

PRINCIPALS' CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES IN RELATION TO ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NYERI SOUTH SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to some of the human relations movement adherents who postulate that organisations should be conflict free, practical experience and research demonstrates that conflicts permeate all types and levels of organisations. The rational approach to conflict avers that it is natural to expect conflicts and best to be prepared to manage them so that they do not adversely affect organisational productivity and working relations. This study sought to identify the types of conflicts that exist in secondary schools and their effects on organizational climate; to analyse secondary school principals' conflict management styles and the effect of such styles on organizational climate.

The study adopted descriptive survey design, questionnaires for principals, teachers, and students. The data was presented in form of percentages, frequencies, means and correlations. The correlation coefficients revealed that conflict management styles had a significant relationship with students and teachers' satisfaction with school climate.

The study established that controlling, accommodating, collaborating, and compromising styles are widely used at varying degrees in the sampled school. This however was not the case with avoiding style. The study also established that members of school communities associated positive school climates with fewer behavioural and emotional problems. It was concluded that goal, behaviour, cognitive and affective conflicts existed in secondary schools. It was established that owing to the conflict management styles used by principals, students and teachers had good rapport with the rest of the school community. The study recommended that the principals should be able to identify a link of four types of conflict management styles carefully to achieve all goals set in their school performance through a positive climate.

KEY WORDS

Conflict management styles, controlling, accommodating, collaborating, and compromising, organisational climate.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a situation in which people or groups are involved in a serious disagreement or argument (Larasati & Raharja, 2019; Saiti, 2015; Mullins, 2005).

Conflict management is the intervention designed to reduce excessive conflict.

Conflict arises when individuals or groups encounter goals that both parties cannot obtain satisfactorily. The behaviour by an individual or group has to be purposely inhibiting the attainment of goals by another individual or group for a conflict to exist; hence there is need for a well-coordinated interaction among different stakeholders participating in a school system which is essential for delivery of a positive school climate (Owen & Valesky, 2007, Fleetwood, 1987).

According to Hoy and Miskel (2008), organisational climate was initially conceived as the general concept to express the enduring quality of organisational life. They further postulate that school climate is a broad term that refers to teachers' perceptions of the general work environment

of the school, formal organisation, informal organisation, personalities of participants and the organisational leadership. The term helps in understanding how schools differ in their climate, what causes these variations and how these underlying influences affect school effectiveness (Kunnanatt, 2007).

According to Schein (1999), the principal is the formal head of the school organization and is the leader of the school community, which is made up of students, teachers, and subordinate staff. A continuous interaction among school community creates a school organizational climate. Kunannat (2007) produced dimensions of school climate in teachers and principals' behaviour as follows:

- i) Disengagement refers to a teacher's tendency to be "not with it". It describes a group which is "going through motions", a group that is "not in gear" with respect to the task at hand. In short, this focuses on the teacher's behaviour in a task oriented situation.

i) Hindrance refers to the teachers' feeling that the Principal burdens them with routine duties; committee demands and other requirements which they feel are unnecessary work. They feel that the Principal is hindering rather than helping their legitimate work.

ii) Espirit refers to "morale" of teachers, a feeling that their social needs are being satisfied and that they are at the same time, enjoying a sense of accomplishment.

iii) Intimacy refers to a teacher's enjoyment of friendly social relations with each other. This dimension describes a social need satisfaction which is not necessary associated with task accomplishment.

iv) A positive organizational climate is one where there is communication and collaboration among participants (principal, teachers, and students) in reaching the goals of the school and where the school positively influences the behaviour of students

and staff. The principals should ensure that a conducive organizational climate is maintained in a school. Kundu (2007) notes that managing conflict constructively and developing effective conflict resolution procedures encourages the development of virtues and right attitude in the organization.

According to Kenya Secondary Schools Heads Association (2005), conflict in Kenyan public schools is a combination of many factors such as lack of consensus of opinion concerning rules governing the schools and at times stakeholders seeing one another as adversaries, not as a team working towards the same goals. According to Nyeri South Sub-County Education Officer's (Sub-County Education Office, 2010), various attempts have been made to address incidences of unrest in the Sub-County public secondary schools.

The attempts however have not adequately brought down the incidences of conflict to tolerable levels (SCDEO Nyeri South, 2010).

In Nyeri South, such conflicts have been observed in Nyeri High School and Endarasha boys (Nyeri South Sub-County Education's Office, 2010). The concerted efforts and the persistent recurrence of conflicts in secondary schools informed and formed a basis for this study. This study was undertaken to provide understanding on how principals' conflict management styles influence school organizational climate.

According to Uline, Moran and Perez (2003), it is necessary for administrators to be able to recognize and solve conflict, view its constructive and destructive potentials and apply conflict management styles in a practical way. Conflicts should be well managed for the common good of everyone within the organization. According to Shanka and Thuo (2017) in a study conducted in primary schools in Ethiopia, effective conflict management takes central stage in creating safer and more supportive school learning environments. Poor management of conflicts is likely to affect adversely learning outcomes. The Kenya

Secondary Schools Heads' Association (2001) observed that unless a conducive environment is created to enhance academic performance in secondary schools, the immense contribution the government is putting in education may go to waste in some schools. Teachers and students must be made to have a sense of belonging and ownership of the school.

This study therefore sought to analyse secondary school principals' conflict management styles and their effects on school organizational climate in Nyeri South Sub-County.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study intended to achieve the following objectives:

- i) To identify the various types of organisational conflicts in public secondary schools in Nyeri South Sub-County.

- ii) To analyse conflict management styles used by public secondary school principals in Nyeri South Sub-County and their effects on organizational climate.
- iii) To establish whether principals' conflict management styles were influenced by gender and levels of education.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to Okumbe (2001) there are four types of conflict which include goal, cognitive, affective and behaviour conflict. Goal conflict occurs when a person or a group desires a different outcome, while cognitive conflict is when one person or group holds ideas or opinions that are inconsistent with those of others. Affective conflict occurs when one group emotions, feelings or attitudes are incompatible with those of others and behaviour conflict is when a group or persons does something which is unacceptable to others (Okumbe, 2001).

Koontz and Weilhrich (2007) asserted that there are three levels of conflict namely intra-individual conflict, interpersonal and organizational conflict. Intrapersonal conflict is conflict within the individual and is characterized by uncertainty, stress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia, among others. An example of such is when a principal concentrates too much on achievement of results at the expense of human relations; one may get stressed. The types and levels of conflicts discussed in this section exist in varying degrees in secondary schools as illustrated in the ensuing subsection.

Several reasons have been advanced to explain the prevalence of conflict in schools. According to Okumbe (2001), the current education administrative structure in Kenyan schools, presupposes a participatory approach to decision-making. The parents-teachers associations (PTA) bring together teachers, parents and administrators to plan for the school, and evaluate its performance.

All these developments facilitate participation in school management. However, participation has a potential to cause conflict. The principals of public schools seem to be faced with the dilemma caused by conflict that through strikes that have turned to be violent and destructive. A similar situation obtains in Ethiopian primary schools where myriads of conflicts exist. Principals of today's schools were socialized in these schools from which they inherited the authoritarian style they use breeding conflicts (Griffin, 1994).

Organizational climate is defined as a situational determined process where the climate variables are either causative factors or moderations for performance and gratitude (Kagis & Williams, 2000). Individual personalities and job requirement interact to produce a climate that can be significant to both individuals and the organization. Kagis and Williams (2000) defined climate as the aggregate of social and cultural conditions which influence individual behaviour in the school. According to Prinsloo (2001), conflict is inevitable in a school setting. It has the potential for improving or impairing organizational performance, depending on the conflict management style that has been

applied. It can enhance a positive organizational climate if well managed. Conflict can lead to increased awareness of problems which need to be addressed. This may result to broader and more productive search for solutions; hence facilitate a positive organizational climate (Davidson, 2000). When conflict prevents the organizational objectives from being achieved, then it is destructive in nature and gradually leads to negative organizational climate and the goals of the organization may not be met.

Gross and Guerrero (2000) defined a conflict management style as an operational plan to achieve a conflict goal. Conflict management style can be defined as the behaviour towards the intensification, reduction, and resolution of conflict. Okumbe (1998) cited Follett (1941) who identified three primary strategies that leaders use to manage conflict, namely openness (or collaboration), distribution (or non-confrontation), and control.

This study adopted dual concern theory by Blake and Mouton (1964) in Okumbe (1998). The theory states that conflict management is a function of high or low concern for self, combined with high or low concern for others. Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Nauta (2001) support the view that the theory is appropriate for application

in the workplace and in particular in educational settings.

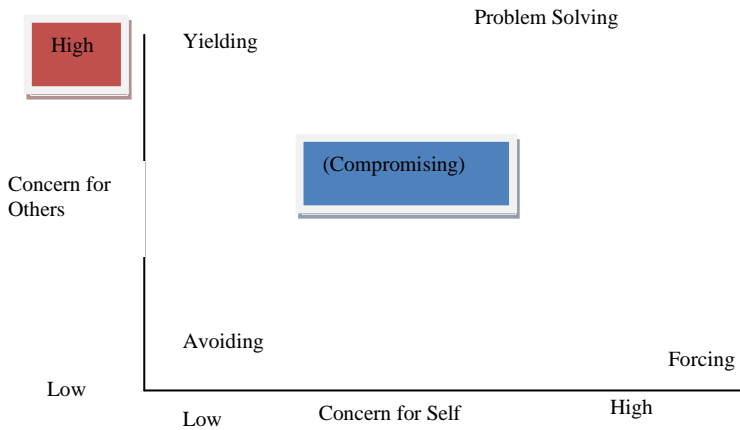


Figure 1: Theoretical representation of the five conflict management styles as a function of concern for self and concern for other.

As Figure 1 shows, high concern for self and low concern for others results in a preference for forcing, focused on imposing one’s will on others. Forcing involves threats and bluffs, persuasive arguments, and positional commitments. Low concern for self and high concern for others results in a preference for avoiding, which involves reducing the importance of the issues and attempts to suppress thinking about the issues.

High concern for self and others produces a preference for problem solving, which is oriented towards an agreement that satisfies both own and others’ aspiration as much as possible. It involves an exchange of information about priorities and preferences, showing insights and making trade-offs between important and unimportant issues. Rahim and Psenicka (2002) suggested that intermediate concern for self, paired to intermediate concern for others results in a preference for compromising. Some see compromising as ‘half-hearted problem solving.

The theory provides solid basis for the development of instruments to assess conflict management styles in a school, hence its use to determine effects of principals’ conflict management styles on organisational climate as perceived by teachers and the students in their respective schools.

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework of the study.

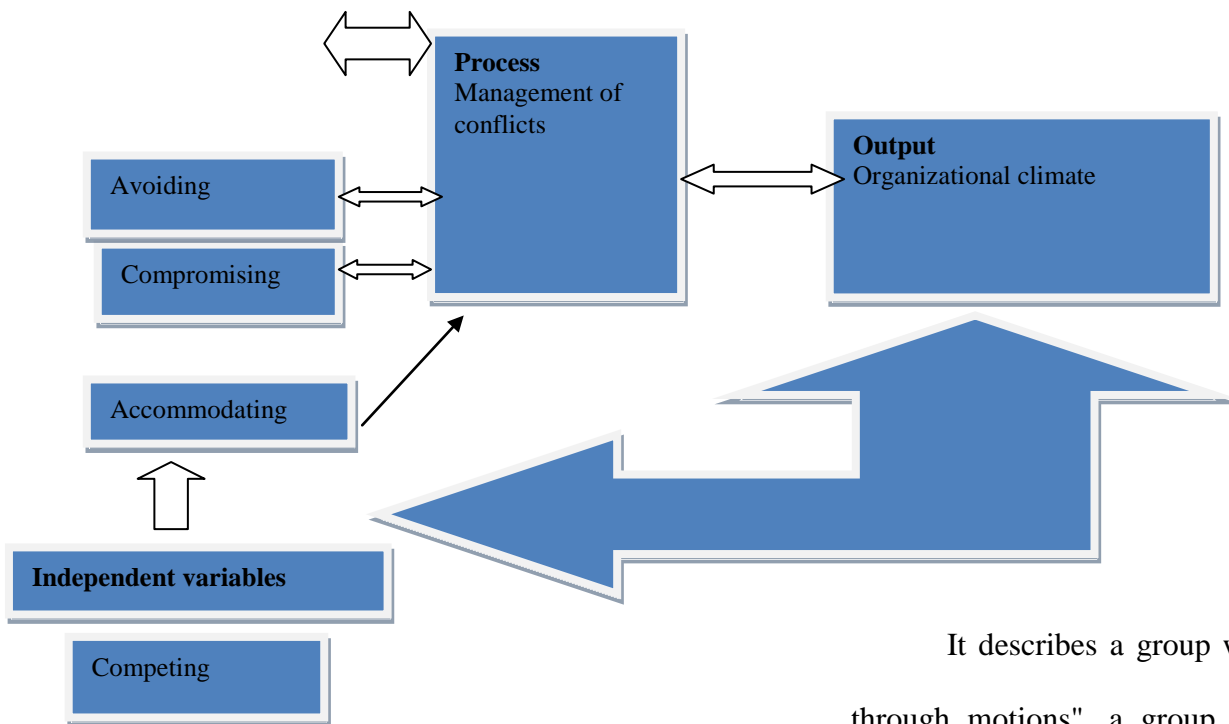


Fig. 2: Interrelationships between principals’ conflict management styles and organizational climate

The underlying premise is that where secondary school principals use competing conflict management style, most of the members of the school of community are likely to engage in competition leading to a lose-lose scenario. The resulting organizational climate is referred to as ddisengagement, in reference to a teacher's tendency "not with it".

It describes a group which is "going through motions", a group that is "not in gear" with respect to the task at hand. In the foregoing scenario, the organisational climate leads to decline in productivity owing to the feeling that one may not win all the time. The disengagement may manifest in form of turnover, apathy or total disregard of what is happening in an organisation. In a scenario where principals employ avoidance conflict management style, school staff tend to also avoid the principal or become confrontational.

Where the principals employ accommodation conflict management style, members of staff operate in what is referred to as “Espirit”, in reference to "morale" of teachers, a feeling that their social needs are being satisfied and that they are at the same time, enjoying a sense of accomplishment. In scenarios where principals are accommodating, an organisational climate of “Intimacy” develops. Teachers enjoy friendly social relations with each other. This dimension describes a social need satisfaction which is not necessary associated with task accomplishment. Similarly, where compromises are made, balancing between work and family life, a positive organizational climate is one where there is communication and collaboration among participants (principal, teachers and students) in reaching the goals of the school and where the school positively influences the behaviour of students and staff.

The principals should ensure that a conducive organizational climate is maintained in a school. Kundu (2007) notes that managing conflict constructively and developing effective conflict resolution procedures encourages the development of virtues and right attitude in the organization.

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Nyeri South Sub-County had 25 public secondary schools translating to a target population of 25 principals, 25 teacher counsellors and 8060 students in the public secondary schools. This study worked with 22 schools since the population is minimal. The total number of form four and three were 1,760 students. Mugenda and Mugenda recommend 10 percent of the population hence 176 students were picked for the study. Purposive sampling was used to pick eight (8) students from each school, that is four (4) form four students and four (4) form three students.

Names of all form four and three students were written and put in a box then pick one at a time until the required number is attained of 176 students. Stratified sampling was used to obtain principals as respondents to capture different school categories.

The research instrument in this study was the questionnaire for Teacher Counsellors. This questionnaire consisted of three sections: part A consisted of four questions eliciting principals' demographic data. Part B consisted of 15 questions addressing the objectives of the study. A Likert Scale was used to identify the frequency of using the conflict management styles by principals in secondary schools in Nyeri South Sub-County. The measures include Always 4, Sometimes 3, Rarely 2 and Never 1. Part C had several items seeking to identify significant information related to the study.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse qualitative data. The data was presented in form of percentages and frequencies. This helped in describing the distribution of scores in the ordinal and nominal scale of measurements that were

used. In using the frequency distribution, various frequency representations were applied. Qualitative data from the open ended questions were thematically presented in narrative form where possible. Inferential statistics utilizes sample data to make estimates, decisions, predictions or other generalizations about a larger set of data. Hence correlation coefficients were used. It examined the presence of multi-collinearity and explored the relationships between the variables.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study established four types of conflicts which include goal conflict (93.3%), affective (92.6%) behaviour conflict (90.6%) and cognitive conflict (80.5%). The most common as established by the students and teachers was task-oriented conflict. The principals felt that they were able to balance between the different issues within the school.

The study established that apart from the avoiding styles, the other four styles namely, controlling (29.5%), accommodating (23.5%), collaborating (22.8%), and compromising (22.8%) are widely used with varying frequencies by principal in the sampled schools. Avoiding (10.7%) was the least used conflict management style. Existence of task oriented conflict is plausible because organisations such as schools operate within limited timelines and they have tasks to be performed by different people. Since each task has to be performed within a given timeframe, it is only logical that those who do not perform are likely to have conflicts with those who expect them to perform.

Conflict management styles did not vary with the principals' demographic characteristics and educational qualifications. The demographic characteristics of the principals under consideration here were gender, education qualification obtained and experience in headship. The results have indicated that there is no significant difference among the

conflict management styles used by principals irrespective of their demographic characteristics. For example, men and women principals were found to be equally likely to apply the controlling style as well as other styles. This finding confirms that of Henkin, Cistone and Dee (1999) who reported that demographic variables were not associated with conflict strategy scores. However, in their study, Henkin et al (1999) found out that the principals' tenure in headship (experience) was related to choose of conflict management styles, with experienced principals more likely to use collaboration oriented styles. This study concurs is related to Henkin et al (1999). The difference between this study and Henkin's et. al. (1999) is that Henkin found out that the principals' tenure in headship was related to conflict management styles they used while in this study there is no significance difference between the tenure and conflict management style.

Correlation coefficients revealed that three conflict management styles had significant relationship with teacher satisfaction with school climate. Controlling ($r = -.310$, $p < 0.01$) was significant and negatively related to teachers' satisfaction with the school climate, while compromising ($r = .281$, $p < 0.01$) and accommodating ($r = .180$, $p < 0.01$) were positively related with teachers' satisfaction with the school climate. Thus while the use controlling style is associated with low levels of satisfaction with the school climate, compromising and accommodating seem to increase teachers' satisfaction with the school climate among secondary school teachers in Nyeri South Sub-County.

The study established that avoiding conflict had a negative correlation signifying its negative association with satisfaction with the school climate ($r = -.066$, $p < 0.01$). It was however, noted that the negative impact of avoiding was weak and insignificant while the negative impact of controlling was weak but significant at $p = 0.05$. Collaborating had positive insignificant impact on the

dependent variable. The implication of this low insignificant of variation explained by the independent variables retained in the model seems to suggest that conflict management styles are not the most important determinants of teachers' satisfaction with the school climate. According to Kundu (2007) there are other factors affecting school climate which include number and quality of interactions between members, students and teachers' perception of their environment, environmental factors, classrooms, materials used for instruction, academic performance, sense of security, school size, feelings of trust and respect. Research shows that school climate can affect many areas and people within the school. Hence this study established that a positive school climate has been associated with fewer behavioural and emotion problems for members of the school community.

CONCLUSIONS

From the study findings were clear that students, teachers, and principals were able to identify the four types of conflicts, namely

goal conflict, behaviour conflict, cognitive conflict and affective conflict. The least preferred conflict management style was avoidance conflict style while the most preferred are collaboration, accommodating, compromising and controlling, hence the result is dissatisfaction among school community members. The benefits of functional conflict, therefore, will not be realized in a school when the principal allows only one way communication and dominates organisational processes. The principals are challenged to manage conflict using styles, which induce individuals and constituent groups to contribute to common goals even when self-interested actions would appear to be more beneficial.

- i) Positive conflict management styles were perceived as achieving rapport among key school stakeholders such as the students, teachers and the principals as well as the rest of the school community. This has the capacity to reduce negative conflicts since conflicts are solved appropriately. School principals,

especially are challenged to change from unitary control-oriented styles of conflict management to the modern, pluralist view of conflict management which emphasises compromise and prudent accommodation. It is important to note, however, that behaviours do not change without diffusing and unfreezing the underling belief and attitudes.

The correlation coefficient revealed that conflict management styles had a relationship with students and teachers' satisfaction with school climate. This shows that collaboration, controlling, compromising, and accommodating have a positive correlation with satisfaction with the school climate. Hence the principals should avoid avoidance conflict management style since it was found to be negatively correlated with satisfaction. On the demographic characteristics of the principals it is clear that there is no

significant difference among the conflict management styles used by the principal. This means that the demographic characteristics of the principals had no effect on choice of conflict management style.

Recommendations

The principals should be able to link the four types of conflict with caution to achieve all goals set in their schools. The set goals to be achieved are well behaved students, relationship with the school and effects on other people when meeting on conflict resolutions. The principals should make the choices of conflict management styles in order to improve on school performance. This will enhance a positive climate if well management. It will also increase awareness of problems to be solved. A good rapport between the principal and the school community will ensure good performance, improved relationship and teamwork within the school community. The relationship of conflict management style and the level of satisfaction of the students and teachers with the school climate show that the principal is

able to make a good choice of the conflict management style. This enables to create satisfying school climate.

With the demographic characteristics of the principals having no significant difference among the conflict management styles then means that conflict management styles do depend on gender, age and work experience of the principal. This shows that it does not matter the gender, age and work experience one has to make a choice of conflict management style.

An in-depth broader study covering a wider geographical region and embracing greater demographics, ethnic, economic and social diversity than was achievable in this study would be valuable to establish whether the conclusions would be generalised. Hence there is need to replicate this study in other Sub-Counties in order to validate its claim and determine which variables are most strongly correlated to principals' conflict management styles. There is need for another study investigating challenges principals encounter in conflict management in schools and the strategies which will

enable them achieve great success in managing conflict. There is need to replicate this study in tertiary institutions in Nyeri South Sub-County and other Sub-County to determine which variables are most strongly correlated to principals' conflict management styles.

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