Assessment of conflict management strategies in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The main thrust of this paper is on the assessment of conflict management strategies in public secondary schools in Delta state, Nigeria. Three research questions were raised to guide the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey design and convenient sampling to select 140 public secondary school heads out of the 159 public secondary schools in Delta north senatorial district. The questionnaire was used as the key data collection tool and analysis of data by simple percentage was done. The study revealed that the major causes of conflict in secondary schools were; principal's illegal collection of levies, principals delegating duties meant for senior teachers to junior teachers, principals tempering with staff salary, communication without feedback and irregular payment of staff salary. It found that the area most affected by conflict in secondary school administration were financial administration and student personnel. The study also found that the most effective resolution strategies were the confrontational, compromising, setting up committee, free flow of communication between members of staff, proper school record keeping and dialogue. The study recommends that Government should initiate compulsory workshops for principals in order to enhance their knowledge in financial management, conflict resolution strategies for particular conflict situation and authority boundaries. Finally, Government should include conflict management as part of the curriculum of teachers training education.

Keywords: conflict; functional conflict; dysfunctional conflict; compromise strategies; confrontational strategies

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1. Introduction

Education system in Nigeria runs a continuum from primary to tertiary and in between can be found the secondary level of education. It can therefore be seen as the bridge interconnecting primary education and tertiary education. It also has the function of producing artisans who desire to improve their lot through technical knowledge and vocational skills that could be acquired from comprehensive high schools and technical colleges. The public secondary schools under study like other schools in the same category in Nigeria are established to carry out these specialized tasks and in order to achieve these objectives of establishment there are offices for different positions, such as principals, bursars, subject teachers, typists, librarians etc and these offices are filled by qualified and competent personnel. Each occupant of these positions is expected to perform a set of specialized functions and such stable patterns of individual behaviors are called roles, which is a part that one plays within a system.

A system can be referred to as an object, event or procedure which is made up of different parts that are working together or independently to accomplish predetermined objectives. The roles within a system therefore can be seen as a pattern of behavior which is familiar and expected of those who occupy the various positions within the system. According to Nakpodia (2000) since the school is an organized system, these individual roles are mutually interdependent and the overall pattern of their interdependence is called the school structure. In performing these roles there is bound to be interplay of relationship between players. For instance the staff interacts with management, fellow members of staff, students, parents, ministry officials and the community at large. These interactions in the course of performing his duty is what is known as the employee role set and to maintain the school structure, there must be role reciprocity between members of the school community according to some shared understanding of what behavior is expected of them and what behavior they in turn expect, with the ultimate goal of realizing the objectives of the school.

Staff conflict as expressed by various organizations is not an empirical phenomenon; rather it can be seen as an engine of change and a product of change. The occurrence of conflict in educational institutions especially in public secondary schools in Delta state is largely attributable to the way such schools are structured and the behavior of the individuals within these structures as they relate with one another and the community around them.

Conflict management as a phenomenon is an integral part of the administration of any given organization. The school as an organization consists of people with different background with regard to their competences, needs, values, skills, aspirations and psychological make-ups. Thus no organization can successfully accomplish its set objectives without having to deal with organizational conflicts as Ejiogu (1990) posited that conflicts are bound to occur from time to time in all human interactions and organizational behaviors. Conflict therefore is an inevitable part of school life; since we agree to the fact that where there are people, there is bound to be conflict. Though some of these conflicts are healthy and if viewed positively can be change drivers, some can be detrimental to the achievement of school goals. Corwin (1996) stated that unhealthy conflict if it raises its head repeatedly, pose the potential risk of causing negative business consequences. Since conflict is an organizational behavior we therefore cannot dispute the fact that there is a positive relationship between Organizational behavior and organizational output. Since conflict is a change driver, individuals that generate conflict can as well generate change thus Dip Paola and Hoy (2001, pp. 238-244) in their study found that militant personnel were not only conflict-oriented but also engines of change.

In line with the above, Secondary school heads need to take conflict management as a very important aspect

of school administration because conflicts and attempts at conflict management is very vital in shaping organizational behavior towards achievement of set objectives. Therefore since conflict is an integral aspect of all organizational behavioral system due to the diversities inherent in men and women who work in these organizations as well as the structure of these organizations and being one of the most frequently reoccurring issues in many institutions and organizations, education managers and school heads need to give more attention to the principles or strategies of managing these conflicts. Corwin (1996) argues that there is the need to analyze conflicts in public schools in order to increase our capacity to understand the teaching profession and the challenges it faces. Therefore, conflict management in the school system is an issue that every school administrator and employees within the school system have to deal with at one time or the other. The basics of conflict management include teamwork, communication and a systematic approach to solving the disagreement. Van Slyck and Stem (1991) believed that competence in conflict resolution skills can lead to increased social and academic achievement in the short run and a more harmonious world in the long run.

Conflict management has of late become a primary area of concern among school heads, staff developers and even researchers. In the light of this development, when conflicts occur, it should not be seen as a sign that those involved are hard and troublesome members of the secondary school system; rather, it should be seen to be helping individuals and groups to attain a beneficial relationship in the school. It is on this premise that Stoner and Freeman (1989) opined that too much or too little conflict can inhibit creativity and poorly managed conflict can do same too. This assertion has brought to the fore among other things, the need to identify the causes of conflict and the need to marshal out management strategies for managing conflicts among staff of public secondary schools. The required behavioral patterns expected of school administrators and their staffs are not too easily achievable in practice as principals and staffs most often have conflicting interests and the management styles which they adopt might promote further conflict rather than its resolution. Therefore management and staff of public secondary schools should work towards the peaceful resolution of conflicts in order to attain their set educational objectives.

Since any school bedeviled by conflict cannot be productive or cannot be exposed to academic progress, conflict therefore is an ill wind that blows nobody any good and since we have earlier stated that there can never be any organization without staff conflict, it becomes pertinent that staff conflict is interwoven with the fabrics of educational, social and economic structure of organizational activities.

Ejiogu (1990) observed that the traditional principles of formal organizations require that people in them work in such situations as would make them dependent on someone else's authority, denied taking their own initiatives most often and subordination to the dictates and control of their superiors, therefore the obvious incongruence between the need of the individual staff and the demands of formal organizations are potential sources of conflict in formal organizations like the school. This study intends to examine the causes and the most effective management strategies that can be adopted by school administrators in public secondary schools towards conflict prevention and resolution. We shall go further to look at the strength and weaknesses of these strategies in relation to different conflict situations which the strategy is intended to address or resolve.

1.1 The Problem

The lack of an organized and systematic approach to conflict management at the secondary level of education cannot be over emphasized particularly in the present generation where youth restiveness, cultism, examination malpractice and other forms of antisocial behaviors have generated conflict among staff and students in secondary schools. Also appraisal system, payroll, condition of service and other welfare packages are not implemented as objectively planned and this has also generated conflict between staff and administration. All these have seriously eroded on the quality of graduates from this level of education leading on the long run to a decline in the standard and quality of education in the country.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

2.1 Concept of Conflict

Where there is human interaction, there is a likelihood of Conflict which is essential and unavoidable since human wants are varied and insatiable. Conflicts may either be constructive or disruptive depending on the ways they present and the strategy adopted in its resolution. The secondary school system being a human organization is bedeviled with various types of conflict situations, so key players in the education system need to understand the nature of conflict because only then can they manage these conflicts constructively. Conflict can be defined from various dimensions and this has a bearing too on the various dimensions of conflict resolution because according to Tidwell (1998) the way in which an individual defines conflict will impact severely on the manner in which he or she implements conflict resolution.

With the apparent definitional confusion which the definition of conflict has generated, let us believe that this confusion is entangled in the box of conflict generating situations from where researchers pick at random and define conflict from the perspective of their pick. Thus according to Amason (1996) conflict is a form of socialization. He went further to state that people in organizations have both personal and role preferences about the organization's actions and policies. Thomas (1976, pp. 889-935) defines conflict as the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate some concern of his. Gardiner and Simmons (1992) defined conflict as any divergence of interests, objectives or priorities between individuals, groups, or organizations or nonconformity to requirements of a task; activity or process. Duncan (1995) opined that conflict implies some types of hostility and perhaps some desires to do harm which may be considered an extreme case of competition. Hocker and Wilmot (1985) define conflict as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. Nyamajiwa (2000) say that conflict can be defined as the opposition of individuals, or groups' interest, opinions or purpose. Conflict therefore can be said to be an affective-cognitive interactive process manifested in disagreement within or between social entities that are linked together by a bond (i.e. individual, group, organization, and many others).

Due to the diverse definitions of conflict, Conflicts in secondary schools takes different dimensions; for instance staff may fallout with principals either due to their work schedule or the reward system in place or the Principals may be too rigid as not to accommodate the interest of staff in the formulation of policies. Since conflict is inevitable due to the wide range of potential differences among people, the absence of conflict usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction. Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad because it helps to raise and address problems, energizes work to be on the most appropriate issues, motivates people to participate in school activities and also helps people learn how to recognize and benefit from their differences. The major issue therefore is that schools and even the community should find ways of managing conflict constructively so that it can be a learning platform for those involved in order that they may learn from the experiences in all kinds of human relationships and social settings.

2.2 Types of Conflict

Conflict can broadly be seen to be either cognitive or affective. Cognitive conflict refers to conflict over issues, ideas, principles or process while affective conflict refers to conflict over people, emotions or values. There are therefore very many types of conflict depending on the perspective from which one views conflict but Stoner and Wankel (1988) identified five types of conflict possible in the educational system and organizational life to include intra-personal conflict, inter-personal conflict, conflict between individual and group, inter-group conflict and inter-organizational Conflict. If we decide to look at conflict from its nature, Ololube (2006) puts forward that conflict can be classified into the following types:

> ➢ Perceived Conflict: this is when people perceive that conflicting conditions exists in the workplace.

The perceived conflict may be true or otherwise but there is a potential for perceived conflict to turn to real conflict.

➢ Latent Conflict: this is one which does not emerge in the open. Although parties to the conflict realize the fact that there is conflict but for various reasons they do not show it openly. Such a conflict is termed latent conflict.

➢ Manifest Conflict: In manifest conflict there is not only a recognition that conflict exists, but it is expressed openly.

2.3 Sources of Conflict

The sources of conflict in organizations like the secondary school vary and are numerous, that is why Egwunyenga (2000) posited that as there are many causes of conflict so there are many types of conflict but Peretomode (1995) went ahead to classify the sources of conflict to include structural sources of organizational conflict and non-structural determinants of organizational conflict. Structural source of organizational conflict refers to formally defined framework or task and authority relationship. Conflicts arising from the structural design of the organization are called structural conflict or structural source of organizational conflict. Non-structural determinants of organizational conflict are the sources of conflict that could be regarded as personal and behavioral sources of conflict. It includes conflicts caused by differences in personal background, differences in values, perceptions, emotion, attitude and personnel's poor communication skills.

In the secondary school, conflict can emanate from differences in status, work interdependence, differences in performance criteria and reward system, mutual dependence on limited resources, differences in goals and jurisdiction ambiguities. This is so because the public secondary school system is structured in a way that there are relationships among individuals and between them and the positions they occupy in the school system and there are also processes by which the structured pattern is created and maintained. Secondary schools being formal organizations have characteristics which makes them to possess a highly structured hierarchy which include a written document or book in which duties and responsibilities are spelt out, have a life span longer than those of human beings in it and have an open system.

Ejiogu (1990) identified some sources of conflict in the school system to include; generational gap, reality distortion, authoritarian rule, anti-authority, organizational structure factor, The Issue of generational gap contends that most conflict in the school system today is because the elders and the youths see the tremendous changes going on all over the world from different perspectives, coupled with the breakdown of the family system. The level of change in all facets of our lives has become very rapid, more conspicuous and very devastating such that most youths do not come from stable homes thus making most of them maladjusted to orderliness and respect for authority. These dissident behaviors of the youths have become a great source of conflict in the school system. Reality distortion according to Ejiogu (1990) can be a favorable and an unfavorable attitude that is resistant to change in the face of contradictory evidence. It is often developed as a result of defensiveness or social pressures in interactive situations and its major outcome is discriminations which itself contributes immensely to both intra-personal and conflict among staff such that in such interactions, people encounter much competition, domination and provocation as each staff or group attempts to gain something that the other side wants as well and since one side must lose, they develop hostile attitudes towards each other. Authoritarian rule is a situation where persons in leadership position like the principal become so dictatorial in their pronouncements, attitude and behavior. Such principals are usually easily given to premature and unqualified acceptance or rejection of other staff situations and opinions. They are often fond of black and white judgments and hardly subscribe to in between judgments. There is no doubt that such extreme postures and tendency to hastily judge others as good or bad can easily create division among staff in any organization hence its potential for conflict emergence. There are staffs in the secondary schools that are chronically anti-authority, they always complain of being oppressed by the organization. Any impersonal bureaucratic behavior is perceived

negatively and subsequently is highly resented. These anti-authority individuals easily become the convenient rallying point for growing dissatisfaction in other staff in the organization. Organizational structure factor**s** like the size of the organization have been found to positively correlate with the amount of conflict, thus the larger the organization, the greater the number and the intensity of conflicts. This is so because the more the number of staff, the more diverse their personality types and the more difficult it becomes to effectively communicate with all members.

In his own contribution, Otobo (1987) identified two major sources of conflict which include; Internal sources which consist of management style, nature of physical environment of the work place, consciousness of staff, promotion system and dispute resolution procedures and external sources which include economic policies, government, unpatriotic behavior of the administrative class and many others.

Although these sources of conflict remain valid, public secondary school conflict can primarily result from:

➢ **Poor Communication** - lack of proper communication is a driver of organizational conflict since ambiguous communication styles can lead to misunderstanding between employees themselves or between the administrator and the employee.

➢ **Different Values** - every workplace is made up of individuals who view the world from diverse perspectives and when this diversity is not properly understood can result in conflict within the school system.

➢ **Differing Interest** - conflicts occur when individual staff fights for their personal goals, ignoring organizational goals and institutional objectives and well being.

➢ **Scarce Resources** - too often, employees feel they have to compete for available resources in order to do their job. In an environment where resources are scarce, this causes conflict despite the awareness of how these scarce resources may be used.

➢ **Personality Clashes** - all work environments are made up of differing personalities and unless staffs understand and accept each other's approach to work situation and problem solving, conflict will arise.

➢ **Poor Performance** - as a working system, when one or more individuals within a work cycle or unit are not performing effectively (not working up to potential) and this is not addressed, conflict is inevitable.

2.4 Causes of Conflicts

Since the secondary school setting is a breeding ground for conflicts because of the dynamics and interdependence of the employee-to-employee and the vendor relationships, Hart (2000) and Bell (2002) suggest eight causes of conflict among staff in the workplace to include Conflicting needs, conflicting styles, conflicting perception, conflicting goals, conflicting pressures, conflicting roles, different personal values and unpredictable policies. Nevertheless Lye (2008) opines that the common causes of workplace conflict may also include poor communication, mushroom effect, unrealistic work expectations, overwork, stress, personality clashes, favoritism and poor leadership. But come to think of it, secondary school conflicts be they inter or intra has to do with the personalities of the individuals involved rather than the tasks they perform and there are quite a lot of reasons why this should be. One of it is when there are personal obstacles to communication, staff conflict will most assuredly arise and such barriers are probably more difficult to overcome than physical obstacles because of their failure to exchange information and ideas. For instance personal conflict may occur if a staff is dissatisfied with his role as compared to the role of another staff if he is not adequately communicated as to why he is performing the role he is performing. Other causes of conflict include:

➢ **Unimpressive Conditions of Service** - poor working conditions and lack of clear work and

remuneration policy by the government has caused quite a lot of conflict between the government and public secondary school stakeholders. Okotoni and Okotoni (2003, pp. 23-24.) indicate that teachers work in highly de-motivating conditions due to poor pay by the government coupled with lack of clear increments in salaries. The bottom line to the above is that workers will capitalize on these to exhibit incongruent behaviors that lead to conflict. Foster and William (1982) affirm this view and indicate that unmotivated teachers will not produce good results.

➢ **Administrative Incompetence of Head Teachers (Principals)** - some principals do not have the prerequisite training and competence to head a school as such their administrative style always brings them into conflict with other members of the school community. Rono (2000) shares the above views and indicates that some head teachers display poor leadership qualities that created conflicts in schools.

➢ **Misappropriation or Embezzlement of Funds** - some principals are not transparent in the handling of financial matters in their school. Most principals do not discuss financial issues of their school with their staff and when financial issues are brought on the agenda of staff meetings, it is most often the last item on the agenda and at this time the members are tired and unable to discuss the item in detail. Thus staffs authorize use of school finance hurriedly without counter checking the implications, giving a leeway to some principals to misappropriate school funds. Some principals are not transparent and accountable in financial issues of the school, they do not let people see value for money and how the money collected in the school is used. These principals create conflicts in their schools because of applying wrong managerial skills in planning, budgeting and expenditure control.

➢ **Indiscipline on the Part of Students** - discipline of students has greatly contributed to a lot of instabilities in public secondary schools. With the high level of moral decadence, a lot of students become engrossed in acts of truancy and other vices that have brought them into conflict with teachers, principals and constituted authority.

➢ **Indiscipline on the Part of Teachers and Administration** - some teachers go into teaching profession as a last resort when other alternatives are absent. These teachers will never settle in their jobs as professionals. They work to earn a salary with the hope that they will soon leave the profession. Complaint, laxity, grumbling and fighting the principal characterizes their work. The principal will always be in the centre of blame. He or she will not get anything done without running into trouble with the teachers. Kingala (2000) concurs with the above and indicates that men and women who have no calling to teaching vocation take up the training as teachers but have no interest in looking after the young people. Such teachers most of whom are brought in by politicians, receive protection from these politicians. This class of teachers lack discipline, and are chronic absentees in school, some engage in immoral acts with students or incite them against the school authority. Philips (2000) affirms the above views and indicates that there are teachers who take up the noble teaching profession yet they have no interest in it.

➢ **Inferiority/Superiority Complex** - some principals tend to be taken up by the status of their position and occupy its authority and privileges. They see the need to defend the sanctity of their office as a fundamental obligation. Such principal regard himself as inseparable from the status of the office. Walker (1979) indicated that principals run into conflicts with other stakeholders because of the way they view their office. They often react with threat and counter aggressive behavior; teachers are seen as impractical if not trouble makers while students as naïve, mischievous and easily influenced to commit acts against the principal.

➢ **Poor Academic Performance** - whenever a school is performing poorly there is bound to be blames and counter blames. In such situations, parents differ greatly with the teachers over academic performance of their children and parents place a lot of pressure on the teachers claiming that they

contribute to poor academic performance of the students. This is supported by Okotoni and Okotoni (2003, pp. 23-24.) that poorly performing schools many at times are characterized by a lot of conflicts by the stakeholders.

➢ **Favoritism by the School Administration - p**rincipals sometimes find themselves in problems with the perceptions of the stakeholders that sometimes the principal favors some stakeholders and some students. In some cases, some staff is allowed express authority to supply goods to schools at inflated prices. This special treatment results in discontentment among the stakeholders.

➢ **Inadequate Resources** - shortage of finances makes it hard for principals to forge ahead in the execution of educational programs. Lack of finance and resources in school sometimes is blamed on the principal. Sometimes parents blame the principal and government for not providing the required learning facilities. Lunenburg and Ornstein (1991) emphasize the fact that principals face difficulties in their schools due to problems associated with lack of finances to run educational programs. The principal is left in dilemma on how to provide quality education in the absence of money and when students fail to perform well due to lack of learning facilities, the parents, government and the school can be in conflict.

This study therefore intends to answer research question one: ***What are the causes of conflict in public secondary schools in Delta State?***

2.5 Aspect of secondary school administration most affected by conflict

Secondary school administration can be seen to comprise of four distinct areas; student personnel services, staff personnel services and financial administration and instructional program implementation. These aspects of secondary school administration generate conflicts at different times and in a variety of ways. Student personnel refer to what relationships that exist between the students and the government, staff and the school administrators. This area of school administration is bedeviled with very many conflicting situations which may arise either from dissatisfaction of students with government policies, rules and regulations or as a result of student's not strictly abiding by the rules and regulations set out by administration. Staff personnel service is another aspect of secondary school administration where conflicts can arise. Staff personnel refer to the human resource of the school. Conflict therefore being a human characteristic can arise between staff and government, between staff and administration or among staff. This may be due to unfavorable working condition, inappropriate allocation of offices, truancy on the part of individual staff and high handedness on the part of the principal etc. Financial administration has to do with the management of all income and expenditure of the school. Conflict can arise between the government and the school administration, between student and government/administration, between staff and principal or between staff and government. Such conflict may arise due to inadequate allocation to the school from the government, poor remuneration of staff, inappropriate school fees and levies and inappropriate accounting record and practice. Instructional program implementation relates to the actual knowledge transfer process which involves the implementation of a complete curriculum outlay containing precise size of lessons, the division of the learning material into units, the sequence and transition from one unit of lesson to the other. This area of school administration involves all that has to do with the curriculum from development to implementation of which if not properly and professionally managed can lead to conflict between staff and parents, staff and administration.

Since all these aspects of secondary school administration cannot be equally affected by conflict, this study intends to answer research question two: ***What are the aspects of secondary school administration mostly affected by conflict?***

2.6 Effects of Conflicts

Conflict among staff in the educational system has contributed immensely to the indiscipline and the restive nature of youths of today. Faulty conflict management has placed the educational system in a state of anarchy among staff in secondary schools thus the upheavals of conflict resulting from inadequate funding, poor facilities, poor appraisal, absenteeism, Teacher's strike and student's demonstrations have caused the standard of education at the secondary school level to be rated low. The fact is that a conflict ridden education system will not be able to provide good quality education to students. However sociologists acknowledge the ubiquitous nature of conflict but tend to emphasize on the benefits of conflict in an organization. In that light, Coser (1967) believes that conflict can be beneficial to an organization in many ways:

➢ Conflict can help in establishment and maintenance of authority boundaries of jurisdiction among the various office holders in the organization.

➢ Conflict helps to strengthen staff identification with the organization.

➢ Conflict situation creates awareness of organizational problems.

➢ It can also stimulate organizational changes and adaptations.

➢ It can lead to emergence of new and more effective leadership.

➢ Conflict directly or indirectly can help in breaking down old rituals and routines and thus encourages innovations among staff.

Robbins (1975) in the same vein examined the positive side of conflict when he asserted that conflict stimulates conditions that breed changes. Consequently, these changes bring about organizational adaptations. He further saw that it is through organizational adaptation that the organization can survive and survival is the primary objective of any organization. However we should put on note that if poorly managed, conflict can degenerate into outright disregard to constituted authority and general antagonism that may impede the realization of organizational goals and objectives. Conflict in secondary schools thus, particularly those between staff and government often degenerate into strike actions which invariably result in the loss of working hours. Furthermore, Rhenman (1970) asserted that the effects of staff conflict may be constructive, destructive or partially both. For instance in a struggle between two staff to gain promotion, the winner will certainly feel that the conflict was worthwhile while the looser would probably reach the opposite conclusion and may resign as a result of his failure. This struggle may turn into a worthless conflict based upon the dissatisfaction of the looser and this will continue to inhibit the functionality of the school system. The destructive effect of staff conflict are generally quite obvious and staff conflict as a form of communication may open up new and lasting channels of communication.

On that note, conflict can therefore be said to be functional and dysfunctional:

Functional Outcomes

➢ Conflict stimulates innovation, creativity and growth.
➢ Conflict improves organizational decision making.
➢ Conflict leads to synergistic solutions to common problems.
➢ Conflict enhances individual and group performance.
➢ Conflict forces individuals and groups to search for new approaches to issues.

Dysfunctional Outcomes

➢ Conflict causes job stress, burnout and dissatisfaction.
➢ Conflict reduces Communication between individuals and groups
➢ Conflict reduces Job performance.
➢ Conflict increases resistant to change.
➢ Conflict affects organizational commitment and loyalty.

2.7 Conflict Management Strategies

From the onset of this study our mind was modeled to the fact that conflict is inevitable in the secondary school system and we still join the argument that the school being a free enterprise system is based on competition, which is a source and form of staff conflict. Since there is no organization that is free of staff conflict and pursuing a conflict free organization would be a mistake, secondary school administrators must live with conflicts. The best attitude an efficient principal, administrator and all staff should have towards it is to recognize its inevitability in the secondary school system and develop understanding of effective ways and manners of managing, minimizing and resolving it to avoid it degenerating to a crisis situation or strike before they are resolved.

Conflict management styles or strategies in the secondary school system are numerous but for any one of these strategies to work efficiently require that the school principals, staff and students study the conflict situation, maintain good human relations and close all communication gaps. That is why Olaleye and Arogundade (2013) argued that different management strategies may lead to either desirable or undesirable outcomes depending on their effectiveness or ineffectiveness. Therefore the management strategy used may result in desirable outcome such as enhanced team spirit, efficient and effective utilization of available resources, achievement of objectives and good working relationships with increased productivity. However, when the management strategy used results in undesirable outcomes the following issues may arise; strikes, demonstrations, poor performance, low productivity and wastage of resources. Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman (1992) therefore saw that since conflict must arise in organizations whenever interests collide and when these differences affect the relationship between interdependent people, they must be constructively managed. Blake and Mouton (1985) then classified these strategies of conflict resolution into four basic categories; Bureaucratic, forcing, compromising and confrontational approaches.

The bureaucratic Approach in the school system, involves the line and staff structure where communication is supposed to be both vertical and horizontal and this should be adequately utilized in the resolution of conflicts. For instance secondary school principals should delegate powers to vice-principals and senior teachers to look into matters and report back to him. This strategy also encourages participation of subordinates and gives them a sense of belonging. This is a diplomatic technique that can be adopted by school principals and administrators to suppress conflict by cautioning conflicting behaviors. The approach requires the parties to ignore their differences by; offering compliment to the other party, making specific offers of assistance to the other party, laying emphasis on the common characteristics of mutual interest among staff.

The forcing strategy according to Blake and Mouton (1985) involves the school administrator or principal threatening or actually giving out punishment to enforce compliance to the resolution in a conflict. It involves the use of pressure to force the other party to give in. Threats and punishment which are not negotiable may be applied by the school principals to resolve conflicts. Well it is not too bad a strategy but it can mostly be used to resolve conflicts at its initial stage where it is still very mild. The major weakness of this strategy is that it treats the symptoms rather than the cause of the conflict and the danger in this is that the conflict can still emerge much later in a bigger form than before. The forcing style most often amounts to an assertive and uncooperative behavior which reflect a win-lose approach to interpersonal conflict resolution. It relies on coercive power and dominance in the resolution of conflict where the arbitrator makes sure there is a looser and a winner.

The compromising style implies involving compromise in the process of conflict resolution. The parties involved in the conflict come to an agreement through reciprocity and understanding so that the mid-way point is established between the parties. The compromising style according to Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman (1992) refers to behaviors at an intermediate level of cooperation and assertiveness. This style is based on give and take, which usually involves a series of concessions. This technique is commonly used and widely accepted as a means of resolving conflict. This approach involves the conflicting parties having to make some sacrifice of

something of value to them in order to resolve the area of conflict. Implying that this technique has potential settlements that provide each party with enough benefits to satisfy aspirations and make unilateral concession. It will also suggest specific exchange concession that would be accepted.

The confrontation approach involves recognizing the conflict so that it can be evaluated by staff or parties involved in the conflict. It can therefore be seen as an integrated problem solving strategy where the conflicting parties take time to identify and correct the source of their conflict. This involves integrative Problem solving where resolution is reached through face to face confrontation of the conflicting parties. It requires the provision of settlement through reconciliation of the need of both staff by an integrator, while, the collaborating style involves strong cooperative and assertive behaviors. It is the win-win approach to interpersonal conflict handling. In this stylistic approach to staff conflict management, it is sharing, examining and assessing the reasons for the conflict that leads to the development of an alternative that is fully acceptable to everyone involved. This may effectively resolve the conflict as it is regarded as the best style to resolve conflicts.

Apart from the above mentioned strategies, effective public secondary school conflict management can be achieved by the following techniques:

➢ **Withdrawal** - this is a conflict resolution technique in which either one or both staff withdraws from the relationship in the organization. This implies that one of the staff leaves the school which can be orchestrated by the principal through transfers. Also alteration of structural and human variables that involves interchanging group members, creating new co-coordinating positions and extending organizational scope of activities among other programs. Altering human variables has been identified as a potent technique of resolving intra–organization conflict and equally involves behavioral modifications of one staff and another to bring about harmony.

➢ **Avoidance** - avoidance may take the form of pretending to be unaware that conflict exists. This implies that with time, the conflicting parties will sort themselves out. Mutual avoidance is best accepted if they have interdependent task roles that need co-ordination among staff.

➢ **Equitable Distribution of Scarce Resources** - it is evident that perceived injustice in some sub-units in an organization and educational setting can result in conflict. Therefore, education administrators and school principals should judiciously allocate resources on the basis of need with respect to the limit of available stock. The criteria or sharing formula should be clearly communicated to all the staff concerned to avoid misinterpretation of the basis of allocation and reward contingencies should be modified for transparency.

➢ **Introduction of Super-Ordinate Goals** - this refers to goals that demand the co-operative efforts of all the conflicting parties to achieve. Thus in a bid to achieve such goals staff must inevitably relate harmoniously with each other whether in conflict or not. This is highly valued by all the parties as the goal must be commonly desired by all staff.

➢ **Modification of Communication Patterns** - this technique involves provision of more vital and reliable information required for mutual problem solving and a set out channel of communication. This approach involves the establishment of norms about openness as well as harmony to agree to abide by rules.

No matter the style adopted, Imhabekhai (2001, p. 103) did state that managers and school administrators should have a proper understanding of the issues that generate a particular conflict situation. Although that is correct because only then can they employ effective management strategies but knowledge of effective strategies is a panacea for good conflict management hence this study wishes to answer research question three: ***What are the most effective strategies to be adopted in the management of conflicts in secondary schools?***

3. Methodology, results, and discussions

3.1 Methodology

The study has as its basic consideration "assessment of conflict management strategies in public secondary schools in Delta state". The descriptive survey research design was employed with a focus on public secondary schools in Delta north senatorial district of Delta state, Nigeria. To guide the study, three research questions were raised and to be able to answer these research questions, the questionnaire designed by the researcher with a reliability of 0.6 Cronbach Alpha Index indicated a favorable reliable score from all the items thus exceeding the common threshold of cronbach Alpha value recommended by Malhotra (2006, pp. 83-94).This was administered to respondents after adopting convenient sampling to select one hundred and forty public secondary schools principals during the meeting of all conference of principals Delta north chapter while data collected was analysed using simple percentage.

3.2 Results

Research question one: What are the causes of conflict in public secondary schools in Delta North Senatorial district?

Table 1

Potential causes of conflict

		Frequency	Percentage
agree		112	80%
disagree		28	20%
	total	140	100%

The response pattern on the potential causes of conflict from the analysis of field survey revealed that 112 (80%) respondents agreed that none or improper record keeping, regular queries and warnings, tampering with staff salary, irregular payment of staff salaries, defamation of character, principals paying deaf ear to complains, sudden Transfers, non promotion of staff, unsuitable educational technology, favoritism, non-conducive working/learning environment, communication without feedback, absenteeism, principal's non release of fund for the conduct of school activities, unfavorable conditions of service, staff insecurity, illegal collection of levies, improper delegation of duties, irregular class attendance, principals concluding without listening to any party, non satisfaction of job and human needs and information overload are potential causes of conflict in secondary schools while 28 (20%) of the respondents disagreed.

Research question two: What are the aspects of secondary school administration most affected by conflict?

Table 2

Aspects of secondary school administration most affected by conflict

		Frequency	Percentage
agree		107	76%
disagree		33	24%
	total	140	100%

When asked on aspects of secondary school administration most affected by conflict, 107 (76%) respondents agreed that student's personnel, financial administration staff personnel and instructional program implementation are mostly affected by conflict while 33(24%) respondents disagreed.

Research question three: What are the most effective strategies to be adopted in the management of conflicts in secondary schools?

Table 3

Conflict management strategies in secondary school

		Frequency	Percentage
agree		111	79%
disagree		29	21%
	total	140	100%

The response pattern on conflict management strategies used in secondary schools revealed that 111 (79%) of the respondents agreed that conflict can be managed by use of confrontation, committee, prayers, orienting teachers on better job performance, compromise, free flow of communication, by the provision of suitable educational technology, regular staff payment, proper keeping of school records, dialogue, orderliness in staff promotion, in-boxing, persuasive speech, arbitration, adequate staff security, early response to complaints, empathy, provision of conducive teaching and learning environment, avoiding and satisfaction of the hierarchy of human needs, proper keeping of school records and. While 29 (21%) of the respondents disagreed.

3.3 Discussion

Causes of conflict among staff in the secondary school system

A consideration of the causes of conflict in public secondary schools show that none or improper record keeping, regular queries and warnings, tampering with staff salary, irregular payment of staff salaries, defamation of character, principals paying deaf ear to complains, sudden Transfers, non promotion of staff, unsuitable educational technology, favoritism, non-conducive working/learning environment, communication without feedback, absenteeism, principal's non release of fund for the conduct of school activities, unfavorable conditions of service, staff insecurity, illegal collection of levies, improper delegation of duties, irregular class attendance, principals concluding without listening to any party, non satisfaction of job and human needs and information overload are all causes of conflict in public secondary schools. These findings corroborate those of Stewart and Dangelo (1980) that conflicts in institutions are associated with conflict over basic values.

Looking at the data result shows that general absenteeism of staff and principals' not releasing money for the conduct of external practical examination may not easily promote conflict since absenteeism of staff for example may be on arrangement. The school may be in a very remote area where there is no easy access to the community, and the village may lack social amenities that will give comfort to the staff. The management and staff could decide to come to an understanding and share themselves on number of days each of the groups will be in the school. Anytime they come to school, they perform very well and the students are even happy that their teachers are absent. So with this type of understanding there will be little conflict.

Principals' not releasing money for the conduct of external practical examinations involves very few science teachers and the management. Both parties may come to a compromise on a formula of "kill and divide" while the needed materials that could involve money could be borrowed and others improvised. As a result of this there may be little or no conflict.

With the above findings, this study becomes congruent with Sisk and Williams' (1981) definition of conflict as the process which begins when one party perceives that one or more of its concerns have been or are about to be frustrated by another party.

Aspects of secondary school administration most affected by conflict

From analysis, we can deduce that the aspects of secondary school administration mostly affected by conflicts are the areas of student personnel and financial administration judging from the percentage of respondents that strongly agree to these two questions. Instructional program implementation and staff personnel may not have the power to promote much conflict and if they do, the conflict may manifest in the erosion of the

standard and quality of education

This study therefore disputes Moore (1996) assertion that instructional program implementation is one of the aspects of secondary school administration most affected by conflict. The opinion of this study is that the extent to which instructional programs are implemented does not affect public secondary school administration rather; its effect will be on the general education system. But this study is in line with Moore (1996) assertion that financial administration is an aspect of secondary school administration most affected by conflict. He opined that improper use of teaching time, charging exorbitant fees for private lessons and pamphlets can induce conflicts.

Most effective conflict management strategies in public secondary schools

This study found that the confrontational and compromise strategies are most productive in public secondary school conflict resolution. The above conclusion is in line with Handy (1978) and Blake and mouton (1985) when they found that arbitration and confrontation strategies are very effective in the management of conflict in secondary schools. In the same vein Reitz (1977) believed that in the above strategies, both parties will come together, gather information, propose alternative solutions and evaluate the alternatives until one is found that solves the problem to the satisfaction of both parties.

As for committee and dialogue, the reason that may support the use of these strategies by most public secondary school principals may be as a result of their busy schedules of duty. So instead of issues coming directly to them, they expect these issues to go through the proper channel which may be to the chairman of the disciplinary committee as the immediate subordinate. Another reason to support the finding may be the line and staff structure of the institution's administrative system. This structure provides a hierarchical pattern and so when there is conflict, there is a tendency for a head of division to apply division of labor to solve the numerous conflicts that exists in the school.

Another conflict resolution strategy is the orienting teachers on better job performance in secondary schools. For if one is put in the right direction, he hardly fall victim of any circumstance. From the findings of this study, other strategies may be seen as postponing the evil day or even promoting the conflict like paying deaf ears to complaints and jumping into conclusion without listening to the parties which could aggravate conflicts but when teachers are better oriented on their job, conflicts if they arise will be minimal or easy to resolve.

The study also revealed that the avoidance strategy is not too suitable for secondary school system. It can be found that junior teachers who experience conflict with senior counterparts use this strategy. Also student personnel in conflict with staff personnel use similar strategy (avoidance). The avoidance styles used include withdrawal, ignoring the conflict, postponed dealing with the conflict and pretending that the conflict does not even exist. This finding tallies with Burk's (1996) study on conflict management strategies employed by supervisors, where the avoidance approach ranked the lowest style employed by the supervisors. In a related finding Imbabekhai (2001) described avoidance strategy as sweeping the conflict under the rug and pretending that the issue does not exist.

4. Conclusion, significance and recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

It is obvious that conflict is part and parcel of human existence because even within the individual there is conflict and with the ever growing diversity in human want, taste and the need for reforms in the secondary school system it will be salient to hammer on the desirability of conflict. In the light of the above, Hacon (1965) posited that conflict is almost a continuous process, he maintained that by sound planning and action, management must try constantly to direct the emergence of conflict into productive and creative channels. Atsenuwa (2005) saw that future conflicts could be managed and curbed by way of proper all round communication between staff and management because good and effective leadership relations are essential in

preventing staff conflict. Based on the results, this study hereby concludes that the major causes of conflict in public secondary schools are principals tempering with staff salary, illegal collection of levies, delegating duty meant for senior staff to junior staff and teachers' irregularity to class. It also saw that the aspects of public secondary school administration most affected by conflicts are the areas of student personnel and financial administration. It finally brought to the fore the fact that the confrontational, dialogue, the compromising and the committee setting styles are most effective in public secondary school conflict resolution.

4.2 Study Implications

This paper found that the aspects of public secondary school administration most affected by conflict are the student personnel and financial administration. School principals therefore need to be prudent in their financial dealings with all stakeholders (learners, teachers, administrators and the community). They should also put the interest of the learners first in all policies, programs, rules and regulations that will be promulgated because if stakeholders are comfortable with the management style, there will be less conflict in the system. Since from the onset we did say that conflicts are inevitable in all human relationships, they therefore must definitely arise in the public secondary school system. Thus when they do arise, administrators should be able to tackle such conflicts with conflict resolution strategies that would yield productive rather than destructive outcomes. This paper therefore sees public secondary school conflict resolution for productive and progressive elevation of the educational quality and standard of society being achieved through the use of confrontational, dialogue, committee and compromising conflict resolution strategies. The implications are that the confrontational strategy will help the school principal to maintain his ground, face issues directly and build confidence in himself and his office. Dialogue is another strategy the principals can adopt in conflict resolution in their schools. It will enable all concerned to make input towards the resolution of the conflict and when this is effectively managed, most often such conflicts don't rear their heads again. This style is better achieved if abridged with the committee setting strategy because the principals who combine both strategies will delegate duties to the committee leaving him with enough time to attend to other administrative duties but must constantly review the committee reports. This paper sees some ray of effectiveness in using the compromising strategy but the principal must ask himself: why and what am I compromising for? Is it to the advantage of all stakeholders? If the compromise is skewed, it may generate further conflict. From all these we could gather that for the effective resolution of secondary school conflicts, all stakeholders should always co-operatively resolve conflicts, avoid rigidity and have the singular purpose of uplifting the quality and standard of education.

4.3 Significance of the study

This study will immensely help school administrators to understand the inevitability and causes of conflict and help them to identify the most effective management strategies in resolving most conflicts in the secondary school system. The findings will also assist the ministry of education, post primary education board and the government in getting to know the challenges facing the different categories of staff in the secondary school system thereby giving the basis for promotion, transfers, the provision of funds, teaching aids and other materials necessary for the smooth operation of the secondary school system. Finally it will help stakeholders in the education sector to appreciate the inevitability of conflict and effective management strategies to employ.

4.4 Recommendations

Conflict as a phenomenon that is endemic in any social structure is also an integral part of human experience which has to do with opposing forces, viewed simply as disagreement in objective expectation, interest and orientation. In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are put forward:

➢   Government should initiate compulsory workshops on financial prudence as an avenue to intimate principals on not tempering with staff salary, not being involved in illegal collection of levies from students and making sure that duties are assigned to teachers accordingly.

> ➢ Principals should be conversant with various management strategies through the attendance of compulsory seminars and conferences so that they can use the most effective conflict resolution strategies for particular conflict situation.

> ➢ Principals should be conscious of their authority boundaries which should be spelt out by the ministry of education to avoid conflict by ensuring that they are always aware of rules governing their responsibilities and jurisdictional boundaries.

> ➢ Government should include conflict management as part of the curriculum of teachers training education.

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