PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT
Managing conflict at school has been an aged old challenge for educators. Recently attention has been drawn to the level of violence in schools and society due to conflicts within those in the system, namely students, teachers and other staff. This paper discussed psychological approaches to conflict management in Nigerian Educational system. The paper observes that conflicts are a natural path of life and therefore a natural path of school life and suggests among many things that when teachers and students learn to resolve their own conflicts, the atmosphere in school is more pleasant for everyone. The psychological approach suggested in this paper include the fact that teachers can spend more time teaching and students can spend more time learning.

Keywords: Psychological approaches, Conflict management, Educational system

INTRODUCTION
There have been cases of conflict of different forms and types in Nigeria especially in the educational system for the past decades. Most common reasons for the conflicts are due to disagreement and or differences of opinion between members or groups over scarcity of resources and socio-economic inequalities leading to mistrust, hostility, prejudice and antagonism. Others are differences in wealth distribution which gives rise to envy, breakdown in communication, oppression of the poor by the rich, just to mention a few. In Nigerian educational system conflict arises over non improved conditions of service for staff, and non-improvement in the physical conditions for teaching, learning and research which often leads to strike action by the different unions in the system.

Conflict is from the Latin word ‘Confligere’, meaning ‘to clash or engage in a fight’. It connotes a confrontation between one or more parties aspiring towards incompatible or competitive means or ends (Miller, 2002). Miller, Heath, Molcan and Dugoni (1991) see conflict as ‘the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups’.
Conflict refers to some forms of friction, disagreement or discord arising within a group when the beliefs or actions of one or more members of the group are either resisted by or unacceptable to one or more members of another group. Conflict within the same group is known as intra-group conflict and conflict outside the group is known as inter-group conflict. The immediate impression we get from the mention of the word conflict would be the equivalent of words like fighting, crisis, destruction, war and misunderstanding. Yet, not all conflicts carry such effects or are destructive.

Despite all its negative aspect, conflicts and disagreement between people has its good side. Conflict is actually the main vehicle through which change takes place in our society. When we disagree, it helps us sharpen our focus and decide what the important issues are for us. Suppression of conflict and dissent is a social sign that freedom is on the decline and democracy is in trouble. Seen from this point of view, conflict is both revolutionary and an absolute necessity. There are two discernible forms of conflict, namely:

1. **Functional Conflict:** This is conflict that is positive which also brings about change.

   It is a healthy, constructive disagreement between groups or individuals. This form of conflict should be tolerated and understood as part of life, and should lead to answers to questions and bring about injustices being challenged, contradictions being rejected and deprivations being addressed.

   The explosiveness, the outward costs and the divisiveness of conflict are so great that it is often difficult to see the ways in which conflicts fulfils useful functions. Yet it does in the following areas: It promotes loyalty within the group, it signals the needs for and help promote short run social change and it appears intimately involved in moving societies towards new levels of social integration.

   If conflict pits groups and organisations against one another, it also tends to promote unity within the group and people who otherwise are competitors, to work together in harmony. Another positive function of conflict is that it serves to notify the society that serious problems exist that is being handled by the traditional social organization. It forces the recognition of those problems and encourages the development of new solutions to the conflict.

   Again there is a general positive function of conflict that is closely related to the earlier one and it is much more problematic. One view of human history tends to focus upon conflict particularly upon war as a primary mechanism through which nations have developed. In other words, war was the mechanism that transformed weak societies into large, powerful ones.
2. **Dysfunctional conflict:** This is negative conflict that leads to problems and destruction of relationships, property and even the parties to the conflict themselves. Dysfunctional conflict should be discouraged and be worked and improved upon using the methods of conflict resolutions; using methods that are generally non-violent.

Conflict takes place in the course of interaction between individuals and groups. Furthermore, it takes place because individuals and groups are seeking to achieve goals and objective, or to fulfil certain desires which may be scarce and which others are also seeking or are reluctant to share with others. Thus, conflict becomes an inevitable outcome of human interaction. Finally, even though conflict is potentially dangerous. It is also malleable and can respond to positive management and resolution. Conflicts often ensue from socio-economic, ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, and gender differentiation within the context of scarce resources and struggle for their control by different groups. According to Pruitt and Rubin (1986), conflict occurs whenever there is ‘perceived divergence of interest or a belief that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously’.

The primary sources of conflicts are divergent interest associated with class, economy, ethnic, cultural, religious, political and racial differentiation. These factors often combined in different degrees to produce conflict of varying scope, intensity, duration, and consequences. Although these differentiations are necessary conditions for inter group conflicts, they do not constitute sufficient conditions. As a result, population heterogeneity is not necessarily accompanied by violent conflict except where scarcity and inequality are acute.

Conflicts are often categorised in terms of their origin, domain of expression, and issues or grievances that are canvassed. However, such categorisations are not mutually exclusive, because issues that are at stake in any conflict may transvers several domain, culture, ethnicity, religion, economy, politics, race and gender. Nonetheless it is common in the literature to classify intra group or inter group antagonism and aggression as class, political, cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts.

**THEORIES OF CONFLICT**

Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace Centre (2013), identified four basic theories of conflict, namely: Human needs theory, Relational theory, Political theory and Transformational theory.
1. Human needs theory – the basic assumption of this theory is that it is the deprivation of individuals and communities’ access to the means of satisfying their basic needs. A human need is behind all violent conflicts.

2. Relational theory – the basic assumption is that conflict is a result of an interaction of different individual and or groups with differing cultural orientations, values, and interests. Conflict is at the heart of all human relationships.

3. Political theory – the basic assumption is that the state is the sole context where various groups or individuals are competing to take advantage of others. They often believe that they will only gain access to the state when others are eliminated or disabled. Power is at the centre of all conflicts.

4. Transformative theory – that conflict is caused by systemic and structural injustice and inequality expressed by competing social, cultural, economic, religious, and political frameworks. Transformative conflict is exacerbated by the tension between the demand for change and the resistance of the structures and institutions of the demand for change.

SOURCES AND TYPES OF CONFLICT IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

Several types of conflicts do exist in schools among which are conflicts between management and staff, staff and students, teachers and parents and management and the community. The more common type experienced in Nigerian educational system is conflict of interest. The issues are many and always almost the same – money, time, resources including procedural and psychological issues (trust, respect, honesty, fairness, etc.). The conflict ensues when the individual or individuals have invested so much of himself or herself (psychologically and emotionally) into a project and there are no satisfactory remunerations. This sense of interest takes over his or her reason and his or her sense of objectivity is clouded.

In some schools today, many conflicts find their sources in the principal’s own leadership skills. Although many variables impact an individual’s leadership, only four are common and are noted here. They are: conflict response style, social problems solving behaviour, communicator’s style and basis of social power. These dimensions of leadership behaviour are related to the amount of conflict that a principal or the school administrator encounters and the successes and failures resulting from managing it (Johnson and Payne, 1997).

CONFLICTS IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Conflicts in Nigerian educational system are numerous but the main forms of the conflicts are those that take place between government and teachers/lecturers which is most often a demand for improved conditions of service for staff and improvement in the physical
conditions for teaching, learning and research. A second category is those that take place between proprietors and teachers as in the case of private educational institutions which most often centres around increase in salary. A third form is the conflict taking place between parents and teachers. In other words, conflicts in Nigerian educational system have become very common and frequent in all levels of its education. More often than not, the missing element in each conflict situation as observed by Okebukola (2013), is in government and all the authorities concern in the matter not being proactive enough to keep the striking forces in the communication loop when certain provisions in some agreement cannot be met within the timeline specified.

**EFFECTS OF CONFLICTS ON THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

Repeated conflicts in Nigerian educational system has put the country into what Gotan (2012) describes as educational paralysis. He observed, and rightly so, that due to the incessant strike in the Nigerian educational system by different groups that matters, the sorry state of instructional materials, teaching and research equipment in the universities in particular continue to meet the agitation with utter disdain. In the other level, public education system has been killed to pave way for private ones to profiteer.

The result of this is that, opportunistic investors in the education sector moved from nursery, primary and secondary schools into establishing tertiary institutions. All levels of public institutions in Nigeria today are in various states of disrepair: inadequate libraries, laboratories, workshops, equipment, materials and motivated personnel. Their highly expensive private counterparts are only embellished with state-of-art facilities and other wherewithal but lacking in-depth quality curricula implementation. Others are substandard in forms and function; with inadequacies in everything that could qualify any contraption as a school. Gotan (2012) notes that their products are like mechanically driven technicians lacking in versatility; with little or no intuitive, imaginative and creative minds. They therefore become robotically gullible, hypnotically dogmatic and pathologically stupid.

The products of the decrepit public institutions find it impossible to compete favourably with those who had sound educational background from well-equipped and facilitated institutions. The certificates wield worth less value as the papers that bear them. Bearers of such certificates are referred to as educated illiterates, they are unemployable and the sociopolitical and economic environment does not favour their taking solace in creating jobs for themselves. They form the army of idle handed and therefore turn themselves over, either as chief labour to slave drivers who use them as machines or unscrupulous politicians as devils workshop used as thugs, assassins or terrorists.
UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS

Conflict management refers to the long term management of intractable conflicts. It is the label for the variety of ways by which people handle grievances – standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Those ways include such diverse phenomena as gossip, ridicule, lynching, mediation, law, arrogance and avoidance. Which forms of conflict management will be used in a given situation can be somewhat predicted and explained by the social structure or social geometry of the conflict.

Conflict management is distinct from conflict resolution. In order for actual conflict to occur, there should be an expression of exclusive patterns, which tell why the conflict was expressed the way it was. Hence conflict is not just about simple inaptness, but is often connected to a previous issue. The latter refers to resolving the dispute to the approval of one or both parties; whereas, the former concerns an on-going process that may never have a resolution. Neither is it considered the same as conflict reformation which seeks to reframe the positions of the conflict parties. As observed earlier, conflict is a natural and common path of school life. But when dealing with school conflict or any conflict scenario, the conflict manager must consider the entire scope of the conflict episode.

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The primary conflict manager in the school is the principal or the school administrator, the person who has power to make changes and who is responsible for outcomes in the conflict episode. The following are some of the psychological strategies a school manager needs to adopt when dealing with conflict of any sort in a school system:

1. **Counselling**

When personal conflict leads to frustration and loss of efficiency, counselling may prove to be a helpful antidote. Although few schools can afford the luxury of having professional counsellors on the staff, given some training, school administrators may be able to perform this function. The simple process of being able to vent one’s feelings – that is, to express them to a concerned and understanding listener, is enough to relieve frustration and make it possible for the frustrated individual to advance to a problem solving frame of mind, better able to cope with a personal difficulty that is affecting his or her work adversely. Listening to staff, student or the individual or groups with sympathy and understanding is unlikely to escalate the problem, and is a widely used approach for helping people to cope with problems that interfere with their effectiveness in their place of work (Arvid, 1976).
2. **Mediation**

Mediation helps stakeholders discuss issues, repair past injuries and develop the tools needed to face disagreements effectively. Mediation may help conflicting parties glimpse at their blind spots, broaden their perspectives, and even muddle through the problem-solving process.

3. **Use of dialogue**

Use of dialogue as a psychological approach to conflict management in school has to do with democracy in the principal’s or teacher’s style of management. According to Okebukola (2013), the use of democratic style of management means that the students, the teachers and other members of the staff should be involved in decision making, bridging the communication gap between students, teachers, other staff and the management as well as setting up welfare committee to seek out their problems and challenges. Dialogue strengthens relationships, builds teamwork, and encourages open communication and cooperative problem solving. It also leads to resolving disagreement bringing about increased productivity, making allies diffuses anger, airing issues in a positive, supportive environment.

4. **Understanding the developmental stage of the student**

In developmental stages of a child, each stage builds upon the successful completion of the earlier stage. The implication of this is that the behaviour of an individual at a particular point in time is a function of how the individual was able to face the challenges of the previous stage. For example, adolescence stage is one of the crucial developmental stages that confront the individual. Santrock (2008) observes that adolescence is a time when conflicts with parents and schools escalate beyond childhood levels. This increase in conflict can be ascribed to a number of factors which include biological changes of puberty, cognitive changes involving increased idealism and logical reasoning, and social changes focused on independence and identity. As the adolescent battles with this conflict, it is expected to affect their performances and relationship within the school and environment. Teachers and school administrators must watch out for these moments in their students and attend to them appropriately.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Conflicts are a reality in every establishment, but conflict is not evil in itself. It is what an individual or groups do with conflict that could turn into evil. Below are some ways through which conflicts in the school system could be managed:

1. Counselling units in the school system should be made more functional by making sure that there is adequate and qualified manpower and material resources.
2. Educational psychologists should form a great part of the school management team giving their expertise in the management of the school.

3. Incorporating peace education into the school curriculum so students may acquire the values and knowledge and develop attitudes, skills and behaviours that will help them to live in harmony with themselves, others and their natural environment.

CONCLUSION

Unmanaged or poorly managed conflicts generate a breakdown in trust and lost productivity. For small businesses where success often hinges on the cohesion of a few people, loss of trust and productivity can signal the death of the business. With a basic understanding of psychological approaches to conflict management, government, teachers, students and school managers can deal with conflicts before they escalate beyond repair.

REFERENCES


