

Variability Pattern in Conflict Management Strategies among School Administrators of Secondary Schools in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The present study examined current management strategies adopted by school administrators for resolving conflict, with a view to determining the extent to which these actors agree on conflict management procedures. Adopting a stratified random sampling technique, to ensure adequate national representation, 2400 administrators from rural and urban school districts were surveyed. Key stakeholders in the education enterprise, such as teachers, principals, proprietors of schools as well as members of the school board were, in addition interviewed. Clear disparity appear to exist between sampled groups, in a majority of the tested variables of avoidance, forcing, and bribing, but a clustering pattern, indicating group consonance, was observed in the application of bargaining method. The result highlights administrators' preference in the use of bargaining as a conflict management tool in school districts. This research has identified the preferred conflict management strategy among school administrators. In addition it has thrown light on areas of dissonance, in conflict management strategy, among education managers.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1842, when the early missionaries established the first school in Nigeria, education has metamorphosed into a large and complex social organization. Predictably, most school systems like other social systems, now experience institutional conflict. Determinants of school organizational conflict have been traced to leadership styles of principals (Devereaux 2003; Goulet 2003; Eregha 2006) structural variation in school organization (Ma and Willms 2004; Lawal 2006; Yakubu 2006) employee unionism (Hee and Vasutheven 2004; Taiye, 2003) and a host of other factors (Benson 2003; Foster and Hilaire 2004). Whatever the causative agents to institutional conflict may be, educators, parents and policy makers (Wadd 1997; Wright 1977; Abia 2000; Collard 2003; Abosede 2006) have consistently counseled on the need for quick resolution of organizational conflict.

It is important for school administrators to pay attention to this call because studies by Lynch (2000), Amaize (2007), Onoyume (2007a) show that when conflict is not adequately resolved, or when there is undue delay in resolution of conflict, properties, lives and academic hours of unimaginable magnitude are lost. Delay in resolution of school

conflict has resulted in disruptions of academic calendars leading to economic as well as psychological exertion. More significant are reports (Avwata 2002; Onoyume 2007b) that while students are "compelled" to stay out of school because of degenerated conflict situations, these students often become victims of armed robbers and gang wars. Some students have in the process been recruited as armed robbers, assassins and political thugs. More studies (Ibok 2000; Jike 2002; Ndiribe and Igbikiowubo 2007) show that, when such protracted conflicts are finally resolved, and students are called back to school, these students who have been recruited as robbers and assassins seldom return back to their schools. Many of them completely drop-out of school, and create more problems for the society.

Thus it is expedient to devise appropriate strategies for effective management of school conflict to enhance school effectiveness. But developing an effective strategy for conflict management in the school requires major actors in the education enterprise working in harmony, unity and with some measurable similarities in patterns of conflict management strategy. Thus, principals, proprietors of educational institutions, members of the board of education as well as teachers, who are proximal stakeholders in the

education industry, should have a common purpose and focus on strategies for conflict management in the school. Dissonance between, and among these groups of school administrators, on how to manage school conflict, could retard effective management and resolution of school conflict.

Theoretical Link

This research is premised on Lipham and Hoeh (1974) concept of the school as a social system, in which stability is constantly endangered by both intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors. The need therefore arises, for education managers to apportion a sizeable portion of their time to conflict management. Since early classical periods of Durkheim (1956), Parsons (1959), and Bowles and Gintis (1976), more contemporary scholars like Blau (1986), Henkin (2000), Naquin and Tyne (2003), Arubayi (2006) have demonstrated significant relationships between organizational conflict and system effectiveness. These authors have separately and in consonance reported that students appear to learn better in a school environment with minimum conflict. In other words, schools are more effective in an environment where there is harmony between and among school administrators, staff and students.

Building on this framework of harmony and schools' effectiveness, Harris and Sherblom (1999), Dee and Henkin (2001) reported that teachers' commitment to duty is linked to school organizational climate, arising from trust and team commitment. In studies by Cohen and Bailey (1997), Bryk and Schneider (2002), Park (2005) teamwork was also reported to be an important predictor of teachers commitment to work. Later studies by Lam (2004), Adenipekun (2007) have also linked schools effectiveness to teachers' commitment to duty, the school organization as well as teamwork. Thus, the literature is replete with research linking organizational effectiveness with a state of minimal conflict (Ikoya 2004; Pushor and Murphy 2004). But the pertinent question now, is, can teachers commitment to students, the school organization or even team members be realized in an atmosphere of distrust, rancor and conflict? On the contrary, there are several reports of decreased teacher productivity in school organizations riddled with conflict (David 2006; Onye 2006). Conversely Leithwood and Hallinger (2002), Akpan (2006) reported increased

productivity and school effectiveness in institutions with low organization conflict, where there is little or no conflict between board members proprietors, teachers and students.

Thus, globally, more research appears to focus on issues concerned with harmony, and reduced conflict in schools systems. Research perspectives on school conflict, in Nigeria, have however tended to focus most often on extrinsic management of school organizational conflict (Rust 1991; Okon 2006). This approach is quite understandable, in the sense that, Nigeria, just like most developing African countries, is riddled with inter-ethnic, inter-communal, religious, economic, and leadership crisis (Ige 2006; Akinola et al. 2007). Most often, these external aggressions are transferred to school systems. This assumption according to Ogbonna (2006), Ijeoma and Osagie (2006) could be a major reason why current studies on school conflict in Nigeria, have paid special attention to these extrinsically motivated factors. Embugus (2005) for example, reported a high incidence of conflict in schools located in regions that are economically poorly endowed. Similarly, Jike (2000), Ikoya (2000) linked school organizational conflict to regional turbulence, particularly among the Niger-Delta States of Nigeria, agitating for fiscal federalism, improved economic and social conditions.

Very few studies have explored intrinsic determinants of school organizational conflict, particularly those that are related to the principals, proprietors of school, members of the Board of Governors and Teachers who are key figures in schools' administration. Consequently, the focus of this study is on variation in patterns of conflict management strategy by these four principal administrators in the Nigerian secondary school system.

Objectives

Several studies have been carried out on conflict management in school systems (Burns 1978; Rowan 1990; Donaldson 2001; Harris 2004; Lam 2005). However, not many of these studies have paid particular attention to differences between school administrators' conflict management strategies in Nigeria. The present authors subscribe to Narmore's (2004) assumption that disparity between administrators in an organization, regarding application of conflict management strategies, could be dysfunctional in the management of conflict in system.

Based on this assumption our study examined variation in the conflict management strategies of principals, members of the school board, proprietors of school and teachers in Nigerian secondary schools. A thorough review of the literature provides the following as current approaches to conflict management in school systems. These are avoiding, smoothing, and bargaining, forcing, bribing and problem solving. In examining these six approaches, four that were found to be more relevant to the Nigerian school system were empirically tested. Four questions were answered and one null hypothesis tested.

Research Questions

1. Is there a difference between principals, proprietors, board members and teachers in the application of avoiding method for conflict management in secondary schools?
2. Is there a difference between principals, proprietors, board members and teachers in the application of bargaining method for conflict management in secondary schools?
3. Do principals, proprietors, board members and teachers differ in the application of forcing as a method for conflict management?
4. Do principals, proprietors, board members and teachers differ in the application of bribing as a method for conflict management?

Hypothesis

1. There is no significant difference between principals, proprietors, board members and teachers in the application of avoiding, bargaining, forcing, and bribing as strategies for conflict management in secondary schools

METHOD

The researchers adopted the ex-post facto design, using survey method to collect information from participants. The study population comprised all 21,932 principals of public and private secondary schools in Nigeria, 8,576 proprietors of private secondary schools, 13,356 members of the board of governors and 298,774 teachers of public and private secondary schools in Nigeria.

Instrument

A 20 item questionnaire was developed from

an earlier instrument used for a similar study (Ikoya 2005) on management of school conflict. The items in the instrument were suggestive of some particular strategic management pattern, for conflict resolution in secondary schools. Each indicator was worded to capture the meaning of the conflict management strategy for which participants' response is sought. Professors of educational management including specialists in conflict management and resolution examined the construct validity of the instrument. To establish the psychometric value of administrators conflict management scale, the instrument was further subjected to content-related validation. Thus the instrument was administered to a purposive sample of 25 "judges" comprising 5 professors, 5 principals, 5 proprietors, 5 teachers, and 5 members of education board. They were provided with a one-page written description of the hypothesized factors. For each of the items, the "judges" were required to certify its ability to identify the intended conflict management strategy. The results of the content validation showed that each of the 5-items sub-scales represented the tested strategy. Items 8 in sub-scale B and item 14 in sub-scale C were rewarded and included in the present analysis in accordance with the "judges" recommendations.

Sample

A stratified random sampling technique was adopted so as to ensure adequate representation of the six geopolitical zones that make up the country. On the whole 2520 samples were drawn which comprised principals, proprietors of private secondary schools, members of the board of governors and teachers. The subjects comprised male, female school administrators whose age ranged between 25 and 57 years old. Each respondent was a professional in his or her functioning area with a mean experience score of 12.37 years, and a range score of between 5 and 33 years. The sample size was adequate in terms of providing dependable estimates of the population characteristics; the bound error of estimation for the present study was $\pm 3\%$ (Schaeffer 1996).

Four trained assistants visited the sample zones for data collection. A trained assistant collected the data for each zone. All the questionnaires were self-administered and were collected at the end of the exercise by the assistant. The questionnaires that could not be collected

immediately were later retrieved from the data box placed in pre-designated offices for that purpose. On the whole 2413 questionnaires were returned and 13 were not properly completed, consequently there was 95.24% rate of return.

RESULTS

Result of data analysis on the four research questions asked are presented in table 1.

Results of data presented in table 1 in response to question 1 reveal some disparity between sampled administrators in the application of tested strategies for school conflict management. More members of the board of education show preference in the application of avoiding ($x=3.20$) as a conflict management strategy, in the school system. The mean scores for proprietors in $x = 2.21$ while those for teachers and principals are 2.01 and 1.80 respectively, in the application of avoiding as a conflict management strategy.

In response to research question 2, teachers ($x = 3.91$) appear more involved in the application of bargaining as a conflict management strategy. The mean scores for other administrators, presented in table 1 are as follows: Principals ($x = 3.81$); Proprietors ($x = 3.67$) and board members ($x = 3.43$). Forcing as a conflict management technique is not so prevalent among school administrators. Thus, in response to question 3, only teachers and principals with mean scores of 2.85 and 2.79 exceeded the critical mean ($x = 2.75$). This result, though expected, fell below the

hypothesized mean. Principal and teachers interact on daily basis with the students and occasionally, a few of these, students may require compulsion to obtain the necessary discipline for effective classroom management. The researchers were therefore not surprised that both principals and teachers scored above average in the application of forcing as a conflict management strategy in the school system.

Bribing as a conflict management strategy appears rare among principals and teachers. The mean scores for principals and teacher, in the application of Bribing as a conflict management technique are (Principal, $x = 2.21$ S.D 0.58; Teachers, $x = 2.01$ S.D 0.59). Both group scores were below the $x = 2.75$ critical value. Proprietors of secondary schools and members of the board of Governors of secondary schools however appear more involved on the application of Bribing in the management of school conflict. Result shows that the mean scores for proprietors and Board Members in the application of Bribing in conflict management are 3.72 and 3.04. Both scores were observed to be higher than the 2.75 critical mean. In attempt to find out whether or not the observed differences are significant, the result was statistically tested with a null hypothesis which stated that:

There is no significant difference between principals, proprietors, board members and teachers in the application of avoiding, bargaining forcing and bribing as conflict management technique in secondary schools.

Table 1: Mean score and standard deviation of administrators' conflict management strategy

Strategy	Type N	Avoiding		Bargaining		Forcing		Bribing	
		x	SD	x	SD	x	SD	x	SD
<i>Subjects</i>									
Principal	600	1.80	0.82	3.81	0.69	2.79	0.52	2.21	0.58
Proprietors	600	2.21	0.84	3.67	0.65	2.21	0.62	3.72	0.65
Board members	600	3.20	0.61	3.43	0.54	2.27	0.53	3.04	0.69
Teachers	600	2.01	0.73	3.91	0.62	2.85	0.68	2.07	0.49
Total	2400	2.30	0.75	3.71	0.62	2.55	0.58	2.76	0.59

Critical X = 2.75 Mean score > 2.75 was considered preferred strategy.

Table 2: Chi square analysis on application of conflict management strategy by school administrators.

Strategy	Avoiding	Bargaining	Forcing	Bribing	Df	χ^2 calculated	χ^2 critical	Remark
<i>Subjects</i>								
Principal	1.803.14	3.813.45	2.793.36	2.212.57	9	1.04	16.92	NS
Proprietors	2.212.46	3.673.90	2.212.31	3.722.90				
Board members	3.203.43	3.433.91	2.272.67	3.042.91				
Teachers	2.012.21	3.913.55	2.852.43	2.072.64				

P < 0.05

Since the data collected were interval data the results were collapsed to categorical data to allow for application of a non-parametric statistic. Result of chi square analysis for the tested hypothesis is presented in table 2.

The result of the Chi square analysis presented in table 2 shows that the calculated χ^2 of 1.04 is lower than the critical table value of 16.92, at .05 level of significance and a degree of freedom of 9. It was accordingly concluded that there is no significant difference between and among principals, proprietors of secondary schools, members of the board of governors and teachers in the application of avoiding, bargaining, forcing and bribing as conflict management strategies in secondary schools. The variability pattern in the application of the tested four conflict management strategies by principals, proprietors, board members and teachers is presented in figure 1.

It would appear than there is a clustering of administrators in the application of bargaining as a management strategy in secondary schools. On the other hand there is more variation in the application of bribing as a conflict management strategy.

DISCUSSION

The Present Study examined variability pattern in conflict management strategies of secondary schools administrators in Nigeria, with a view to determining whether or not there is difference in conflict management strategy. A

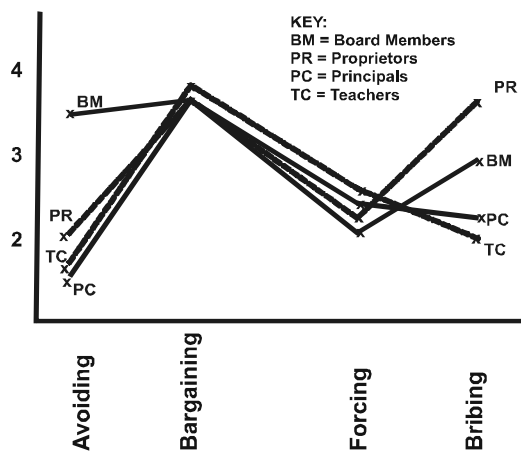


Fig. 1. Variability pattern of administrators in the application of conflict management strategy.

situation where disparity exists among principals, board members and teachers may not enhance effective management and resolution of school conflict. Several studies (Brophy 1983; Braggfett 1992; Sergiovanni 1992) have shown that expediency in management of conflict dictates that all parties involved, minimally differ on the framework for resolving conflict. In a similar perception, Okon. (2005) Embugus (2006) reported that in school districts where principals and teachers agree on a common course of action for conflict management, disputes are better managed. Vautheven and Hee (2004), Ikoya (2006) also reported that when principals, and board members and teacher are satisfied with school conflict management policy teachers are motivated and get actively involved in school discipline. In contrast to these findings, Anderson and Prawat (1983), Brophy (1986), Narmore (2004) examined different localities and reported that in school districts where administrators differ in management policies, such school systems experience more disciplinary problems.

Considering the fact that not many studies have been carried out in the area of school conflict management in Nigeria, these authors decided to examine the issue with a view to locating precursors to proffering solutions to some of the conflict management problems plaguing the Nigerian school system.

Our first question was on whether or not principals, school proprietors members of schools governing board and teachers of secondary schools differ in the application of avoiding an a conflict management strategy. Results from data analyzed revealed clear disparity in the mean scores of sampled participants. While members of the board of education and school proprietors agreed on the application of the avoiding technique, principals and teachers are less keen on the application of that approach. This observation which appears similar to findings by Ciulla (1995), Greenberg (1995), Burns (1998) is likely due to participants' proximal relationship with the students. Teachers and principals who are closer and therefore directly relates with the students on daily basis understand more of the implication of avoidance as mere postponement of conflict resolution. To the teachers and principals, issues relating to conflict resolution should be tackled at once, and without delay so as to avoid a backlog of unresolved issues. On

the issue of bargaining as a conflict management strategy, all sampled administrators are consistent on the need of applying this technique in conflict management and resolution. Principals, proprietors, board members and teachers scored above the 2.75 critical mean. Some of the sampled teachers had this to say

“Bargaining creates an opportunity for staff and students to be actively involved in conflict management and since all are involved, every member is equally held accountable for infringement of decision reached in conflict management”.

On a similar note, school proprietors interviewed declared that decision reached regarding staff emoluments through bargaining are less subject to future contention and conflict.

The application of forcing and bribing were not found to be popular among school administrators. There were sharp disagreement between principals (2.71) and proprietors (2.31) of schools on the application of forcing, while teachers ($x = 2.07$) strongly differ from members of the governing board ($x = 3.04$) on the application of bribing as a conflict management technique. These findings could partly call into question the efficacy of current reform program against corruption and bad governance. While there is little doubt as to the importance of the program, proprietors of secondary schools, as well as members of the board of education, appear not to have demonstrated total commitment to the eradication of corruption from the school system, just like teachers and principals have declared by results of this study.

CONCLUSION

Consensus among school administrators, on strategies for conflict management is vital for desired increased productivity in school systems. Permeating school reform is the global concept of conflict management, which is widely discussed as system's functional derivative, but seldom placed in empirical integrative perspective among school administrators. Thus, the present undertaking represents one of the few integrated approach at examining conflict management patterns among key stakeholders in the Nigerian educational system.

Results from the study show that the patterns of strategic linkages among principals, proprietors, board members, and teachers in the application of

forcing, avoiding, bargaining and bribing are closely linked. The observed near clustering pattern probably provides evidence supporting the claim that concordance among school administrators regarding strategies for conflict management is vital to upgrade school productivity, efficiency and effectiveness. Evidently, agreement among stakeholders emancipate both principals and teachers from the bureaucratic control of the board because it gives them the assurance that localized disciplinary and conflict management policies do not run foul of ministerial and school board reforms. This perception again has the capacity to motivate teachers to get more actively involved in conflict management for improved learning conditions for students.

Like most empirical studies, this research has its limitations. For example, only four of the several stakeholders involved in conflict management in the school system participated in the study. Similarly the variables examined were delimited to only avoiding, forcing, bargaining and bribing. Hopefully further studies in this area would help to expand the scope of our understanding beyond the present state in our quest to enhance effective conflict management in our school system.

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