

## SCHOOL CONFLICT: WHAT TEACHERS SHOULD KNOW

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### ABSTRACT

*The school system is awash with various intensities of conflicts. School personnel, especially teachers, are faced with the serious problem of how to mitigate these conflicts without recording much success. This is because of poor orientations of teachers about conflict management dynamics. Their poor knowledge of conflict dynamics and its management approaches has exposed them to the various negative consequences of conflict situation. This article therefore, explored the issues of school conflict and its management approaches. In doing this, it argued that conflict in the school is a normal and expected phenomenon but becomes unacceptable when it escalates beyond the normal limit. In this study, the various forms of school conflict were discussed, as well as their specific causes and consequences. The role of perception in conflict and how teachers can effectively confront school conflict were explored. The aim is to keep teachers abreast of the changing contours of school conflict and to make sure that they are equipped with the required knowledge for its constructive management in order to enhance their productivity.*

**Key words:** *conflict, conflict management styles, school conflict, teachers, perception,*

### INTRODUCTION

School conflict has become a black box in social conflict discourse, at least in developing countries, particularly in Nigeria. The obvious fact is that religious conflict, communal conflict, ethnic conflict, and electoral violence, just to mention a few, have taken the centre stage in social discourses on conflict. Specialists in peace and conflict studies hardly write on school conflict, which has created a lacuna in its understanding and make the existence of local scholarly works scarce on the subject. Most of the available materials on school conflict were written by those who are not specialist in peace and conflict studies, and particularly in school conflict. The effect of this development is that the nature of knowledge being disseminated on the subject is greatly limited. The seriousness of the subject and my professional background in both education and peace and conflict studies motivated this effort to begin to open the box.

The school as a social institution is a conflict-ridden environment and has been classified as the highest conflict brewing organisation. Conflict is an ever-present phenomenon in all social organisations, but conflict manifesting in the school far surpasses those emerging from other organisations. For instances, Lippitt (1982) asserted that conflict management in schools commanded nearly 49% of the attention of schools as compared to 24% in other management positions. This idea gives insight into the fact that conflict is more pervasive in the school than any other social organisation. This was also confirmed by Dipaola and Hoy (2001) that conflict is indeed on the daily menu of school administration. Spring (1993) partly highlighted the reason for the pervasiveness of conflicts in the school, when he submitted that the educational settings are even more conducive to repeated conflict situations because of their inherent political, economic and social characteristics. People go to school with different orientations, ideas, views and backgrounds. The interplay of these variables, without conscious display of understanding and tolerance will trigger conflict in enormous proportions in the system. Even teaching and learning process which is the core of the system is not immune from conflict. Barsky (2003) and Msila (2012) are of the opinion that the process of teaching and learning is fraught with conflict and it

impacts badly on it. These ideas attest to the fact that the whole process of the school is conflict-laden, which imposes on the school personnel, especially teachers, the need to understand conflict dynamics and its management approaches for the survival, performance and sustenance of the system. The idea that teachers constitute the most important personality in the school lends credence to the need to build their capacities on conflict dynamics in order to enhance their efficiency. According to Fabunmi (2007) teachers are the most important element in the school system. They are more important than the quality and quantity of equipment and material and degree of financing. All these are passive resources in the school system. It is only teachers that can use them as instructional aids for effective dissemination of knowledge and learning (Fabunmi, 2007). To improve teachers' knowledge and understanding on the issues of conflict and conflict management approaches, as primary knowledge creator and dispenser, it is paramount to expose them to conflict knowledge so that they can positively confront conflict before it degenerates into violence acts. The existence of conflict in the school system does not potent danger and does not in fact mean that the system is unhealthy.

Conflict is not a bad omen and its existence in the school underscores the fact that it is normal arena for human capital production. The system becomes abnormal and unhealthy when emerging conflicts are allowed to escalate into violent conflicts, capable of causing havoc to both human and material resources and even the system at large. The nature of conflicts often experienced in the school is largely interpersonal conflict. Anderson and Kypriano (1994) posited that interpersonal conflict is the most widespread and visible kind of conflict in schools and other organizations, because it is evident when two or more individuals disagree about issues, actions or goals. Interpersonal conflict manifests in the school in various forms between or among the school personnel, including the students. Conflicts that occur between teachers, teachers and heads of departments, between teachers and learners, between teachers and parents, between teachers and the school governing bodies, between teachers and principals and between teachers and other stakeholders (Kgomotso, 2006) are purely interpersonal in nature. These conflicts can be linked to a number of factors resident in the school and imported from outside the school. The inability of teachers to carefully handle the various conflicts that might confront them in the daily discharge of their responsibilities may create a long-time problem for them, the school and the society in general. Conflict is a parasite that robs teachers of the opportunity to perform their tasks as expected and that has the potentials to inflict health problems on them.

In a more explicit manner, conflict jeopardizes the capacity of teachers to perform, when misperceived and managed. According to Alimba and Fabunmi (2014), negative conflicts have the capacity, if unchecked, to snowball into perpetual decline in the productivity of school personnel and consequently lower the quality of education in a country. Makaye and Ndofirepi (2012) stressed that school conflicts often disturb the tone and climate of school and ultimately impact negatively on the performance of both teachers and students. Since teachers are the most important entity in school administration, whatever jeopardises their productivity will in the long-run compromise the achievement of the goals of education in a country. This makes it highly paramount for teacher education to keep teachers abreast of and equipped them with the intricacies of conflict dynamics and its conflict management strategies in order to help them cope with the complexities of their jobs. Conflict management is not a phenomenon that deals with the elimination or eradication of conflict from organisations.

Conflict management consists of interventions designed to reduce excessive conflict or in some instances to increase insufficient conflict in a system. Conflict management is a set of skills that assist individuals and groups to better understand how to deal with conflict that may crop up in all aspects of their endeavours constructively, so as to improve their social relationship with other people and enhance their productivity. Conflict management therefore, is a practice that involves the identification and handling of conflict in such a way that its intensity is reduced to a minimum level, capable of ensuring innovation and creativity in social relations or in organisations. Rahim (2002) pointed out that conflict management does not necessarily imply avoidance, reduction or termination of conflict. Instead, it involves designing effective macro-level strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and enhancing the constructive functions of conflicts in order to enhance learning and effectiveness in an organisation (Rahim, 2002). The impression created is that the goal of conflict management is to reduce conflict level to the point where it will become a positive force in social relationship and institutional development. Miall (2007) opined that conflict management is all about how to regulate and contain conflict, but not necessarily to end it. There are various approaches that can be adopted in managing conflict in organisations. The approaches can generally be categorised into three, namely: unilateral

conflict management, joint conflict management and third party conflict management. The understanding of these approaches will make teachers to be prudent in making choice of strategies and ensuring its effective utilisation to achieve constructive outcomes in their schools. This will create the needed social atmosphere that will enhance their performance. Based on this preliminary introduction, this article intends to provide a platform for teachers to understand the dynamic nature of conflict and its management approaches, so that they can be equipped with the required knowledge on how to functionally resolve conflict that might confront them for harmonious living and promotion of a compatible working relationship in their schools.

### **CONCEPTUAL EXPLANATION OF CONFLICT**

A major factor that influenced the understanding of conflict at the early stage was its Latin exposition. Conflict was considered as “confligere” in Latin, which means “to strike to together”. Striking together can literally be translated into something negative. Therefore, this idea shaped the understanding and reactions of people to conflict for a very long time. For instance, the interpretations of conflict by scholars follow a negative connotation. Lindelow and Scott (1989) stressed that conflict conjures negative connotation, invokes negative feelings and often leads to destruction. Hocker and Wilmot (1995) argued that “a negative connotation is implied” when conflict is being mentioned. This possibly was the reason Nwolise (2003) described conflict as a clash, confrontation, battle or struggle.

By this, conflict generally conjures negative thoughts that could lead to unwanted behaviour. The early school of thought on conflict purely considered conflict as a negative phenomenon that blows no one any good. Proponents of this theory, such as Henry Fayol, Frederick Taylor, Max Weber considered conflict as highly detrimental to organisational development. They, therefore, described conflict as a dysfunctional element that should be eliminated by all means or at worse be avoided in order to maintain positive social relations and improve organisation performance. Robbins (1996) submitted that the traditional school saw conflict as “synonymous with such terms as violence, destruction and irrationality to reinforce its negative connotations. Management of conflict, when viewed from the theoretical proposition of this school, may not yield constructive outcomes. The theory recommended avoidance, elimination or eradication. Considering these recommendations, the contemporary school of thought cashed in to posit that conflict cannot be eliminated or eradicated in social relations or organisations. This theory advocates the acceptance of conflict as a social condition ever-present in social relations and that cannot be eliminated or eradicated. Hence, the existence of conflict was rationalised and the theory further revealed that there are even at times when conflict may benefit organisations. The theory advocates a constructive management of conflict through the use of appropriate strategies. The major contribution of the contemporary theory is that it encourages group leaders to maintain an on-going minimum level of conflict enough to keep the group viable, self-critical and creative (Robbins, 1996). Going by this theory, the ideas that conflict is not bad and that the way it is perceived and handled are essential elements that determine its outcome are highly promoted. Managing conflict depends on how it is defined. When defined negatively, the management approaches that will be adopted will be negative in nature, and when positively defined, constructive and functional approaches will evolve to handle it. This idea creates the pathway for positive ways of conceptualising and understanding conflict for functional mitigation. For instance, Pondy (1967) described conflict as a phenomenon that can produce positive outcomes by introducing different perspectives that produce innovative solution. Other definitions of conflict are: a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests, and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals (Donohue and Kolt, 1992); an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e individual, group, organization e.t.c)(Rahim, 2002) and as the clash of perceptions, goals or values in an arena where people care about the outcome (Alessandra and Hunsaker, 1993). These definitions conjure the ideas that:

- (i) Conflict is a process. It is a process that involves a series of activities which aimed at opposing or frustrating another individual from achieving his/her goal. It is a process because it takes stages or time to manifest.
- (ii) Conflict depends on interdependence: People must be brought together before they can experience conflict. This can either be by their goals, interest, needs, or values. In fact, it can also be by their social tides.

- (iii) Conflict can be expressed in manifest or latent form. When conflict is in manifest stage, people are aware of the existence of the conflict between or among the parties. It is in latent form, when the parties to a conflict do not want people to be aware of its existence. They therefore, hide it from people. Manifest conflict can easily be resolved because people are aware of it, hence, they can intervene. Latent conflict may not be easily resolved because people are not aware of its existence in the first place.
- (iv) Needs and interests are central to conflict initiation. Needs and interests are the core issues that foment conflict in social relations or organisations. Needs are those things which are of uppermost importance to people and should be satisfied as soon as the purchasing power is available. On the other hand, interests are mere desires. These elements, especially, needs have the potential of generating conflict, when the means of achieving them are frustrated by others.
- (v) Interference or opposition leads to conflict. In a bid to meet one's needs or interests, interference is often experienced between the parties concerned which may lead to conflict. From the above analysis, conflict is a natural phenomenon that results from differences in individuals or groups' aspirations, values, or needs. However, when conflict occurs, its manifestation will vary depending on how it is perceived and the nature of conflict management approaches employed to handle it.

### **NATURE OF CONFLICTS CONFRONTING TEACHERS IN SCHOOL**

Teachers deal with a lot of conflict in the school. Some of these conflicts are teacher-student conflict (TSC); principal-teacher conflict (PTC); teacher-teacher conflict (TTC); teacher-parent conflict (TPC); teacher-school board conflict (TSBC); and teacher-community conflict (TCC). Teachers constantly confront these conflicts in the course of discharging their assigned duties in school. The fact that teachers are involved in numerous conflicts in school demands that they be careful in their choices of conflict management strategies at any particular time to ensure effective and positive mitigation. When emerging conflicts in the school are mismanaged, they can produce permanent enmity between teachers, principal, parents and even students. This can dent the image of those concerned and the school in a community.

Teacher-student conflict (TSC) is a form of conflict that exists between a teacher and a student. This is the most conspicuous conflict confronting teachers in the school. Some of the factors responsible for this kind of conflict are inappropriate classroom placement, irrelevant instruction, inconsistent management, overcrowded classrooms, rigid behavioural demands or insensitivity to student diversity (Gable, Manning and Bullock, 1997; Gable and Van Acker, 2000). Teacher-student conflict (TSC) can also occur as a result of "misunderstandings about coursework or the teacher's intentions and manifest themselves in behaviours that teachers find offensive or discourteous--coming to class late and leaving early, complaints about test questions or grades, sarcastic comments and disapproving groans during class, etc" (Boice, 1996). Teacher-student conflict can be devastating when misperceived and when inappropriate management approaches are adopted by teachers. Cases abound in which teachers are manhandled by parents/guardians based on problems associated with their children. Also, cases of students ganging up to beat up a teacher because of unresolved conflict between a teacher and student are replete in dailies around the world. This type of conflict can also be carried over to a teacher's domain or place of abode. This implies that it can lead to family skirmish, in which the parents of a child extend the conflict to a teacher's home. Teacher-student conflict has the potential to get out of hand when mismanaged and can easily dent the image of a teacher and bring disgrace upon him/her. Meyers, Bender, Hill and Thomas (2006) recommended that this type of conflict can be tackled by communicating respect, interest and warmth to students; addressing the students outside of class; focusing on students' feelings and expressing empathy and clarifying the goals and agenda for the course to ensure that students found them meaningful.

Principal-teacher conflict (PTC) is a conflict that occurs between a principal and a teacher. This form of conflict can lead to hatred and easily provoke preferential treatment, which will in turn breed division in a school. Poor performance of students, differences in the opinion/idea of a principal and teacher, teachers' poor attitudes towards lesson planning, pattern of handling offending students; principal's bossy attitude, principal's disregard for teachers in the presence of students; teachers' coming late to school; subjects and school resources allocation by principals, and poor class conduct by teachers are some of the issues that can provoke principal-teacher conflict in a school. To prevent this type of

conflict there is need to follow a bidirectional trend. Teachers should obey and respect principals, in the same way, principals should accord teachers due respect in the school.

Teacher-teacher conflict (TTC) is conflict that takes place between a teacher and another teacher. Spaulding and Bursleson (2001) considered some of the behaviours that can attract teacher-teacher conflict as: bullying, derogatory comments, gossip, disrespect of authority, harassment, predetermined expectations of others, discord between individuals and groups and angry outbursts. Apart from the above factors, principals displaying preferential treatment and being impartial in dealing with issues relating to teachers will breed jealousy, envy, and hatred among teachers. These vices are cardinal elements that drive conflict between teachers in school. Adherence to school rules and mutual respect between teachers will reduce this form of conflict in schools. Teacher-parent conflict (TPC) is conflict that occurs between a teacher and a student’s parent or guardian. According to Ageng’a, A. R. and Simatwa (2011) some of the triggers of teacher-parent conflict are: marks awarded to students; academic performance; breakdown in communication; negative attitude towards teachers; disciplining of students; and love relationship between teacher and students. Proper conduct of teachers in schools and ensuring that parents maintain a decent complaining process in school will minimise frictions between teachers and parents/guardians in schools.

Teacher-school board conflict (TSBC) is a form of conflict experienced between a teacher or a group of teachers and the School Board. This type of conflict can occur during school inspection/supervision, transfer issue, salary stoppage, promotion problem, delay in handling issues concerning a teacher or teachers and the inability of school board to promptly attend to a teacher or teachers’ demands. The school board has the power to coerce teachers to act on their bids. Hence, obedience to the rules of school board and prompt reaction to teachers’ queries will reduce this form of conflict.

Teacher-community conflict (TCC) exists where there is conflict between a teacher and the community in which the school is sited. Encroachment on school land; rejection of a teacher transferred to a community; poor social relations between a teachers and the community, and disrespectful to community elders can lead to this kind of conflict. Building a positive teacher-community relationship will minimise the occurrence of this type of conflict in schools.

## **CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF CONFLICT IN THE SCHOOL**

The causes and consequences of school conflict are numerous and varied depending on the nature of the conflict. However, there are causes and consequences that are generally associated with schools. For instance, Jonkman (2006) identified communication barriers, role ambiguity, unclear expectations or rules, unresolved prior conflicts, conflicting interests, disagreement on task and content issues as some of the factors that can lead to conflict situations in schools. Achoka (1990) considered structural factors such as the size of the school, school bureaucratic characteristics like the degree of specialisation, dissatisfied educators and principals’ authoritarian outlook, and low self-esteem as factors responsible for school related conflict. Meyers, Bender, Hill and Thomas (2006) associated conflict in schools with instructor’s choice of teaching methods, their demeanor, and how they responded to challenging situations. Equally, structural factors in the school such as the size of the school and school bureaucratic characteristics like the degree of specialization were found to correlates with conflict (Achoka, 1990). These causes underline the fact that school conflict are associated with internal and external factors. The internal causes tend to be more serious and frequent than external causes. The internal causes can be categorised as structural causes and non-structural causes. Structural causes are those conflicts inducing factors which are related to part of the school process. The non-structural causes are those factors which are directly related to school personnel. The causes are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Structural and Non-structural Causes of Conflict in Schools**

S/No	Structural Causes	Non-structural Causes
	Degree of school size	Communication problems in school.
	Job differential of teachers/Areas of specialisation of teachers.	Background and diversity nature of school staff.
	Available school facilities.	Differences in behaviour and attitude of school personnel.
	Unclear school rules and regulations.	Performance abilities/skills of school staff.
	School policies and goals.	Unfair distribution of school materials or preferential treatment of school staff
	Status differences in schools	Differences in perception and personality of personnel in schools.
	Ambiguous school roles.	Needs and interests of school personnel.

Table 1 revealed some of the structural and non-structural factors that can induce conflict in school. The effects of school conflict can be viewed from two perspectives, namely: negative and positive effects. In this study, the negative effects will be discussed because of the need to understand them for they constitute problems in school administration. When conflict is poorly managed, it degenerates into disruption of academic programmes, inadequate staffing as a result of unplanned transfer, hostility, suspicion and withdrawal from active participation in school activities (Okotoni and Okotoni, 2003). As a result of these: government suffers financial losses from closure of schools, while pupils and their parents suffer unquantifiable losses. All these have contributed in one way or the other to a steady decline in the quality of education (Okotoni and Okotoni, 2003). School conflicts lead to disharmony among school staff and negatively affect their interpersonal relationship. It also increased indiscipline among students, disarmed school authorities, clogged channel of progressive communication and rendered institutions of learning ungovernable (Agbonna, 2009). School conflict makes students to completely drop-out of school and create more problems for the society (Ikoya and Akinseinde (2009). Owsu-Mensah (2007) observed “that conflict can lead to physical and psychological withdrawals in schools. Physical withdrawal can take the forms of absence, tardiness and turnover, which are often result in laziness on the part of the teacher. Psychological withdrawal can also take the form of alienation, apathy and indifference”. School conflicts have many negative effects on teachers. For example, it: reduces the productivity of teachers; discourages effective teaching behaviour in teachers; leads to poor preparation of academic activities by teachers; breeds factions/division among teachers; makes teachers to lose job concentration and dedication; lowers the morale of teachers; results in suspension of teachers; results in stress for teachers; leads to violent fight between or among teachers and can result in health problems in teachers. These effects underscored the reason conflict should be carefully managed to promote orderliness and conducive atmosphere in schools for efficiency and optimal performance.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS ON SCHOOL CONFLICT**

Before delving into the main issue, it is imperative to consider who a teacher is? A teacher is a person who has the registrable professional qualification which enables him to be appointed to teach at any appropriate level of recognised education in any nation and who has a sound mind and is mentally alert (NUT, 1994). According to Achimugu (2005), a teacher is somebody who is grounded in his subject and who must necessarily possess basic teaching qualification that will enable him to be appointed to teach in institutions of learning. Based on this, a teacher is someone who transmits knowledge and directs the learning process. Some of the fundamental functions of a teacher are: teaching, attending to parents, examining students, awarding marks, settling conflicts between students, punishing students when necessary and acting as a role model to students. Therefore, in discharging these duties, conflict may occur. The way conflict is perceived can either ameliorate the problem or escalate it. Perception plays a central role in initiating and managing conflict. Scarcity of resources is one of the major causes of conflict, however if scarcity of resources is positively perceived by the parties concerned, conflict will not ensue. Perception is the reality a person can infer from a given situation. The idea derivable from a development or happenings around a person is central to the subject of perception. Nelson and Quick (1997) conceived social perception as the process of interpreting information about another person. This definition revealed that perception is an opinion forming mechanism about a person or a thing. The nature of the opinion formed will motivate action. Therefore, the way a situation is perceived and interpreted will determine the response pattern. Teachers’ perception about school conflict will influence their attitudes towards the conflict. This means their response patterns will be determined by how the conflict is perceived. According to Rao and Narayan (1998), perception is the process whereby people select, organise, and interpret sensory stimulations into meaningful information about their work environment. They argue that perception is the single most important determinant of human behaviour. They stressed further that “there can be no behaviour without perception (Rao and Narayan, 1998). Perception is the main trigger of conflict at any time. Perception plays a dominant role in the way conflict is resolved. When conflict is positively perceived, constructive approaches are employed to handle it, compared to when it is perceived negatively.

Since, perception has bearing on the attitudes and behaviours of people, it is germane for teachers to understand its crucial nature in conflict initiation and management. This will create pathway for conflict to be viewed from a positive edge rather than negative angle. However, the problem is that most

school teachers view conflict from a negative perspective. For instance, in a study conducted by Fabunmi and Alimba (2011), it was discovered that majority of the teachers (i.e.64%) claimed that conflict is something bad. Also, Turay (n.d). Turay (n.d) observed that teachers, most especially males, felt that conflict is bad because it nurtures ill feelings, leads to frustrations and anger. Teachers' negative attitude to conflict is equally associated with their poor conflict management behaviour. Meyers (2003) argued that regardless of their academic discipline or amount of teaching experience, many faculty members (i.e teachers) encounter conflict in the classes that they teach and they are often unprepared to effectively handle classroom conflict, which may be distressing and disruptive. Distressing and disruptive atmosphere are bound to make teachers to form wrong perception about the situations and poor management approach will certainly be adopted. This has impact on teachers' work attitudes and can render them unproductive. The perception of conflict as a bad element creates an atmosphere characterised by the adoption of wrong approaches for handling conflict, which increases the volume of conflict that exist in schools. It also escalates existing conflict in schools and prolongs the conflict thereby making its resolution tedious and time consuming. The school in this regard becomes an inappropriate arena for schooling; as teachers become each other's enemies rather than partners. No meaningful activities can take place in this kind of environment, no matter the amount of resource devoted to the system. The long-term effects of conflicts are attributed to the ways teachers continue to picture the situation due to initial insight formed about an issue. This can only be positively altered when teachers' perceptions are modified to perceived conflict situations in a more constructive manner. The attitude of some teachers could make them become perpetual conflict triggers in the school. The disposition of people at any point is underscored by the way things are perceived. To reduce conflict incidence in schools, teachers' perception of school conflict be constructive.

### **SCHOOL CONFLICT DYNAMICS: BUILDING TEACHERS' LEARNING CAPABILITIES**

What should teachers learn about school conflict? There are a lot to be learned by school conflict. First, school conflict is simply conflict that occurs in the school. Therefore, conflicts occurring in schools whether primary, secondary or post-secondary institutions are classified as school conflict. Bogota (2009) described school conflict as any process that violates or affects the physical, social or psychological integrity of a person or group within the framework of school. It was further revealed that most widespread forms of school conflicts are classroom disruption, discipline problems (conflict between teachers and pupils), abuse between pupils (bullying), vandalism, physical damage, physical violence (aggression, extortion) and sexual harassment (Bogota, 2009). School conflict can become violent especially when it is perceived wrongly and ineffective managed. School conflict involves incompatibilities that arise from specific issues in schools that have the capacity to thwart individual as well as school goals. There is no limit to where conflict can occur in the school. It can start from the classroom, staffroom, or imported from home. Therefore, school conflict is a behaviour shrouded in opposition between two or among individuals, which aims at preventing them from achieving their goals in the school. School conflict is numerous and highly dynamic in nature. This development imposed on teachers the need to understand certain things about it, in order to be able to cope with its complexities in the school. Teachers therefore, should understand that:

- (i) conflict cannot be eradicated or eliminated in the school. It must occur in as much as two or more teachers are gathered together to interact. They cannot run away from the experience of conflict in the school. The school is a social institution characterized by people from various social backgrounds and possessing different orientations, ideologies, values, and needs, pulled together for educational reasons. With these compositions, it is expected of school teachers, at whatever level, to know that conflict is a harbinger of the school system. The problem is that most people not yet employed see the school as a holy land or scared place, where activities are perfectly carried out, organized and administered, but when they get in, they soon realized that what they think is not what they are experiencing. Immediately, frustration start surfacing and this will lead to serious conflict if unchecked on time. Teachers should know that the composition of the school makes it to be easily susceptible to the experiences of conflicts. The solution will be how emerging conflicts be handled to make the school a better place for operation.
- (ii) conflict graduates. It gradually moves from one stage to another, and if its dynamics is not checked, it will create more problem than envisaged. This idea should help teachers to

know that they need not allow conflict to escalate when it occurs. If conflict occurs, they make sure that it is addressed to make it remain at the lowest ebb, where it cannot thwart or distort communication potential of teachers. It should not be allowed to escalate because that is where the problem will start.

(iii) perception is the core issue in conflict initiation, escalation and management. A wrongly perceived conflict will become difficult to resolve. This idea should impress on teachers that conflict occurring in the school may not necessarily be bad. There are positive sides to emerging conflicts. Those positive sides incubate constructive and positive outcomes, which will bring about growth and development. This can only be understood when conflict is viewed from a positive perspective or perceived from the right angle. If conflict is rightly perceived, it can easily be managed to enhance communication and productivity of teachers involved in it.

(iv) Conflict can occur at any time and maturity is shown by the person that first goes to the other party for them to discuss it. When conflict occurs, it makes people to start displaying all kinds of behaviours which involve a feeling of being too big to go to the other person and possibly arrogance. In peace studies, the person that makes the move for peace is considered as the most matured. Age has nothing to do with conflict. It can occur at whatever level, status and age. Therefore, if a teacher thinks he/she is the most senior and matured, then, the move for resolution should be ignited by such a person. Whosoever does that first is considered as the most matured. Peace is a sine quo non for progress and development and should be pursued by all means necessary to achieve it

(v) They should not allow any conflict confronting them to get out of hand. When conflict is considered as something bad, bad approaches will be adopted for its management. This will only make the situation to get worse. Therefore, it good for teachers to read every process of conflict manifestations and develop positive impression out of it in order to limit their thoughts and actions within acceptable limit.

(vi) What makes conflict to escalate and become violent conflict are the attitudes and behaviours of some teachers in the system. The attitudes and behaviours formed about conflict will strongly influence the response pattern, which will determine the propensity of the conflict to either decrease or increase. Some teachers are unnecessarily stubborn, and their attitudes to situations raise questions about their level of maturity and education. They are so aggressive that they don't listen and take corrections. Such people should be aware of the nature of the environment in which they work. A school is a place where role models are built and developed and people live by example. Therefore, forming the right attitude and behavior in all situations is a natural way to stem conflict from escalating and platform for provoking resolution.

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: WHAT TEACHERS SHOULD KNOW

School conflict management is act of intervention designed to reduce the intensities and negative consequences of conflicts in order to ensure its moderate operation for constructive outcomes in schools. School conflict management is all about increasing the constructive outcomes and reducing the dysfunctionalities of conflicts occurring in schools in order to create a conducive atmosphere for school personnel to operate amicably to achieve set goals. There are various approaches that can be adopted to manage conflict in the school. These approaches can be categorised into three, namely: unilateral conflict management, joint conflict management and third party conflict management.

**(i) Unilateral conflict management:** This approach consists of conflict handling styles that can be used by individuals to manage conflicts that emerge in their daily transactions. These styles are competing, avoiding, accommodating, collaborating and compromising.

**(ii) Joint conflict management:** This approach is made up of conflict management strategies that can be employed to manage conflict by two parties. The parties come together without the help of a third party to resolve their differences and come up with agreement accepted to them. Negotiation is a good example of this approach.

**(iii) Third party conflict management:** In this conflict management approach, a neutral third party is invited to assist the conflicting parties to resolve their conflict. Examples of this approach are mediation, facilitation, conciliation, arbitration, and adjudication/litigation. Also, the larger spectrum of United



Nations instruments of conflict mitigation which involves peacekeeping, peacemaking, diplomacy and peace enforcement are included in this approach. In this approach, a third party consciously or unconsciously brings the parties together to start communicating in order to settle their differences. In this paper, emphasis is placed on the unilateral approach which is a combination of five basic strategies that can constantly be used by individuals on their daily routine exercise to contain conflicts that might arise. The unilateral conflict management strategies are: competing style, avoiding style, accommodating style, collaborating style, and compromising style. These are the styles that can be used by individual teachers to contain conflicts that might confront them in the school. These styles are mostly used in interpersonal conflict situation. They are discussed as follows:

### ***Competing Style***

Competing style is an attempt to struggle with the other party to get what rightly belongs to one. It involves the adoption of various tactics that will make a person to defeat the other party at all cost. It can be subtle or aggressive in nature. Connelly (1998) observed that this style is a power-oriented style, in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one's position. The style does not respect the feelings and aspirations of the other party, and attention is usually concentrated on personal concerns. In a study conducted by Fabunmi and Alimba (2010), it was found that 8% of teachers out of 760 teachers sampled are favourably disposed to using the style in managing conflict in their schools. The style ends up in win-lose conflict outcome. It is considered as an aggressive way of bring conflict to a settlement.

### ***Avoiding Style:***

This style involves a situation in which the conflicting parties tend to ignore or intentionally disregard the fact that conflict exists between or among them. It results in a lose-lose outcome. It can be described as a decision not to decide. An avoiding person fails to satisfy his or her own concern as well as the concern of the other party. When using this style, the issue at stake is not attended to. According to Bateman and Snell (2002), by avoiding, people do nothing to satisfy themselves or others. It is a style that is constantly adopted, even by school personnel, to manage conflict. Fabunmi and Alimba(2010) discovered that 8% of teachers indicated that they often adopt the style. Albert (1999) was of the opinion that this "kind of response to a conflict situation compounds problems as the party that is "avoided" will later seek other means of getting to be listened to. Such people usually resort to violence". Truter (2003) also observed that avoidance is not a successful method for achieving a long-term solution since the original cause of the conflict remains.

### ***Accommodating Style***

This is a style in which the individual neglects his/her own concerns to satisfy the concern of the other person (Connelly, 1998). The underlying value of this style is that of self sacrifice, which may be imbued in self-esteem order. According to Ojiji (2006), the adoption of this style may be a reflection of the desire to ensure personal and social harmony and to preserve relationships at one's cost. 20% of teachers indicated that they often adopt the style to manage conflicts in the school (Fabunmi and Alimba, 2010).

### ***Collaborating Style***

Collaborating style is an approach in which the parties involved in a conflict work with one another to find a lasting solution that is acceptable and satisfactory to them. It is a problem-solving approach in which the parties come together to discuss the issues of concern, and come up with acceptable decisions to the parties. This style ends up in win-win outcome. Collaborating style encourages mutual respect, open communication and full participation of all parties. It is a style that is constantly employed by organisational staff and school personnel. 53% of teachers were discovered to be favourably inclined to the style (Fabunmi and Alimba, 2010).

### ***Compromising***

It is a style in which parties to a conflict give up some measure of their demands in order to gain some other things. This implies that both parties will win something and also lose something. The style typically

involves “give and take” where both parties involved relinquish some aspects in order to arrive at a mutually acceptable decision (Copley, 2008). Also, the study conducted by Fabunmi and Alimba (2010) found that 11% of teachers make use of the style. Therefore, the importance of conflict management cannot be overemphasised in school administration. Conflict management is a central issue in school administration. Contrarily to this fact, it is the least observed variable in schools. This is because in teacher education studies, issues of this nature are not directly reflected in their curriculum. According to Hall (2003), the manner in which conflict gets resolved becomes a part of the culture of a school and is a factor in determining community perceptions of the value of schools. This idea points to the fact that school administrator, teaching staff, non-teaching staff and students are expected to have a good understanding and knowledge of conflict management to construct a positive school climate where trust, honesty, discipline, empathy, love, cooperation, and justice will be the order of the day. Considering the importance of conflict management in schools, teachers are expected to be abreast of the following facts:

- (i) conflict management is a central issue in school administration, which makes it imperative to for them to seek detailed information and knowledge in that direction. This helps them to adopt the right approaches to mitigate conflict that might confront them in their schools. The understanding of conflict management strategies will enhance the ability of a teacher to perform, because it will help to prevent stress, headache, undesirable thinking and flight, which naturally becloud teaching behavior as a result of poor management of school conflict.
- (ii) Conflict management styles cannot just be employed because one is in a conflict situation. The adoption of the styles is based on dispositional and situational factors, that surround the existing conflict. For instance, teachers should understand that competing style can be utilised when: (a) a teacher is convinced about the correctness of the issue under contention; (b) the issue to be decided upon is crucial and the decision to be taken is going to be favourable to the teacher; and (c) a teacher does not want the other party to gain advantage over him/her on the issue under consideration.
- (iii) avoiding style can be adopted by a teacher when: (a) the issue at stake is trivial and does not warrant urgent attention; (b) the risk or cost associated with an issue is far greater than the potential benefit; and (c) there is need for a teacher to exercise patience to gather more information about an issue or gain detailed knowledge about an issue.
- (iv) accommodating style can be used by a teacher when: (a) a teacher is willing to gain favour or is looking for favour from another person; (b) a teacher wants people to learn something from his/her action; and (c) a teacher want to give peace a considerable chance to prevail in a situation.
- (v) collaborating style can be used by a teacher when: (a) the issue in contention is critical and commitment is highly needed; (b) a teacher’s interest in a conflict is crucial to him/her and must be met; and (c) it is necessary for a teacher to settle past issues with someone.
- (vi) compromising style can be adopted by a teacher when (a) he/she is aware that the other party to the conflict is so incompatible that they cannot be reconciled without them losing something in the process; (b) a teacher knows that using collaboration or competition will not yield any result; and (c) the other conflict party is a stronger opponent pursuing mutually exclusive objectives.
- (vii) There is no best conflict management style. Dispositional and situational factors determine which style should be adopted at a particular time by teachers. The style that worked today may not work tomorrow because the situations that underpin the occurrence of such conflict are peculiar to the conflict. However, collaboration is strongly recommended because it is a style that leads to a win-win outcome.

## **CONCLUSION**

School conflict is one of the least discussed subjects by conflict experts in social conflict discourses. This can be attributed to various reasons. In this article school conflict was examined by a conflict scholar, who also is professionally qualified in the field of educational management. The school remains the organisation with the highest incidence of conflict manifestations. The various conflicts existing in the school need to be understood by teachers for constructive management to achieve set goals. This article has explored the concept of conflict and its characteristics. It was argued that conflict is an inherent part of

the school system, and that teachers should free their minds from the idea that the school is a scared organization bereft of conflict. Harboring this idea is bound to make teachers to be frustrated. However, the presence of conflict in the school system does not necessarily pose a danger; it only shows that the system is alive and able to function as expected to achieve the goals for its establishment. Therefore, teachers are expected to understand that conflict is not bad, but how it is perceived and approaches adopted at resolving them accounts for their outcomes. This means that managing conflict is the real issue and not the occurrence of conflict. Based on this, conflict management strategies were discussed with their detailed application patterns to illuminate the minds for teachers for efficient usage in the school and at home. Since, perception is central to conflict initiation, escalation and management, it was discussed to allow teachers gain a deeper insight into the dynamic nature of conflict and the essentiality of perception in school conflict dynamics. The various conflicts that teachers can face in the school were analysed, indicating their possible consequence and how they can be reduced in the school system. One thing that globalisation brought to fore is the fact that conflict management has become highly essential for school personnel, especially teachers, who are highly fundamental in school administration. It is therefore, imperative to persuade decision makers on education to note the strategic need for school personnel to be exposed to conflict dynamics and its management strategies, so that they can be solidly established and equipped to face challenges that might emerge from the system in order to enhance their functionalities. This will naturally encourage and motivate school personnel towards greater productivity edge.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS IN NIGERIA**

This study has policy implications for teachers across primary and secondary schools as well as those in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The conflict trend in schools in Nigeria is highly frightening and pathetic in nature. This is not because of its frequent occurrences but because they often escalate leading to devastating consequences in schools. This occurs because most teachers lack the basic knowledge on how to contain emerging conflicts. Hence, the volume of conflicts in the system increases, resulting in a closed school climate. In such a climate, teachers find it difficult to interact positively with their peers and students. This type of climate is characterised by a high degree of apathy on the part of both the principal and the teachers. No one is working towards either goal achievement or personal need satisfaction (Eneasator, 1997). In this situation, teachers' productivity is impaired, leading to poor academic performance in students and greater societal chaos. The importance of teachers in the society cannot be downplayed because they are "the most important element in the school system. They are more important than the quality and quantity of equipment and material and degree of financing. All these are passive resources in the school system. It is only teachers that can use them as instructional aids for effective dissemination of knowledge and learning" (Fabunmi, 2007). By extension, teachers are the hub of any educational system. Therefore, teachers' productivity is a function of the quality of education in a country. And where their productivity is affected negatively, the quality of education becomes questionable and undoubtedly will be low in a country. The presence of conflict in school does not confer it a negative intonation rather it means that the system is natural and alive, but the escalation of emerging conflicts into violence is what is unnatural and unacceptable for the system. This is because violent conflict in school will lead to a negative school climate and automatically lower teachers' productivity. The resultant effects will be grave on the school, staff, students and the society in general. Therefore, the acquisition of basic knowledge on conflict management becomes highly essential for teachers to make them proactive in tackling conflict in the system. Conflicts constructively managed lead to positive outcomes, and the development of an organisation. Constructive management of school conflicts will contribute positively to the development of a positive school climate and the general growth of the system. This will contribute positively to the productivity of teachers. Conflict has both positive and negative effects; therefore, constructive management of school conflict will engender the experience of the positive sides of conflict in the school. The positive side to conflict, according to Pondy (1967) is, it helps to introduce different perspectives that can produce innovative solutions. Also, this will lead to creativity and innovation, which will translate into efficiency and high productivity in an organisation (Alimba, 2015). Therefore, to bring creativity and innovation into the educational system in Nigeria, emerging conflict should be constructively managed to exert a positive school climate. To achieve this, teachers and other school personnel should be made to understand conflict dynamics and its management patterns.

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