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## Strategies employed by education managers in managing and resolving conflicts in the Bulawayo Metropolitan province schools, Zimbabwe

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Conflict is an integral part of school management and its existence must not be shunned as it stimulates creative and innovative ways of thinking which enhance organisational growth and performance. The purpose of the study reported on here was to investigate how education managers executed Thomas and Kilmann's model in managing and resolving conflicts in schools to avert chaos and anarchy with the ultimate intention of enhancing productivity. A constructivist, inductive grounded theory utilising a qualitative approach was employed. Qualitative data were generated using a semi-structured interview protocol from 4 information-rich education managers who were purposively selected. The inclusion criteria for the participants were age, experience, professional qualifications and the sample was determined by theoretical saturation. Data generated were thematically analysed. The study revealed that the conflict management and resolution model used by education managers in schools was contingent to their environment and perception. It also revealed that conflict was innovative and stimulated thought processes. As a result, schools must recruit education managers who are transformative, democratic and equipped with the appropriate strategies for managing and resolving conflict if teachers' morale is to be boosted and productivity enhanced.

**Keywords:** avoidance; collaboration; competition; compromise; disagreements; inter-group; intra-personal; mediation

### Introduction

In group dynamics, more than two people form an organisation and naturally when such people try to co-exist, conflict becomes a natural, essential and unavoidable human phenomenon due to incompatible personal/group interests (Lukman, 2021). Conflict as a concept itself is equivalent to the history of humanity (Omene, 2021). Its inevitability effectuates innovation in organisations (Lukman, 2021). However, when mishandled, conflict might be destructive while the constructively managed one could lead to organisational growth resulting in strengthening the bond between two people, promotion of new beliefs, principles and rules (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). Therefore, when conflict occurs in schools, it must not be prevented or ignored (Omene, 2021). Instead it demands managing and resolving for the benefit of the organisation, hence, the need for superordinates that are knowledgeable about how conflict occurs to minimise any negative effects engendered in the educative enterprise (Shanka & Thuo, 2017). Noteworthy, conflict must not be absolutely eliminated as it is an integral part of a school management system (Ntho-Ntho & Nieuwenhuis, 2010). Generally Zimbabwean teachers bemoan the lack of disposable income due to poor remuneration (Ngwenya, 2021), yet education managers sometimes use coercion to attain incompatible goals which leads to hostility between both parties (Nickerson, 2023). In that regard, I sought to investigate the strategies that education managers employed in managing and resolving conflict in the Bulawayo Metropolitan province in an attempt to make schools efficient and effective in attaining their goals.

### Background

Conflict is traditionally viewed negatively and is considered symptomatic of bad school management which was supposed to be suppressed (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). However, contemporary scholars view it as an inevitable evil which ensures high performance in schools (Omene, 2021). Furthermore, Tjosvold (1991, in Doğan, 2016:200) views it as "an important part of thinking, watching, performing and managing an organisation." Similarly, Cobanoglu, Kaya and Angay (2015) view it as a healthy stimulant which galvanises people into action. Therefore, conflict viewed from these perspectives, activates the education manager's thought processes and establishes an excellent working rapport with teachers resulting in the accomplishment of educational goals. Generally, teachers work in pursuance of self-interests and conflicts of interests arise when such engagements occur, more so as human beings are the face of an organisation (Iqbal, Khalil & Khan, 2017).

Likewise, Karl Marx believes that human existence would be a non-event without conflict, since society is in a state of perpetual conflict due to competition for limited resources (Chappelow, 2019). This assertion is grounded in the basic conflict theory (CT) which posits that individuals/groups within society work to maximise their own benefits (Chappelow, 2019). It is through conflict that creative ideas of trying to resolve it emerge (Iqbal et al., 2017). Without it, life would be monotonous.

Noteworthy are social conflicts involving differences/disagreements between two or more individuals or family units (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022) that are abundant in the Bible. The disguised Jacob stole Esau's birth right, encouraged by his mother who had eavesdropped the conversation between Isaac and Esau (Genesis [Gen] 27). When Esau arrived home from hunting game, he prepared a delicious dish as requested. While on the verge

of receiving a blessing from his father, he discovered that his younger brother had deceitfully stolen it. In anger he vowed to slay Jacob at his father's demise. When Rebekah overheard this outburst, she intervened to avert bloodshed by suggesting that Jacob leaves to stay with his uncle, Laban, to escape Esau's anger. Her astute mediation resolved the conflict.

Such social experiences made Doğan (2016) liken conflict to "furiousness, fear, tension, anger, disappointment, distrust, hostility, damage, destruction and discussion." Resultantly, conflict earned negative descriptors such as inhibition, inconsistency, incongruent, disagreement, opposition and resistance (Cobanoglu et al., 2015). However, solace is drawn from the way in which the brothers' conflict was resolved as it bred an opportunity for personal development, intellectual revolt, excitement and encouragement (Cobanoglu et al., 2015). According to Karl Marx, such experiences drive change and development in schools (Chappelow, 2019). Therefore, in the 1920s, the presence of conflict in organisations led to personnel being trained to minimise related problems in the United States of America (USA) and the world over (Doğan, 2016). Such experiences imply that schools cannot be conflict-free zones as they are populated by individuals with different perceptions. Little wonder that the fundamentals of conflict resolution are learning the skills to resolve conflict as unresolved conflict leads to chaos and anarchy (Cobanoglu et al., 2015). Therefore, when conflict becomes a plague in the school, it needs to be resolved before it escalates. What all this means is that when conflict – good or bad – arises, education managers must critically analyse the situation from which it emanates, before devising strategies for managing/resolving it. Besides, Rebekah's use of the withdrawal strategy to avert a potentially fatal inter-personal dispute between brothers testifies to this assertion.

#### Objective of the Study

The aim with this study was to discover how education managers executed the various strategies of managing and resolving conflict in schools to avert chaos and anarchy with the ultimate intention of enhancing productivity.

#### Literature Review

##### *Concept of conflict*

Robins and Judge (2013, in Cobanoglu et al., 2015:35) describe conflict as "a process that begins when one party perceives another party has or is about to negatively affect something the first party cares about." Combatively, Iqbal et al. (2017:158) define it as "a situation of falling out, chaos, and turmoil or antagonism or when two parties or individuals are engaged in some protracted fight,

struggle or quarrel with each other." Therefore, conflict seems to arise when individuals/groups differ in opinions, ideas, perceptions, attitudes or, cultures as they try to co-exist. This scenario is prominent in schools when teachers compete for the limited resources in pursuit of either personal or organisational goals. It is such tone contradictions which, if not aligned to the institution's common goals, might turn schools into perpetual battlefields of unsettled scores. Such wars, if not heeded, might compromise the attainment of organisational goals, hence, the need to manage/resolve them decisively for the learners' benefit. In the process, debates and disagreements must be viewed as necessary ingredients for effective decision-making (Mullins, 2010).

##### *The difference between conflict management and conflict resolution*

The terms "management" and "resolution" need clarification to avert confusion within this discourse. Ramani and Zhimin (2010) describe conflict management as a long-term strategy which entails limiting its negative effects while maximising its positive aspects without the intention of eliminating it in its entirety. Kalagbor and Nnokam (2015:148) view conflict resolution as "a reduction, elimination, or termination of all forms of conflict." In their opinion, resolution strategies bring to the fore negotiations, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration. Iqbal et al. (2017) view conflict as an intellectual and deductive process that demands scrutiny to gain insight into it with the intention of bringing the disputants to a decisive stage through productive communication. As a result the conflicting parties would, through sacrifices of their objectives, regard a decision reached as reasonable (Doğan, 2016).

In both instances, in order for education managers to manage/resolve conflict as perceived, it needs detection, investigation, determining alternative ways of managing it, applying the most appropriate alternative, following the result and, getting feedback (Shanka & Thuo, 2017). In the process, education managers must be aware of the fact that plentiful or meagre conflicts may damage the organisation. Cobanoglu et al. (2015) suggest that moderate conflict maintained at reasonable levels is beneficial for the existence of organisations.

##### *Causes of conflict*

Causes of conflict are as numerous as organisations and conflicting scenarios are different too, hence, conflict needs to be examined if appropriate strategies for managing/resolving them are to be adopted. Studies conducted by Msila (2012) and Uchendu, Anijaobi-Idem and Odigwe (2013) in South Africa and Nigeria respectively, classify potential causes of conflict into three categories,

although some factors might overlap. Both studies revealed that conflict may be caused by institution-related factors such as unfair distribution of scarce resources and personality factors and informal group opposition among staff members. The final category is leadership-related factors such as an unfavourable leadership style. The prevalence of such factors in a school signals that something is psychologically wrong and conflict is a harbinger of a potential major change (Nickerson, 2023).

Furthermore, Lukman (2021) unearthed sources of conflict which resonates well with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. A study by Salleh (2013) in Malaysia revealed that insufficient resources such as finances and a heavy workload were some of them. With the conflict source identified, education managers must not be concerned with winning political battles; instead, with what would give them a competitive edge over their rivals (Isabu, 2017). They must know that successful conflict resolution involves listening and providing opportunities to address the needs of all parties and adequately addressing their interests to result in a win-win outcome for all parties involved (Ramani & Zhimin, 2010). Most important is that every conflict is linked to the past.

#### *Types of conflict*

Bano, Ashraf and Zia (2013) and Isabu (2017) identified four basic types of conflict that might exist in schools, namely, intra-personal, inter-personal, intra-group and, inter-group/organisational conflict. Understanding these types of conflict enables education managers to devise strategies of effectively managing and resolving them.

#### *Intra-personal conflict*

Durojaye (2010), claims that intra-personal conflict may occur within an individual and may be caused by goal differences, interests, and, ethical questions.

#### *Inter-personal conflicts*

George and Jones (2006, in Isabu, 2017) view inter-personal conflict as conflict which arises between individual members of the organisation and usually occur due to goal incompatibility within the organisation. Polatov and Pavlovets (2022) further postulate that such conflicts arise due to differing goals/needs and individuals competing for scarce resources to either gain promotion or accomplish tasks.

#### *Intra-group conflicts*

Contrary to individual conflicts, are those that arise within a group, department or team (Griffin & Moorhead, 2007, in Isabu, 2017). Such conflict may also occur between persons, members,

or factions belonging to the same group (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). These could emanate from differences/disagreements among group members/sub-groups regarding the goals, functions or activities of the group (Kipruto & Kipkemboi, 2013).

#### *Inter-group/Organisational conflicts*

Finally, inter-group/organisational conflict is conflict that arises between a school and a community or between government bodies in a community. It can also occur between/among different groups of society (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). Such conflicts develop when there is an "us-against-them" attitude between departments and groups that perceive each other as enemies (Ramani & Zhimin, 2010). The existence of such hostilities decreases positive relationships. The identification and classification of the sources of conflict as described must lead to seeking strategies for managing/resolving it.

#### *Conflict management and resolution (CMR) model*

Research demonstrates that conflict is prevalent in workplaces and super-ordinates spend close to 2 to 3 hours a week on it (Doğan, 2016). In most cases the outcomes are unsatisfactory and lead to falling-out, disharmony and, distraction from the real purpose of work, resulting in lost production and human pain (Bano et al., 2013). Furthermore, it breeds stress and discomfort in the workplace due to fear of the unknown, resulting in a depressing and frustrating situation between the parties involved (Ageng'a & Simatwa, 2011). However, when it occurs, schools must have clear-cut policies and mechanisms that guide its management/resolution (Bano et al., 2013). As mentioned before, super-ordinates must know that to keep personal and professional relationships strong and growing, one needs to learn the skills of conflict resolution (Isabu, 2017). That can be achieved by learning the 1970 CMR model proposed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (KTRK) (Doğan, 2016). The model, although old, has been found to be user-friendly.

The KTRK model is premised on the assumption that people in any conflict situation choose to be either assertive or cooperative (Omene, 2021). Assertiveness is the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy his/her own concerns while cooperativeness is the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns (Omene, 2021). Since subordinates respond differently to conflict, the education manager must understand all the suggested CMR strategies below, as circumstances might demand different dosages of these or a synthetic approach (Lukman, 2021), if productivity in schools is to be enhanced.

### Avoidance

The first strategy, avoidance, also known as the withdrawal, is both unassertive and uncooperative. The conflict is sidestepped or the individual withdraws from the conflict situation when the discomfort of the confrontation exceeds the potential reward of resolving it (Isabu, 2017). Expressed differently, when the situation at hand is threatening, the parties involved diplomatically ignore or postpone it until tempers cool down (Omene, 2021). After that, both parties pretend as if the conflict never existed at all (University of Notre Dame [UND], 2019). The disputants ignore the conflict thinking that it may die a natural death without their engagement (Doğan, 2016). If unresolved, conflict might escalate to unprecedented levels.

### Competing

The second strategy, competing, also known as defeating/forcing/dominating/obliging/win-lose is assertive but not cooperative. It calls for contestants to stand up for their rights, defend a position which they believe is correct, or simply try to beat the other side (UND, 2019). It also uses institutional authority/power, reward/punishment, bribery or, even physical force to achieve desired goals (Isabu, 2017). What the contestants are interested in is winning at all cost regardless of how the other party feels about it (Omene, 2021). However, users of such a strategy must know that employing it offers short-term relief, which may be detrimental to the organisation's future health (UND, 2019).

### Compromising

Compromising or bargaining/ negotiation/ reconciling/agreement is moderately assertive and cooperative. Compromisers value fairness and in doing so, anticipate mutual give-and-take interactions and are prepared to make concessions until a reasonable and respectable agreement acceptable to both parties is reached (Polatov & Pavlovets, 2022). By compromising, both sides get something that they want, not everything. Compromisers need to be aware of passive or aggressive tactics that might mislead the other party (UND, 2019).

### Accommodating

Accommodation or yielding/giving-in/smoothing/suppression is both assertive and cooperative. It occurs when goals are incompatible but interactions are not considered important to overall goal attainment (Isabu, 2017). It further encourages selfless generosity/charity and giving-in to another's point of view (Omene, 2021). This is what makes it derive satisfaction from meeting the needs of others with the intent of having the general concern for maintaining stable, positive social relationships. It is this aspect of preserving a friendly relation at the expense of appraising the

issues critically and protesting personal rights which makes it dysfunctional (Isabu, 2017).

### Collaboration

The last strategy, collaboration, goes by several monikers too: integration/cooperation/win-win situation/problem-solving which is both assertive and cooperative. The style assumes that when two parties are at loggerheads, they must be brought to the table, listened to and their areas of disagreement/agreement must be discussed amicably with the ultimate intent of satisfying both (UND, 2019). Usually, collaborators think creatively and try to satisfy their goals without making any concessions. Instead, they resolve their differences in such a way that both parties are left better off (Isabu, 2017). Collaborators view conflict as a creative opportunity towards organisational growth and invest time and resources in their attempt to find a win-win solution (Lu & Wang, 2017). For that reason, they are admired and respected (Isabu, 2017).

Education managers empowered by the CMR model must know that goal incompatibility in schools is a natural phenomenon which needs managing or resolving (Isabu, 2017). However, it is the uniqueness of the conflict and the circumstances surrounding it which might complicate the applicability of the CMR model. The choice of strategy depends on whether one is being assertive or cooperative (McPheat, 2022). While the former may require a leadership style that achieves quick results though being counterproductive, the latter is people-oriented with dire consequences of group dynamics (McPheat, 2022). Falling-outs must not cause nightmares since the CMR model is developmental in its approach (McPheat, 2022). Therefore, Karl Marx's social CT, which is premised on the scarcity of resources, demands education managers who have knowledge of the CMR model.

### Theoretical Framework

According to Karl Marx, the competition for limited resources has put society in a state of perpetual conflict (Chappelow, 2019). The scarcity of resources does not imply impoverishment but is a global phenomenon and schools are no exception (Isabu, 2017). It becomes worse when one group/individual is favoured in the allocation of resources. Counterparts may view the favoured group as enemies and may become hostile, which in turn would lead to the decline of positive relationships in the organisation (Ramani & Zhimin, 2010). Coincidentally, such favouritism does exist among teachers. Furthermore, Marx asserts that social order is maintained by domination/power rather than consensus/conformity (Chappelow, 2019). This means that those teachers who have access to limited resources

become dominant/powerful, while those without feel inferior and subdued. The teachers, who have access to the scarce resources, are considered to be wealthy and in turn try to hold on to the resources by any means possible, chiefly by suppressing the “have-nots” and powerless (Chappelow, 2019). Such a scenario, according to Oboegbuleni and Alfa (2013:91), breeds “a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals.” The teachers in question become connected to management and assume power over others for them to continue enjoying such privileges at the detriment of the organisation’s health (Chappelow, 2019).

The basic premise of Marx’s CT is that individuals/groups within society work to maximise their own benefits since society is divided into economic classes between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (Chappelow, 2019). This portrays a negative picture of what a human being is: selfish, self-centred, and egocentric. In Marx’s perception, the school’s management system with its legitimate power and authority represents the bourgeoisie and the teachers the proletariat. Furthermore, their statuses differ economically.

Similarly, management, on behalf of the parents procured resources from the Ministry which were rationally distributed among subordinates. The scarcity of resources sometimes resulted from the unfair distribution of these by management. Well-resourced individuals/groups feel elevated and those without, outwitted. The economic classes envisioned by Marx then begin to surface (i.e. the proletariat vs bourgeoisie), and competition prevails. The latter scenario strengthens the economic lines between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Such prevailing inequalities are aggravated when haves become more creative and innovative than their counterparts (Isabu, 2017). On the basis of their performance, they become better candidates for promotion (Kipruto & Kipkemboi, 2013). These social inequalities emanating from the sharing of limited resources and the emergent classes are core to the concept of the CT as they are drivers of change and development (Chappelow, 2019). Schools in such disequilibrium born out of the competition for limited resources become tools for the struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie classes (Chappelow, 2019). Such a development demands the astuteness of a super-ordinate with sufficient training in CMR strategies as averred by Thomas and Kilmann (Doğan, 2016) to reconcile the prevailing tone contradictions before calamity befalls (Msila, 2012).

Finally, Marx asserts that the bourgeoisie possesses the means of production and the state machinery to oppress the proletariat (Chappelow,

2019). Education managers, as implementers of the aspirations of the ruling elite to which they are answerable, have legitimate power and authority to use the numerous regulatory mechanisms crafted by the appointing authority to deal with dissenting voices caused by inequalities in the distribution of resources (Lukman, 2021). They further use physical threats/force to subdue their subordinates (Isabu, 2017). Marx perceives such social structures in schools, laws, and traditions as meant to support the super-ordinate’s dominance while preventing subordinates to join their ranks (Chappelow, 2019). The imagined worsening conditions of teachers would lead to a collective consciousness which would bring inequality to light and potentially resulting in a revolt (Chappelow, 2019). Therefore, such animosities emanating from parties working in opposition to each other would need to be dealt with decisively (Denisi & Griffin, 2005). To unearth such sentiments within an educational context, a qualitative methodology was employed.

### Methodology

Since the phenomenon under investigation demanded gathering in-depth insights or generating new ideas for the research (Bhandari, 2020), the epistemological perspective underpinning the qualitative methodology employed was a constructivist, inductive grounded theory (Khan, 2014) as I sought to answer the following research question: “How do education managers manage and resolve conflict in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province Schools?” The approach adopted was meant to understand the meanings that education managers construct in the utilisation of CMR strategies in schools as they try to make sense of their experiences in their natural settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It is from this perspective that I was convinced that participants would develop subjective meanings of their experiences as they sought to comprehend the world in which they lived and worked (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### Research Methods

Seeing that I intended to build concepts and theory based on the data collected, a constructivist, inductive grounded theory research strategy was deemed appropriate in an attempt to understand the phenomenon under investigation from the participants’ perspective (Khan, 2014).

### Research Participants and Sampling

Participants were purposively selected based on factors such as age, experience, and qualifications. The sample size was determined through theoretical saturation, thus making the data credible, dependable, transferable, conformable, and authentic (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The participants’ biographic data are presented in

Table 1.

**Table 1** Participants' biographic data

Description	EMA	EMB	EMC	EMD
School	P1	P2	S1	S2
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male
Age in years	54	59	55	49
Qualifications	MED	MED	MED	MED
Experience in years	9	18	10	15

*Note.* MED = Master's in Education Management, EM = Education Manager.

Table 1 reveals that two male and two female EMs participated in this study giving a sample of four. Initially I intended to interview five participants, one from each district, but data saturation and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) restrictions confined the study to four participants. A small sample was based on the belief that in-depth interviews would provide unique opportunities to uncover rich and complex information from the seasoned EMs (Khan, 2014). The oldest participant was EMB and the youngest was EMD. All the participants, two from high schools (S1 and S2) and two from primary schools (P1 and P2) held MED degrees. Their experience in the positions varied: EMA – 9 years, EMB – 18 years, EMC – 10 years and EMD – 15 years.

#### Research Setting

S2 is a Christian private school located in a leafy suburb of Selbourne Park. Its catchment area comprises affluent families who can afford the high fees. Parents drive learners to and from school which has 60 staff members and 580 learners. S1, on the other hand, is a recently constructed government school located in a low-density suburb. Its school fee structure is cheaper than that of S2 as it is determined by the government. S1 has 32 staff members and 884 learners. Most of the parents residing in the area around S1 are hustlers.

P2 is a municipality school located in a low-density suburb and was constructed after Zimbabwean independence. Its geographical location and catchment area are similar to that of S1. It has 44 teachers and 1,659 learners. P1 is in the same area and has 42 teachers and 1,688 learners.

The major difference among these schools was the tuition fees. In private and municipal schools, fees are determined by the responsible authority and submitted to the government for approval. The government regulates the school fees paid at public institutions in which parents' affordability levels and equal access to education, which is a fundamental right, are priorities (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). Little wonder that public schools are characterised with higher enrolment numbers.

#### Data Generation

Qualitative data were generated from the four consenting EMs of the carefully selected schools where face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol in an attempt to demonstrate how CMR strategies would be employed. The protocol was piloted with five non-participants and adjusted accordingly to minimise ambiguity. Interviews of about an hour were conducted which allowed me to observe non-verbal communication, to clarify ambiguities and necessary points (Khan, 2014). The preliminary findings were emailed to the participants for verification (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Where contradictions arose, follow-up questions were conducted telephonically for clarity in an attempt to come up with rich, thick descriptions which would represent the participants' sentiments and make the data transferable to similar situations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

#### Data Analysis

An interactive research method was used in the inductive thematic analysis compatible with the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Data generation and analysis processes were merged to determine sample size and data saturation (Khan, 2014). Textual data were systematically reviewed (i.e., units of texts, words, or paragraphs), emergent themes were identified and hand-coded (EMA 1, 2 ..., EMB 1, 2 ...), their structure and content were interpreted and relationships were established (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process was repeated continuously, punctuated with the "constant comparison method" (i.e., all segments of text were systematically compared and contrasted with each other) until the data generation was completed. The output from this thematic analysis of interview data along with the literature reviewed facilitated the development of conceptual thinking and theory building on which recommendations were based (Khan, 2014).

#### Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of South Africa's (UNISA), College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (ERC Ref #: 2020\_CRERC\_002 (FA)).

Furthermore, permission to conduct the research within the jurisdiction of Bulawayo Metropolitan province was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and the Provincial Education Director respectively. Thereafter, permission to conduct the research in the sampled schools was also sought from the EMs who participated in this study. The participants were briefed about the benefits of the study and the psychological harm which would befall them. Those who volunteered to participate signed consent forms and were advised that they were free to withdraw their participation from the data collection without penalty. In the process, privacy, human dignity, confidentiality, and anonymity were guaranteed. The qualitative methodology used for this study yielded the findings discussed below.

### Findings

The data analysis yielded six thematic areas, namely, the concept of conflict and the five CMR strategies mentioned previously.

#### Concept of Conflict

From the definition of EMC and EMB, two perspectives clearly emerged: inter-personal and intra-group conflicts. The former reported that *"It is a situation where two people working together clash due to different opinions/values resulting in disharmonious organisational operations"* while the latter concurred as revealed in *"when organisational members are not getting along well resulting in objectives not being achieved."*

Similarly, inter-personal, inter-group/organisational conflicts were implied by EMD who pointed out that conflict was *"serious disagreements between staff, staff and parents, staff and education managers/parents, education managers and parents."* Likewise, EMA observed that it *"is where-by some individuals are having some tensions/misunderstandings between each other or cliques."* The fact that EMC acknowledged that conflict disrupted *"organisational operations"* vis-a-vis EMB who viewed it as hindering the attainment of *"organisational objectives"* implies that conflict really needs to be resolved when it occurs.

#### Sources of Conflict

Before conflict could be dealt with, it was incumbent on the participants to identify its sources. According to EMD, the sources were inter-organisational as parents were at loggerheads with teachers over *"losing in a sporting activity"* or *"poor academic performance."* Such a scenario could result from parents' high expectations of their children since they paid more and wanted value for their money. Related to this phenomenon were the raging wars between the school and parents over the *"non-payment of fees"*; the only

inter-personal conflict mentioned by EMD was *"teacher gossip."*

The conflict highlighted by EMA, EMB, and, EMC were premised on *"unfair allocation/distribution of the limited resources"*, *"regionalism"*, *"tribalism"*, *"lack of respect among members of staff"*, *"poor communication"*, *"favouritism by management"*, *"bullying"*, *"harassment"*, *"role conflicts"* and *"dress code."* Like EMD, EMA hinted at organisational conflict brought about by the organogram in her school. It seems that top management made crucial decisions on the procurement of materials and other professional issues only to be revised/reversed by the bursar who reports to the municipality.

#### Strategies to Manage/Resolve Conflict in Schools

Having identified the sources of conflict as it occurred in schools, it was now up to the participants to demonstrate how they would use the KTRK model to manage/resolve conflict.

#### Avoidance

EMA, EMB, and, EMC agreed that not every conflict that occurred in schools demanded the intervention of management as some could be resolved at the departmental level: *"some are so trivial such that they do not affect the attainment of organisational goals."* Moreover, *"teachers as professional adults have the capacity to resolve conflicts amicably."* However, *"where minimal intervention is required, let it be."* To prove how delicate the intervention could be, EMC cited a situation where the school had to decide who attended the non-governmental organisation (NGO) or government-sponsored workshop. Attendees of the former were highly remunerated compared to the latter. He, therefore, concluded that *"whatever rational formula is used to choose attendants, teachers will always be sceptical."* However, EMD who claimed *"to deal with economically empowered and an enlightened community"*, strongly believed that no conflict was too little to be ignored. In his opinion, avoidance

*is not applicable because it does not solve the conflict but conceals it. As long as it is reported to my desk I confront it. I institute investigations and report to the complainant timeously. However, if the school has faulted in the management of the conflict, I quickly apologise to the stakeholder.*

#### Competing

Participants seemed to be confirming Chappelow's (2019) notion which asserts that society is in perpetual conflict over limited resources as noted in the manner in which teachers were always trying to outwit each other as individuals/teams/departments in competition for them. In concurrence, EMA cited an experience which was solved by the managerial intervention:

*A basketball and hand ball coach were at loggerheads when their timetables clashed as to who would use the only pitch available. Left on their own, none wanted to budge as battle lines were drawn. The conflict was resolved by the intervention of the sports master. The hand ball coach was advised to move to an empty space which was available since his goal posts were movable.*

EMD vividly recalled an incident which almost turned nasty at his school:

*My two teachers were at each other's throats over coaching duties. Teacher A felt that Teacher B was playing truancy. Little did he know that Teacher B on the day in question was writing exams. I averted the conflict by re-assigning Teacher B to hockey, which operates on the same principles as soccer. At first he was hesitant but is now posting wonderful results.*

Similarly, EMB weighed in by reporting that teachers in the infant department were allocated a box of chalk per week. She asserted that had she not intervened to rationalise the sharing process, the pieces of chalk would have been used up.

#### *Compromising*

It appears that all the participants employed compromise as noted by EMC: *"I have used this strategy effectively. Subordinates will take time to digest the causes of conflict and in most cases they appreciate my effort in trying to resolve it. Normally subordinates felt valued and appreciated."* His sentiments were echoed by EMD who said: *"This, I use a lot as in some cases the conflicting parties have to give-and-take and move on. If parties do not reconcile then the conflict may escalate."* Similarly, EMB highlighted that where shortages were pronounced, *"teachers are encouraged or motivated to improvise."* EMA, complimenting this discourse, reported as follows:

*Our teachers have keys to the classroom storerooms where they secure their valuables. Likewise, groundsmen have keys to the same classrooms. However, some locks to the classrooms are malfunctioning. When teachers started missing their valuable possessions, the groundsmen were the prime suspects. Tension grew between the warring parties until I intervened. A stakeholders' meeting was called where angers were vented out through me by each party. At the end of the day each party realised its mistake and apologies were made. That is how I extinguished the fire.*

Similarly, EMD remarked that despite the hyper-inflationary environment schools were operating in, he demanded that his teachers arrive at 07:00 without fail. Although his teachers never remonstrated, their facial expressions betrayed them. So as a compromise,

*I sourced fuel in drums from garages we have good rapport with. Instead of letting our teachers spending their precious teaching time queuing at garages or hunting for it, each teacher was allocated 20 litres of fuel regardless of whether one*

*had got a car or not. Those without were encouraged to sell it and augment their transport money.*

#### *Accommodating*

All participants claimed that they had used this style but at different levels. EMC claimed that wherever he used it, the conflict was never resolved fully, as it usually resurfaced. He cited a situation in double-session where some teachers taught in both sessions while others did not. Those who did so felt abused although derived solace from the professional growth they realised from the engagement. Additionally, EMA reported that she preferred to engage with the combatants separately in productive communication, praise where it was due and, reprimand as well before bringing the two parties to the negotiation table.

By the same token, EMB claimed that she used it for the organisation's benefit. She cited a case where a lady teacher was phoned by her husband informing her that their child at a different school was injured and had already been taken to hospital. To EMB's surprise, the teacher wanted to leave instantly. On engaging the teacher highlighting to her the core business of the school versus the private one, the teacher obliged. Furthermore, EMD strongly believed that being accommodating must not compromise the academic standards of the school. He mentioned parents who always wanted to use their political or economic dominance to secure a safe passage for their children to A-level classes regardless of whether they had passed the five prerequisite subjects at O-level or not. He only accommodated those who agreed to have their children re-sit the failed subject by May of the issuing year, failure of which, his answer was a *"big no."*

#### *Collaboration*

All participants unanimously agreed that collaboration was the best style to use at educational institutions as it afforded both warring parties due process by bringing them together at the negotiating table where their misunderstandings were clarified and attempts were made to come up with a win-win solution (Cobanoglu et al., 2015). In that way, participants thought the warring parties would learn to respect and value each other as they aligned their energies towards common goals.

When asked to advance any other comments on the phenomenon, schools appeared to have committees chaired by deputy EMs that dealt with complicated disagreements. This committee counselled and guided teachers as it tried to manage/resolve all the conflicts within its capabilities. When they reached a stalemate, such cases were handed over to the EM for resolution. At that stage, no known cases were handed over to the Provincial Disciplinary Committee for arbitration.



## Discussion

Judging by the calibre of the participants as well as the multitude of teachers within their jurisdiction, I was convinced that the findings may be transferable to other similar contexts (Michael, 2022). Similarly, EMs in the Bulawayo Metropolitan province seemed to have ably handled any form of conflict in their schools in a professional manner guided by the KTRK model as none of the grievances dealt with were referred to a higher authority for arbitration.

What was amazing was that the source of conflict in the participating private school was not linked to financial resources at all. The affluent parents in the community could easily afford these resources, thus, contradicting Marx's CT, which claims that society was in perpetual conflict due to the scarcity of resources (Chappelow, 2019). However, this phenomenon seemed to be vividly dominant in government and municipality schools due to the different economic statuses of parents residing in the communities.

From the participants' definition of conflict, I inferred that conflict at schools were either inter/intra-personal or intra/inter-organisational according to Marx's CT (Chappelow, 2019). The latter featured mainly in municipality and private schools. In municipality schools, there was the need to synchronise the organogram as reporting and accountability systems seemed to be conflicting. This was what made the municipality-appointed bursar appear to be more powerful and dominant than the school management when it came to decision-making.

Unfortunately though, in the private schools, it appeared the elite parents trying to seek self-satisfaction, exerted undue pressure on the school management. Perhaps, due to the high-fees that they were paying, they confidently demanded more accountability from teachers in both extra and core-curricula activities. This revelation demanded that EMs in such a school should not ignore conflicts as these could be destructive (Shanka & Thuo, 2017), which in the long run, could affect the enrolment. On the contrary, EMs in municipality and government schools seemed to solve conflicts selectively.

While the findings reveal that all EMs used the KTRK model to manage/resolve conflict in their schools, EMD did so sparingly. Instead, he employed Shanka and Thuo's (2017) strategy effectively by first conducting an investigation before giving feedback to the complainant compelled by circumstances within the environment. Interesting to note was that departmental managers tried to manage/solve minor conflicts at that level and major ones were referred to the grievance committee for negotiations, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration (Iqbal et al., 2017). In such instances, EMs usually

played the role of chief arbitrator in managing/resolving conflict, as they were ultimately responsible.

## Limitations

The findings are applicable to the sites in which the research was conducted although transferability to similar contexts may be possible.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, conflict in schools is no longer inevitable but a reality. Therefore, EMs armed with the appropriate CMR strategy informed by the KTRK model to deal with conflict is needed to avert chaos and anarchy in schools. Stated differently, schools must prioritise the recruitment of EMs who possess transformative, democratic qualities, along with effective CMR strategies. However, despite its negative face, conflict is innovative and must be viewed as a stimulant to thought processes as both parties (i.e., combatants and arbitrators) seek viable solutions which would energise them towards harmony and accomplishment of goals.

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## Notes

- i. The views expressed in this article are purely those of the author, not the official position of the institution or the funder.
- ii. Data sharing is only applicable at the approval of the Research ERC although the article will be available in the public domain for use by other researchers.
- iii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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