at least an agreeable outcome. Principals do involve in conflict resolution and management in the school system on issues bordering on students' discipline, control and amongst the teachers. All meticulous school principals strive for effectiveness, and also to have a strong commitment to fellow teachers in their school as they build relationships with the learners O'Hanlon and Clifford, (2004).

In Nigeria and most other parts of the world, students are being controlled and guided in schools by rules and regulations, school time table and curriculum contents etc. these however affects students' behaviour and learning, teachers who implement the organizational control patterns are also faced with other statutory duties such as updating continuous assessment records class registers, diaries and scheme of work. The principals and teachers do have constraints than any other as they are required to be diligent, honest and responsible, irrespective of the conflicts that could arise in the schools while performing these roles. Therefore, when conflict arises, they

must be managed with a view to resolving them – using either of these strategies: integrating, compromising, avoiding and dominating.

Integrating strategy focuses on gathering and organizing information at the same time, it encourages creative thinking and welcomes diverse perspectives. This strategy enable parties involve in conflict to pool all their information together, put their differences on the table and examine them along with any data that might contribute to resolution. It leads to alternative solution, which addresses all parts of the conflict, other than the initial solutions of the parties involve. This implies that the school system, school authority, students and teachers must be able and willing to contribute time, energy and resources to finding and implementing a solution.

Dominating strategy is used by the school principal to resolve the conflict by dictating what the students and teachers will do. It implies that the school management resolves conflict as it deems fit and communicates its decisions and desires to the students and teachers and they will abide by the decision whether or not they the teachers and students are with it. According to Iwowati (2007) the dominating strategy does not allow inputs from students and teachers in the school system.

Compromising strategy is a middle of the road strategy that gets every one talking about issues and moves them closer to each other and to a resolution. In compromise, each person has something to give and something to take. Compromise is more effective in the school system, when issues are complex and parties in conflict look for a level playing ground and are also willing to exchange concessions. In this strategy, negotiation and bargaining are complementary skills.

Avoiding strategy: this occurs when one party in a potential conflict ignores the conflicting issues and denies the significant of the conflict. It is a way of not addressing the conflict or postponing the conflict for a better time, which never comes. It is a way of postponing or withdrawing from – conflict situations in the school that might cause unpleasantness for the principal in particular and teachers in general.

Msila (2011) in his study of effectiveness in schools states that the challenge of school principals is to identify the problems endemic in their schools. Furthermore, Botha in Msila who contends that the workload of school principals is becoming unmanageable and as a result many school principals, especially in secondary schools, lack the time for an understanding of their leadership roles.

Conflicts are caused by a number of aspects that create tensions between people. Corvette (2007) contends that conflict exists wherever, and whenever there is incompatibility of cognitions or emotions within individuals or between individuals. Moreover, conflict arises in personal relationship in organizations, between groups and between nations. Many schools have broken down relationships because of the existence of this incompatibility. School managers in conflict schools will face huge tasks as they try to be effective. It is also important to note that the principals' philosophy will influence how they react to conflict, some perceive it as something to be avoided at all costs while others see it as an aspect that is necessary to enhances a sustainable learning environment. It is the perception or belief to opposing needs, wishes, ideas, interests and

goals exist that create what we commonly call conflict. Conflict is everywhere and it is inevitable. It arises from many sources. In addition to being the antecedent for negotiation, conflict may also arise during negotiation. The subject of conflict is large and complex. Conflict if misdiagnosed, can lead to a spiral of antagonistic interaction and aggravated destructive behaviour.

Statement of the Problem
Despite the national system of education in Nigeria today, schools are diverse in their organizational structure with attendant emerging conflicts arising, school principals operate on formal structures which will enable them perform their institutional daily activities. Inspite of these, school principals engage on diverse approaches on general school administration which invariably breeds conflicts. And because the school system is social system, where components are people. According to Peretomode (2012) each of these individual is shaped by his psychological uniqueness and sociological attributes. Nevertheless, the impact of these diversities in the schools management leads to certain conflict arising within the administration as a result of nomothetic dimension, which stresses institutional roles, rules, regulations and procedures for getting things done in other to achieve institutional goals and the ideographic dimension, which stresses – social interaction of individual's need. Conflicts create serious administrative problems also in the school system because of these diversities or dimensions of the individuals in the school system and the need to be addressed with a view to resolving them as they arise.

Aim and Objectives of the Study
The aim of the study generally is to examine principal conflict management strategies in secondary schools for sustainable learning environment. Specifically, the study sought to identify
1. Principals level of utilization of integrating strategy in conflict management for a sustainable learning environment.
2. Principals level of utilization of dominating strategy in conflict management for a sustainable learning environment
3. Principals level of utilization of compromising strategy in conflict management for a sustainable learning environment.
4. Principals level of utilization of avoiding strategy in conflict management for a sustainable learning environment.

Significance of the Study
The study will be significant to principals and managers of schools, to those who want to understand teacher commitment, and schools dysfunctionality, many schools are broken down by conflicts that alienate both principals and teachers from their professional work. School principals who can utilize these strategies effectively will know how to act in times of conflict. According to Snodgrass and Blunt (2009) opined that unmanaged conflict can create dysfunctional schools, which deprive learners of their rights to citizenship through and equal education. In other words, when conflict is not well managed, the learning environment is in chaos, which at time affects the students. This study will be significant in that it wants to comprehend the role of principals in managing conflict in the school as they enhance good learning environment even as they work in challenging situations where there are conflicts.

Research Questions

The following research questions addressed the problems and purpose of this study.

1. What is the level of opinions of principals on their use of integrating strategy in the management of conflicts for sustainable learning environment?
2. What is the level of opinions of principals in their use of dominating strategy in the management of conflicts for a sustainable learning environment?
3. What is the level of opinions of principals about their use of compromising strategy in the management of conflicts for a sustainable learning environment?
4. What is the level of opinions of principals about their use of avoiding strategy in the management of conflict for a sustainable learning environment?

Methodology

The study used a descriptive survey design. The population comprises 19 principals in 19 secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The sample size consisting of 9 principals was selected through the simple random technique. A 16 items structured questionnaire titled "conflict management strategies of principals for sustainable learning environment" (CMSPSLEQ) was used to collect data. The data collected were analyzed using frequency counts, percentage, and mean rating.

Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The analysis of data and discussion of findings from secondary school principals and the strategies to conflict management, which provided answers to the research questions were presented thus:

Research Question 1

What is the level of opinions of principals on the use of integrating strategy in the management of conflict for a sustainable learning environment?

Table 1: Raw score and percentage of opinions of the principals on their use of integrating strategy in the management of conflict for a sustainable learning environment

S/N	Item	Principals				
		N	A	%	D	%
1.	Students' and teacher's conflict issues are investigated before any conflict is resolved	9	4	44	5	56
2.	Students and teachers involved in conflict are always allowed to find solution to the resolution of the conflict in the school	9	6	67	3	33
3.	The consensus decision in the resolution of conflicts are often reinforced	9	5	56	4	44
4.	Creative thinking and diversified perspectives are adapted to minimize students and teachers' conflict in the school	9	7	78	2	22
	Total	36	22	245	14	155
	Mean	9	5.5	61.25	3.5	38.75

Table 1 shows the level of principals opinions in the use of integrating strategy in the management of conflict for the sustainable learning environment with a mean of 61.3 which is the highest. It shows that principals uses the integrating strategy more.

Research Question 2
What is the level of opinion of principals on the use of dominating strategy in the management of conflict for a sustainable learning environment?

Table 2: Raw score and percentage of opinions of the principals on their use of dominating strategy in the management of conflict for a sustainable learning environment

S/N	Item	Principals				
		N	**A**	**%**	**D**	**%**
1.	Force is not frequently used to resolve conflict in the school	9	3	33	5	67
2.	Students who involve in conflict are not denied their rights of participation in conflict resolution	9	4	44	5	56
3.	Lasting resolutions of students' and teachers conflict are guaranteed in my schools.	9	6	67	3	33
4.	Hasty decisions are not always taken in the managements of teachers' and students' conflict					
	Total	36	17	188	19	212
	Mean	9	4.5	47	4.75	53

Table 2 shows that the level of principals opinion in the use of dominating strategy is lower than that of integrating strategy with a mean of 47.0.

Research Question 3
What is the level of opinion of principals in the use of compromising strategy in the management of conflict for a sustainable learning environment.

Table 3: Raw score and percentage of opinion of the principals on their use of compromising strategy for a sustainable learning environment

S/N	Item	Principals				
		N	**A**	**%**	**D**	**%**
1.	Students and teachers are encourage to make concessions as a way to resolve their conflicts in school	9	7	78	2	22
2.	In my school, teachers and students are moderately satisfied irrespective of who wins or looses in any conflict	9	4	44	5	56
3.	In my school, teachers and students are always allowed to meet privately for settlement of their conflict	9	3	33	6	67
4.	Mutually acceptable solutions to conflicts among students and teachers are guaranteed in my school	9	3	56	4	44
	Total	36	19	211	17	189
	Mean	9	4.75	52.75	4.25	47.25

Table 3 shows that the principal level of opinions in the use of compromising strategy in the management of conflict with a mean of 52.75 is lower than the integrating strategy and higher than the dominating strategy.

Research Question 4
Raw score percentage of principals opinion on their use of avoiding strategy

S/N	Item	Principals				
		N	**A**	**%**	**D**	**%**
1.	Teachers and students are encouraged to ignore the conflicting issues for peace to be in the school	9	9	100	0	0
2.	Teachers and students are afraid of pursuring a matter against the school authority but instead seek learning	9	4	44	5	56
3.	Conflicting students' matters were set aside due to pressing administrative and academic issues	9	3	33	6	67
4.	Principals avoid taking sanctions on students and teachers to avoid stepping on toes	9	3	33	6	67
	Total	36	19	210	17	190
	Mean	9	4.75	52.75	4.25	47.25

Table 4 shows that the level of principals opinions about the use of avoiding strategy in the management of conflict with a mean of 52.5 who agreed and a mean of 47.25 who disagreed shows that principals uses the avoiding strategy.

Discussion of Findings

The percentage (%) score of the principals using integrating strategy in the management of conflict is more than any other strategy. The result shows that principals adopt the strategies, whenever it suits them. Principals effective utilization of the integrating strategy may be as a result of the establishment of disciplinary committees by the principals in their various schools. This method improves students' and teachers' sense of belonging and allows fair hearing in the school system. According to Acholonu (1991), good administrators are concerned in stimulating members to take actions towards achieving described goals. This is to say, principals can minimize conflict through consultations and teamwork, which enhances administrative effectiveness and students' academic achievement.

In the second findings, which is table two indicates that principals do not frequently use the dominating strategy in the management of conflict in the school. The principal mean percentage of 47.0 agreed. The implication of the findings imply that principals can resolve conflict as they deem fit and do not to a large extent place themselves in the position of dictators when deciding conflicts in the school.

In the third findings of the study, principals uses the compromising strategy effectively well in the management of conflict in the school as shown on the 52.75 mean response. Compromising conflict management strategy is most adopted in a complex conflict matter. The parties involve in the school must be willing to exchange concessions.

The fourth finding shows that principals uses the avoiding conflict management strategy within the school system as shown on the mean response of 52.5. Principals use of avoiding strategy is a way of avoiding the inaction of some teachers and students parents and its' not healthy to the school system. This however pose a threat to principals on issues that border on students management effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this study is to determine the extent principals use the integrating, compromising, dominating and avoiding strategies in the management of conflict in the school for a sustainable learning environment. The study reveals that principals use more of the integrating strategy than any other.

The study outcome goes further to imply that managers of school (principals) are beginning to understand that conflict is inevitable and appreciate the fact that it could be managed through various strategies so as to sustain a conducive learning environment.

The study also revealed that while other strategies could be used in resolving conflicts in the school, the dominating strategy should be avoided at all costs because the long term effect can be devastating. In addition, the study suggests that the compromising and integrating styles of conflict management should be used jointly in the management of conflict in the school, while the avoiding and dominating strategies may not be suggested to be a reasonable styles of resolving conflict because they speak injustice and threat to conflict resolution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends as follows:
1.   Principals should be educated on the negative implications in the use of the avoiding strategy
2.   Infusing and integrating conflict resolution into the school curriculum and culture is also imperative.
3.   Above all, it is very imperative that school board organize regular workshops, seminars, conferences and orientation programmes for principals and teachers on conflict management strategies. This is appropriate to improve their knowledge, particularly the emerging ideas and innovations concerning students and teachers conflict management in schools.

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