Teachers’ Perceptions on Management of Conflict in Primary Schools in Mberengwa District

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Authors’ contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Authors JN, GAM and OM designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors OM, BNM and FFC designed and wrote the first draft of the manuscripts, introduced critical content the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Conflict is major social construct happening in most communities where people of divergent and different backgrounds finds themselves inhabiting a common environment. Schools formulate habitat with semi-seclusion from the rest of society and conflict arising needs to be managed. Also engaging is conflict resolution without taking sides in such environments where children interact with adults more frequently requires skills and training which aspects do not form part of teaching and learning curriculum. Peri-urban schools find themselves as rich ground for conflict due to their being neither urban or rural but tend to receive influence from both settlements. Conflict nature and conflict resolution may tend to take different forms from an aggregate of diversification.
approaches seen or taken in urban and rural settings. Therefore, the study explored school teachers’ perceptions on conflict management in eight representative schools in Mberengwa District. **Materials and Methods:** The sample of the study comprised of eight school managers, thirty-two members of school disciplinary committee members and twenty-four junior classroom practitioners. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in the study. The qualitative research design followed focused group discussions and open-ended questions fielded during interviews to school heads and school disciplinary committee members who formed the management team of the schools. Quantitative data was obtained through closed ended questionnaires given to primary school teachers. The school teachers were selected using a stratified simple random sampling technique and purposive sampling were used to select both the school heads and the school disciplinary members. **Results:** The study revealed that poor communication (100%), unfairness (87.5%), shortage of resources (100%), role-conflicts (70.3%), poor governance (87.5%) and political afflictions (87.5%) were the root causes of conflict in primary schools when compared to other causes ($P < 0.05$). Thirty disciplinary committee members (100%) and twenty-four teachers (92.2%) indicated that student-student, teacher-teacher and teacher-managers conflicts were common in peri-urban schools contrasted to other forms of conflict ($P < 0.05$). Conflict resulted in strained relationships (100%), caused of disunity (100%), disrupted teaching and learning (88%), was time consuming (78%), lowered production (78%), caused stress and high blood pressure (100%) and diverted attention from crucial activities (75%). Heads of schools displayed a conflict avoidance as a conflict resolution strategy. Conflict management literature was in short supply in schools and schools rarely conducted conflict management meetings. Confrontation, collaboration and compromise were the most used conflict management strategies. Managed conflict had benefits of creating social change and allowed staff to engage more and needed to be included in curriculum development. **Conclusion:** Primary school head teachers need to conduct meetings on conflict management and procure literature on conflict management to resolve conflict appropriately. Members of disciplinary committee need to handle conflict fairly and to consult literature on conflict management so that they can handle conflicts progressively and as benefit to teaching and learning. Educational officers need to facilitate and ensure that conflicts are handled appropriately and progressively. Introduction of conflict management as a learning tool, study area or be taken as a cross-cutting component in the competency-based curriculum was necessary.

**Keywords:** Teacher’s perceptions; management of conflict; Mberengwa district; primary school teacher; peri-urban cluster schools; School Disciplinary Committee; head of school.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

Conflicts are a time immemorial challenge faced by schools. Great cognizance of that conflict is a common phenomenon in schools in Mberengwa Peri-urban clusters and in Mberengwa as a whole which is common in many organizations although somehow it is worrisome. Conflict culminates in social system deterioration hence great exists to close this communal malady gap. The type of conflict range from socially-induced, resource scarcity associated, personality differences directed and lack of good communication caused conflicts in primary school with school executives, disciplinary committee members and school teachers playing a role in one way or the other [1].

Conflict emanates from atmospheres in which differences are articulated by inter-reliant people in the progression of achieving their needs and goals. Escalation of conflict arises when variances between two or more people necessitate change in at least one person for their engagement to remain and advancing [2]. Conflict is an unavoidable aspect of everyday life which may be within oneself, with others, or within an organization originating from internal or external struggles or a misunderstandings [3]. Serious disagreement among groups or individuals characterized by antagonism and hostility about important or non-important issues give rise to conflict [4]. In schools, conflict is an appearance or demonstration of unfriendliness, resentment and misunderstanding between the staff members which is inevitable and often good [5,6]. Conflict is often needed as it assists in raising and addressing problems, energizing and focusing work onto the most appropriate issues, motivates people to be real and participatory, prods staff to learn how to distinguish and benefit from their differences [6]. Conflict becomes a
problem when it hampers productivity, lowers morale, causes more and continued conflicts, and causes inappropriate behaviours [7].

There are different facets or textures of conflict. Conflict may be affective, which is a condition in which cluster members have interpersonal clashes branded by anger, frustration, and other adverse emotional states [8,9]. Substantive conflict is characterized by divergences among group members’ ideas and opinions about the task being performed, such as disagreement regarding the school’s curriculum and expected outcomes compared to resources available [10]. Conflict of interest is an inconsistency between parties in their penchant for the allocation of a scarce resource where each party, sharing the same understanding of the circumstances, desires a different and somewhat incompatible resolution to a problem involving either a distribution of resources between them or a decision to share the work to be done [11]. Conflict of interest is usually displayed through allocation of provision to supply school materials by selected staff members without going to tender against procurement regulations. Conflict of values or ideological conflict occurs when staff members differ in their values or ideologies on certain issues [12]. Goal conflict occurs when preferred outcomes or end-states of entities are inconsistent involving divergent preferences over all of the decision outcomes and reconstituting a zero-sum end game [13]. All the mentioned aspects of conflict, in full or varying degrees, may exist in primary schools and perspectives of teachers on these need elucidations to harness positive energies embedded in conflict as a natural phenomenon.

Realistic and non-realistic conflict is associated with rational or goal-oriented disagreement while non-realistic conflict is an end in itself having little to do with group or organizational goals [14]. In institutionalized and non-institutionalized conflict, the former is characterized by situations in which explicit rules are followed with predictable behaviour, continuity of relationships as in teacher-teacher conflict or teacher-management negotiations. Conflicts at football matches are non-institutionalized as the actors may tend to be diverse and resolution unpredictable. In many cases conflict has been retritive characterized by an intent to draw out the conflict and punish the opponents. Conflicting parties determine their gains by incurring cost on the other party [15]. More often than not, conflict may be misattributed where there is incorrect assignment of causes to parties. A school team losing a match, where naturally only one team should be the winner, other teachers may find the coach, the headmaster, the players or the referee blameworthy [16]. Critical to convergency of conflict into a social dilemma is displacement of conflict. Conflicting parties often either direct their frustrations or hostilities to social entities that are not involved in conflict or argue over secondary and not on major issues and in schools it could be on students or other teachers. The avoidance concept or fear of confronting the real cause of conflict eventually boils over resulting in violence requiring mitigation against at all cost before it happens and therefore the necessity for current research [17].

Mberengwa (originally Mbere-Yeingwa, renamed Belingwe during colonial era) has always been a bed rock of conflict characterized by a violent colonization process, coercive religious conversions, forced labour, land and animal expropriation of Blacks by White colonial masters during the Southern Rhodesian, Rhodesia and Zimbabwe-Rhodesia periods [18-22]. The armed conflict for Zimbabwe's Independence [23] from colonial rule also left indelible emotional and inflamed social scars in many a people [24-26] which could be source ongoing conflict today in schools and other areas of society. These unforgettable war-related experiences seem to be transcending the timeframe boundaries, displacing conflict into classrooms and schools like an unspent cartridge fired from the muzzle of a rifle in a war gone by and raising vortexes of retributive conflict.

Conflicts appear to be on the increase in the Mberengwa peri-urban cluster schools in Mberengwa District as remnants and new unsolved ethnic acrimony still linger amongst inter and intra school teachers environments. There is a perturbing weekly increase in the number of conflicts referred by peri-urban cluster school Headteachers to the Mberengwa District Education Offices for arbitration, resolution and mediation. Aggravating the matters, the peri-urban schools are situated in highly unregulated and violent “war-zone-like” gold panning or digging activities [27]. The artisanal miners (Makorokoza) [28,29] are infamous for their aggression to all and sundry, flashy and spend thrift life styles amidst a sea of poverty [30,31] such as peri-urban schools where deteriorating salaries are losing purchasing capacity daily. As such, school teachers in the cluster may passively adopt the same atmosphere of conflict.
as way to possibly adapt to an environment inimical to sanity and wellbeing. Teachers' perceptions of conflict and its resolution are imperatives for creating insights into handling future episodes and training in conflict management.

To shade some light into episodes of conflict, there are cases in point. For National Association of Primary Schools Heads Competitions, schools in the peri-urban cluster gather at timed intervals and the spirit of aggression is occasionally portrayed. Contesting learners tend to fight over games whether they were winning or losing showing conflict results from interaction and not about outcomes of competition. The peri-urban teachers also exchange vulgar words which at times lead to physical fist fights. What is disheartening is that the teachers rarely take cognition of the parents at the games, let alone their Heads of Schools. Surprisingly, some of the school heads even portray the same hostility during such events- just like it was the norm.

Unsuccessful conflict management taking place in schools ends up being referred to higher offices for hearings. On several occasions, observations of have been made where heads of school together with a good number of teachers, were called for hearings as a result of failing to manage conflict in the peri-urban cluster. During such calls the heads of schools and teachers put aside their core business to the disadvantage of learners. However, the same life of conflict continues when teachers afterwards hence the need to investigate the phenomena around this state of affairs from the teachers’ perspectives with the understanding that when properly handled, conflict can advance schools intended outcomes [32].

According to the reports from both the District Schools Inspector Mberengwa and District National Association of Primary Heads Chairperson, conflicts in schools were on the increase and were disturbing the smooth running of the schools. Some teachers clashed with their learners against Ministry of Primary and Secondary Schools Circular Minute P35 on discipline, suspension, exclusion and corporal punishment schools.

The corporal punishment circular minute which says, "Corporal punishment has become one of the most contentious issues, from a human rights perspective, where it becomes necessary to apply corporal punishment, Heads of Schools are instructed to strictly follow laid down procedure and use it only as the last resort" may be a source of conflict. For school teachers, compiling with the regulations and simultaneously contending with indiscipline in the classroom or school creates potential for conflict escalation. However, such conflict is rarely attended to fully to satisfy both the teacher and student.

Short-fixing of conflict in peri-urban schools may cause the tendency to spill over into society [33] displaying a hidden curriculum taught to students passively [34]. What teachers demonstrate as part of their life-style when imitated by learners is known as the hidden curriculum. Exploring teachers’ perceptions on conflict may unravel the curriculum hoping to inculcate remedial mediation counselling to determine causes of conflict and its resolution [35].

Conflict management in the peri-urban cluster is fast becoming a priority. Seeking teachers’ perceptions on conflict and conflict management to explore the underlying motivations, drivers, benefits and methods of redirecting conflict for the betterment of educational outputs and outcomes, and creating negative-conflict-free teaching and learning spaces is a novel approach in the peri-urban cluster schools in Mberengwa.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Materials

2.1.1 Research method design

Both qualitative and quantitative research designs were used. The qualitative research was based on the assumption that features of social environment constitute an independent reality and relatively constant across time. Focus group discussions (FDGs) were used to collect knowledge, views, opinions, emotions and thought patterns on conflict in schools which provided insights into the teachers’ perspectives of the prevailing culture of conflict and how to ameliorate it occurrence in school environments. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data for obtaining answers to the research questions. Questions fielded to classroom teachers (CRTs), members of the schools’ disciplinary committees (DCMs) and heads of schools (HODs) were designed to elicit how conflict emanated, progressed, managed and resolved in primary schools in Mberengwa Peri-urban Cluster. Gathered data was analyzed and
compared for justification of responses for validity and reliability.

2.1.2 Research setting

The study was conducted in primary schools that are found in areas that are on the margins of urban dwellings in Mberengwa. These schools are not in the urban areas and also not in the rural areas. These schools interact with both the urban and rural schools and amongst themselves as well. By receiving inter, intra and extra school influences from rural schools, urban schools and among themselves, the peri-urban school cluster has a unique experience in conflict processes.

2.1.3 Study population

All teachers (Heads of Schools, DCMs, classroom teachers) in Mberengwa Peri-urban Cluster formulated the population in the study. Mberengwa Peri-urban Cluster has eight primary schools and one hundred teachers. Schools were designated by alphabetic letters from A-H and not by names to maintain anonymity Table 1.

2.1.4 Study sample

All sample respondents were teachers. Eight HODs, thirty-two DCMs and twenty-four classroom teachers out of eight heads, thirty DCMs and sixty CRTs in the cluster, were chosen to represent all the sections of the teaching fraternity in the schools in the cluster.

2.1.5 Interview questionnaire

The interview questionnaires were adopted, modified and adapted from previous open-source studies in the area of conflict management in schools [36,37]. Three different set of questionnaires were prepared and administered to thirty DCMs, twenty-four CRTs and eight HODs to find out their perceptions on management of conflict in primary schools in Mberengwa Peri-urban Cluster. The repertoire of questions in the questionnaires were both close and open-ended.

2.1.6 Interview questionnaire pretest

The three questionnaires were pretested and adjusted in one school outside the study area. Bias was noted and ways were sought to avoid it and balance out the tools. Areas of the questionnaires which were not clear were clarified and the way of asking certain questions were rewritten. Pretesting also validated and made the questionnaires to be more reliable.

2.1.7 Focus Group Discussion (FDG) guide

To ensure that the perceptions of teachers on conflict and conflict management in schools were captured uniformly, an FDG guide was created to be used during the discussions. The FDG guide was a set of questions and suggestions to the moderator for conducting the discussion. The FDG guide comprised of sequential questions that followed a logical progression tracing the definitions of conflict and conflict management, causes of conflict, types of conflicts, resolution of conflicts and recommendations on conflict management.

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Stratified sampling

The individuals in the population were either simple randomly selected or purposively selected and to make a sample which was an unbiased representation of the population. In the stratified random sampling, the population was divided into strata based on members’ shared attributes and characteristics. One hundred teachers comprised fifty-nine males and forty-one females. The teachers were subdivided into HODs, DCMs (composed of senior teachers) and CRTs from the eight primary schools in the cluster Table 2.

2.2.2 Simple random sampling

A simple random sampling used a set of a statistical population in which each member of the subset had an equal probability of being chosen using a method that gave each subject an equal chance of being picked.

In this study, the simple random sampling was used to select CRTs at each school across the cluster. The hat system was used. However, males and females were made to pick cards separately to ensure gender equity. In four schools one female would be selected and two males. The opposite applied to other four schools in order to have equal representation by both sexes.

2.2.3 Purposive sampling

The purposive sample used was a non-probability sample that was selected basing on characteristics of the population and the
objectives of the study. Purposive sampling was also judgmental, selective or subjective sampling with no particular criteria serve to obtain data.

Due to the fact that HODs and DCMs by virtue of their work handle or manage conflicts in schools, they were purposively selected to study a phenomenon or trend as it relates to what is typical to them and to capture knowledge rooted in them due to their experiences and expertise.

2.2.4 Data collection procedure

An introductory letter from the University which outlined his purpose of the visit to the schools was used. Permission was sought from Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE) to conduct the research in schools. Pre-testing of the instruments to find out if the instruments were workable was carried out. Prior arrangements were made with respondents and they were all assured of the confidentiality of their responses and they were not asked to give their names in order to gain their confidence. Interviews were held for eight HODs, twenty-four CRTs and thirty-two DCMs were engaged in focus group discussions. The interview lasted between fifteen to twenty minutes each. The data from interviews was not tape-recorded but was jotted down.

2.2.5 Interviews

During the interviews, misconceptions were detected and rectified. Notes were taken. Face to face interviews were carried out as these were easy to validate because there is less bias and the questioning procedure covered intended areas. The warm rapport established between the interviewer and interviewee was made to motivate the later to supply useful information. The face to face encounter also resembled more closely a human relationship rather than the self-administered questionnaire method where the respondent receives a series of questions and converse with text that does not give immediate feed-back.

The use facial expressions to assisted convey the message and to obtain a high response rate from the interviewees and the non-verbal cues gave unspoken data. Room to clarify issues allowed for probing further and data generated was immediately cross-checked for authenticity. Interviews added depth to the study by qualifying some responses on the formal questionnaire. The fear, anxiety, suspicion or hostility most likely to arise in the respondents were allayed through the assurance that no names or identities of schools or individuals were going to be included in the interview records, research data or study report. During the interview all respondents got equal chances to give their views in a free and friendly manner.

2.2.6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

An FDG guide was created to be used during the discussions to ensure that the perceptions of teachers on conflict and conflict management in schools were captured uniformly. The guide was a tool that kept the discussion of deliberately selected people focused and in an environment that was non-threatening and receptive. The tool was constructed aimed at drawing from complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the participants on conflict through moderated interactions.

Thirty DCMs and twenty-four CRTs were involved in FDGs. Four DCMs and three CRTs per school making up a seven-member group. In total eight FDGs were conducted in the study with fifty-six members enabling a balanced view on the teachers’ perceptions on conflict management in primary schools in Mberengwa peri-urban cluster. Information from non-verbal responses, such as facial expressions or body language, was easily captured. Also, information was provided more quickly than if people were interviewed separately, saving both time and money as single sessions were held per school.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis included the process of inspecting, cleansing, transforming and evaluating data using analytical and logical reasoning of the data provided. Answer to questions were obtained by examining patterns within the data, primarily through content analysis and narrative analysis in the qualitative research. Data was organized in manageable units, synthesized searching for patterns and deducing what was valuable and what was to be learnt. Data collected in the study was converted into tables, percentages, pie charts, graphs and thick narratives given. For quantitative data Statistical comparisons were performed by one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), followed by Tukey-Kramer multiple comparison post hoc test using GraphPad InStat Software (version 5, GraphPad Software, San Diego, California USA). A P < 0.05 considered statistically significant.
3. RESULTS

3.1 Study Sample Demographic Data

Data was presented in thick narratives, frequency tables, graphs and percentages in relation to research questions. These concerned the root causes of conflict, the negative effects of conflict, positive effects of conflict, benefits of conflict and conflict management. Subsequently the presented data was critically interpreted and analyzed.

The BED cadre was relatively over represented in the sample when compared to the CE/DiE (**P < 0.05 BED vs CE/DiE) and the MSc (**P < 0.05, BED vs MSc). Management of education was one common area of study the heads of school had Table 5.

Amongst the teachers (Table 7) holders of either a Certificate or Diploma in Education were relatively highly represented in the study as compared to those who had studied up to the BED level (**P < 0.05; CE/DiE vs BED). There were no MSC holders in the cluster amongst teachers. Both CE/DiE and BED qualifications holder had studied conflict resolution as part of the teaching and learning curriculum.

The Table 8 shows the respondents had working experience that ranged from five years to over twenty-five years. Those with more working experience (21-25 years) were relatively over represented in the study when compared to the 1-5, 6-10, 11-15 and 25+ year experience (**P < 0.05 21-25 years’ experience vs 1-5 or 6-10 or 11-15 or 25+ years’ experience). Respondents with 16-20 and 25+ years’ working experience were relatively equally represented (10.94%) but were twice as much experienced when compared to those with 11-15 years’ experience (**P < 0.05, 16-20 and 25+ years’ experience vs 11-15 years’ experience). The working years’ experience were calculated to the nearest year from the year one obtained their teaching qualification.

### Table 1. Study population for the primary schools in Mberengwa Peri-urban Cluster

| School | Male | Female | Total |
|--------|------|--------|-------|
| A      | 11   | 7      | 18    |
| B      | 7    | 6      | 13    |
| C      | 8    | 5      | 13    |
| D      | 5    | 4      | 9     |
| E      | 9    | 3      | 12    |
| F      | 8    | 5      | 13    |
| G      | 5    | 6      | 11    |
| H      | 6    | 5      | 11    |
| Totals | 59   | 41     | 100   |

### Table 2. Study population stratification by roles in the teaching and learning environment in the Mberengwa Peri Urban Cluster of schools

| Category              | Male | Female | Total |
|-----------------------|------|--------|-------|
| Heads of schools      | 5    | 3      | 8     |
| Disciplinary members  | 16   | 16     | 32    |
| Classroom teachers    | 38   | 22     | 60    |
| Totals                | 59   | 41     | 100   |

### Table 3. Study sample stratification by roles in the teaching and learning environment in the Mberengwa Peri Urban Cluster of schools

| Category              | Male | Female | Total |
|-----------------------|------|--------|-------|
| Heads of schools      | 5    | 3      | 8     |
| Disciplinary members  | 16   | 16     | 32    |
| Classroom teachers    | 12   | 12     | 24    |
| Totals                | 33   | 31     | 64    |
Table 4. Distribution of professional qualifications for school heads interviewed

| Professional qualifications                  | Number of school heads | Percentage |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------|
| Diploma in Education (CE/DiE)               | 2                      | 25         |
| Bachelor of Education (BED)                 | 5                      | 62.5 **    |
| Masters of Education (MSc)                  | 1                      | 12.5       |

Table 5. Distribution of professional qualifications for teachers

| Professional qualifications                  | Teachers | Percentages |
|----------------------------------------------|----------|-------------|
| Certificate/Diploma in Education (CE/DiE)   | 40       | 71.43 **    |
| Bachelor of Education (BED)                 | 16       | 28.57       |
| Master of Education (MSc)                   | 0        | 0           |

Table 6. Distribution of School Heads and teachers by academic experience in the field of education teaching and learning

| Working experience (Years) | Frequency | Percentages |
|----------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| 1-5                        | 7         | 10.94       |
| 6-10                       | 7         | 10.94       |
| 11-15                      | 5         | 7.81        |
| 16-20                      | 12        | 18.75 **    |
| 21-25                      | 20        | 31.25 ***   |
| 25+                        | 13        | 20.31 **    |
| Total                      | 64        | 100         |

Table 7. Frequency distributions of causes of conflict collected from heads and teachers

| Causes of Conflict          | School Heads (SH) | Disciplinary Committee Members (DCMs) | Junior teachers (JT) | Total   | Percentages |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|---------|-------------|
| Inadequate resources (IR)   | 8                 | 32                                    | 24                   | 64      | 100 ***     |
| Role conflict (RC)          | 3                 | 21 **                                 | 21 **                | 45      | 70.31       |
| Poor governance (PG)        | 0                 | 32                                    | 24                   | 56      | 87.5 **     |
| Difference in values and norms (DVN) | 2 | 14 | 14 | 30 | 46.88 |
| Poor communication (PC)     | 8                 | 32                                    | 24                   | 64      | 100 ***     |
| Political affiliations (PA) | 7                 | 25                                    | 13                   | 50      | 78.13 *     |
| Unfairness (UF)             | 0                 | 32                                    | 24                   | 56      | 87.5 **     |

Note: Abbreviations used for easier of reporting results in text

3.2 Data on Common Causes of Conflict from Teachers and Members of the Disciplinary Committee

All the DCMs and all CRTs from the eight schools pointed inadequate resources, poor governance, poor communication and unfairness as the most common forms of conflict that occur in their institutions. Consequently, common causes of conflict are administrative as heads play a significant role in communication, school governance and procurement of resources.

Table 7 indicates that inadequate resources and poor communication were relatively the major causes of conflict in schools when compared to the role teachers, DCMs and school heads had in schools (**P < 0.05, IR/PC vs PG or DVN or PA or UF). Differences in values and norms had relatively the least influence on the causes of conflict in the cluster when compared to either poor governance (**P < 0.05, PC vs DVN) or unfairness (**P < 0.05, UF vs DVN). While political affiliation was seen by the majority of school heads (7/8) as a cause for conflict in schools, half the teachers and 7/32 of the DCMs did not share the same views. Equal and higher numbers compared to school heads (**P < 0.05, DC-JT vs SH), of the DCMs and teachers, although teachers had a relatively higher
3.4 Forms of Conflict Found in Schools

Out of the fifty-six respondents engaged in FDGs all the thirty DCMs and twenty-four teachers mentioned student to teacher, teacher to teacher and teacher to head and head to teacher as the forms of conflict found in schools. There was no mention of student to teacher conflict in the FDGs. Neither was there an indication that the head of school had a conflict with a pupil. The responses showed that interpersonal conflicts were the most common forms of conflict in the Mberengwa Peri-urban Cluster primary schools.

3.5 Negative Effects of Conflict

All respondents identified the negative effect conflicts which under discuss mainly (Table 8): conflict strained relationships among people; conflict causes disunity among people; conflict disrupts teaching and learning; conflict is time consuming; conflict lowers productivity; conflict causes stress and blood pressure and affects people’s health; conflict diverts attention from the most important things. The frequencies to which they agreed ranged from 75-100% with diversion of time having 25% the respondents perceiving no time wasting experienced through conflict. Junior teachers and DCMs responses contributed more to the relatively different of opinion on diversion of attention from the most important things (DAIT) when compared to straining of relationships (***P < 0.05, SRAP vs DAIT), or causing disunity among people (***P < 0.05, ADAP vs DAIT) or causes stress and high blood pressure (**P < 0.05, BPHA vs DAIT).

There was a relatively lower response, although seemingly innocuous, for time consuming and lowered productivity of conflict when compared to conflict causing strained relationships (*P < 0.05, SRAP vs TC or LP), or causing stress (*P < 0.05, BPHA vs TC or LP), or causing disunity (*P < 0.05, ADAP vs TC or LP) in the Mberengwa Peri-Urban Cluster primary education schools.

3.6 Benefits of Conflict

During GDPs, all respondents (teachers, DCMs and school heads) mentioned and concurred with that conflict created social change and balance, created an environment where staff members got to know each other well if controlled within limits and that it assisted in the smoothening of running the institution. Respondents pointed out that “staff members get to know each other’s strengths and weakness through a conflict as long as it is handled properly.” One school head did mention that “conflict can be a tool used to smoothen our creases within an organization as issues not correctly applied are corrected”...
showed a major benefit of conflict. However, a minority (12.5%), at School A argued the conflict could never be used as a tool for creating social change and harmony as by nature conflict was a violent process that created winners and losers when it occurs. “Conflict will always rise up and be a tool to disorganize, disrupt and cause confusion where ever it is and uses a lot of energy” ... remonstrated one teacher to the applause of those who shared the same thought pattern.

3.7 Conflict Management in Schools

3.7.1 Conflict resolution skills/strategies

In schools, conflict resolution and peer arbitration programs are often encouraged as a way to diminish vehemence and destructively managed conflicts which is a human relations perception long recognized in business and industry as an essential component of the developmental process where a settlement is reached ultimately [17]. This is predicated upon that people develop patterned rejoinder to conflict, people develop conflict styles for reasons that make sense to them, no one style is automatically better than another, and that people's styles undergo change in order to adapt to the demands of new situations [38]. Administrators (school heads and DCMs) need to be able to recognize conflict, to view its constructive as well as destructive potential, to learn how to manage conflict, and to apply conflict management strategies in a practical way [39]. Conflict are resolved constructively when they result in an outcome that all disputants are satisfied with, improve relationship between disputants, improve the ability of disputants to resolve future conflicts in a constructive manner usual through a mediation process [40,41].

The interview question required the heads and teachers to state the conflict management strategies used in schools. Eight heads, thirty DCMs and twenty-four teachers mentioned confrontion as the best strategy to use in conflict management.

Sixty out of sixty-four of the respondents, (93.75%), pointed out that compromising and collaborative strategies were good conflict management strategies. The respondents said that the compromising strategy is expedient and satisfies both parties in most cases. They also said collaboration enhances mutual trust and respect. However, less than half of the heads of schools saw this as an appropriate method of dealing with conflict. One head stated that it “was not a good method to handle conflict as it showed that one had a weak backbone and could not stand their ground on issues.”

Table 8. Frequency distributions of respondents on the negative effects of conflict collected from heads and teachers

| Negative effects of conflict | Frequency of responses by participants | Distribution % |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------|
|                            | School heads (SH) | Disciplinary Committee Members (DCMs) | Junior teacher (JT) | Total |
| Strain relationships among people. (SRAP) | 8 | 32 | 24 | 64 | 100**, * |
| Causes disunity among people (ADAP) | 8 | 32 | 24 | 64 | 100**, * |
| Disrupts teaching and learning (DTL) | 8 | 24 | 24 | 56 | 88 |
| Time consuming (TC) | 8 | 21 | 21 | 50 | 78 |
| Lowers productivity (LP) | 8 | 21 | 21 | 50 | 78 |
| Causes stress and blood pressure – people’s health is affected (BPHA) | 8 | 32 | 24 | 64 | 100**, * |
| Diverts attention from the most important things(DAIT) | 8 | 20 | 20 | 48 | 75 |

Note: Abbreviations used for easier of reporting of results in text
While all the teachers and members of the disciplinary committees argued that good governance was necessary for the conflict recognition and resolution, all the heads of schools saw perceived in a different light. The heads of schools saw good governance as being unnecessary for conflict resolution. The school heads reasoned that "conflict by being a natural tendency amongst people tend to find solutions from the same environment and usually outside the realms of good or bad governance" The heads of schools, however did agree that good communication was key in conflict resolution.

3.7.2 Respondents’ perceptions on conflict management

Also, to address the research question on conflict management, all respondents were asked how they perceived conflict management. The majority of the school heads argued that conflict was bad for any environment but it can only be acceptable if it is treated with caution. Some said conflict affected the smooth running of the school whether treated with caution or not so should be avoided or well managed. Conflict was seen as a hindrance to progress in any given institution.

All the twenty-four teachers and thirty-two DCMs argued that conflict management is good for the survival of the organization provided it was handled by competent managers or members of the disciplinary committee. They further stated that conflict management should be handled with the fairness and impartiality at all costs. Both heads and teachers said that it was far much better that conflict management be taken as one of the competency-based curriculums offered in schools or taken as one of the cross-cutting themes in competency-based curriculum.

3.8 Conflict Resolution Strategies

A question was asked on whether schools do have literature to refer to during conflict management, only one head of school indicated that the school had some modicum resources on the subject. out of eight school heads stated that they did not have any literature on conflict management. Only one school said it had some literature on conflict management.

When heads were interviewed on how often they conducted staff developments on conflict management, all of them indicated that they conducted them once per term. The DCMs said that they conducted conflict resolution on conflicts brought to them by management mainly.

3.9 Settling Disputes

When HODs were interviewed on what makes it difficult to settle disputes as a negotiator between disputants, six out of eight heads came out openly that it was difficult to be neutral in a conflict. Two out of eight said that “one may be labelled as practicing favouritism even when one was working flat out to assist in solving a dispute.”

4. DISCUSSION

Identification of teachers’ perceptions on types of conflict, causes of conflict and ways to improve conflict management in the Mberengwa Peri-urban Cluster primary schools with HODs, DCMs and CRTs being key respondents is a crucial step in for a negative-conflict-free education system.

Overall, causes of conflict were perceived as inadequate resources contributed equally with poor communication > poor governance and unfairness > political affiliation > role conflict > differences in values and norms.

The range of causes of conflict points to the fact that conflicts are evitable in schools hence there is great need for its management.

Conflict in schools is closely associated with stressful situations [43]. Other scholars also added that conflict is an old phenomenon which has been there since the creation of mankind and is now causing concern to stakeholders in education and other employers identically [44, 45]. Conflict emanates when one person decides that things are not moving in the way they feel or think they should and therefore seeks change which may not be agreeable by the other parties and the root causes of conflict may lie within the human nature and behavior regardless of their environment or background making conflict inevitable [46].
There is great need for HODs to improve their administration roles in order to minimize conflict associated with managerial and leadership roles. Some managers do not have the requisite training and competence to manage conflict in schools and as such their administrative style always bring them into conflict with other members of the staff [47]. During the focused group discussions most of the respondents postulated that HODs “want their powers to be felt” and do not treat subordinates fairly which fuels conflict in the school. Power-related domination leads to conflicts [48]. Therefore, there is great need for HODs to be staff-developed on good governance and conflict management before they take their promotional posts. Furthermore, HODs sometimes find themselves in problems with perceptions of stakeholders. Sometimes HODs may be seen to indulge some stakeholders and some students more than others without even the intention to do so [47]. Conflict of interest occurs when some staff members are allowed to express authority to supply goods to the school without going to tender. This special handling results in discontentment among teachers. Shortage of resources makes it hard for managers to forge ahead in the execution of educational programs and often HODs are erroneously held accountable as managers [47].

Heads of schools tended to agree that financial administration and teaching and learning material supply were mostly affected by conflict. Supply and sharing of limited resources fuels conflict in most schools supporting opinions by other researchers that shortage of finances makes it hard for managers to forge ahead in the execution of educational programs [47] and cause conflict among employees [34]. As a result, HODs should supply adequate resources or distribute the scarce resources in schools equitably.

In some strange way, there was an overwhelming unanimity of opinion amongst...
DCMs and CRTs during FDGs that conflict forms were of student-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-HOD but did never student-teacher or student-HOD. There was also no indication that the HODs had a conflict with a pupil although they were the ones mandated to deliver corporal punishment in schools. Nevertheless, interpersonal conflicts were the most common forms of conflict in the Mberengwa Peri-urban Cluster primary schools contributed possibly by the diverse backgrounds of the individuals involved.

Interpersonal conflicts refer to disharmony occurring between individuals borne typically of how people are different from one another and relate somewhat differently even on common everyday issues and is very common in a variety of institutions [49]. The FDGs indicated that more often than not, as students advance from lower to higher levels in the school, they tend to feel the need to be monitored less and so, some may start to break the school rules and display some hostile attitude towards teachers and other members of staff [50]. Conflict may take diverse forms in schools-sometimes among teachers, among pupils or between teachers and students [51] although there was no mention of teacher-pupil conflict in the FDGs carried out in the study intimating the absence of this type of conflict possibly due to vast age disparities between the two groups.

Negative consequences of conflict were given almost the same weighting with causes of conflict ranging from 75% to 100%. Moreover, the high frequencies for each effect signified that conflicts' negative effects were most likely to disturb the smooth running of the school, insinuating that conflict should be managed well in schools. All HODs perceived conflict in the same manner as they identified positively the negative effects of conflict. DCMs and CRTs also perceived negative effects of conflict to the same degree numerically although with a higher relativity amongst the CRTs. In a nutshell, all respondents perceived conflict as destructive to the schools. Nonetheless, a small, but critical percentage had a different view of conflict disrupting teaching and learning, or conflict lowering productivity or consuming productivity time or diverting attention from the most important things [52].

The majority of the responses conformed to the findings that unresolved conflict often produced negative results such as decrease in productivity, increased employee turnover and violence, regardless of whether the conflict is between two individuals, between staff and leadership or among workplace teams [43]. Madziyire et al. opine that conflict can cause a lot of harm to parties involved and points out great stress and unhappiness as some of the negative effects of conflicts [53]. The same authors add that frequent and powerful conflict can affect the behaviours of the conflicting parties physically and psychologically. In schools particularly, conflict can lead to hostility between students and teachers, between students or between teachers and between other staff members disrupting purposes, goals and progress [52,54, 55].

In a contrasting opinion Madziyire et al. [53], also narrates conflict can be used as a medium through which problems can be cured and solutions can be arrived at. This is a major positive side of conflict that can be enjoyed by schools. Moreover, majority of respondents articulated that conflict may lead to social change ensuring that both interpersonal and intergroup dynamics remain fresh and reflective of current interests and realities and serve to discourage premature group decisions [43]. When handled properly, conflict can also bring about positive effects as shown by respondents who stated that conflict often brings about healthy and productive changes within schools when problems are detected and disagreements solved progressively [54]. Conflict is a pivot around which change takes place in the workplaces and in society at large, whether positive or negative depending on who won or lost the contest [56]. Nevertheless, the word conflict does not sound so positive or beneficial, but it has some inherent importance when deeply scrutinized [57]. Conflict when resolved correctly, builds trust, delineates order, characterizes good behavior patterns, may build a long lasting culture and eliminate traits of betrayal and disloyalty [58] in the Mberengwa Peri-Urban Cluster primary education schools.

Five methods of conflict resolutions were investigated, mainly collaboration, compromising, confrontation, good governance and good communication. Confrontation was mentioned as the best strategy to use in conflict resolution by HODs, DCMs and CRTs alike. Some people have given credence to confrontational conflict resolution as the most effective stratagem [59]. Confrontation may be described as an open and direct expression of one’s views, thoughts or feelings of a conflict situation and an invitation for the other party to express their views of the
conflict [15]. When handled appropriately, the confrontational approach can help people to carefully examine the consequences of their behavior with remorse rather than being arrogant and defensive [60]. This may be the best strategy because the definition of conflict specifically means confrontation between two or more parties seeking incompatible or competitive means or ends [61].

The compromising and collaborative strategies were seen as good conflict management strategies by some in the study. The respondents said that the compromising strategy is expedient and satisfies both parties in most cases. They also said collaboration enhances mutual trust and respect. However, the compromising stance is the opposite of the competitive or confrontation style of conflict resolution in which one stresses a position without bearing in mind opposing viewpoints or a highly assertive stance with minimal cooperativeness with triumph as the goal.

Compromising is not needed when a quick action is to be taken or when having to make an unpopular decision, or handling vital issues, or when one requires protection in a situation where non-competitive or compromising behavior may be exploited negatively. Scarce resource sharing requires compromising and collaboration from those receiving less of the resources and a confrontational approach from the one with the unenviable task of distribution. However, compromising as a conflict resolutions strategy avoids the development of abilities to argue and debate, use of rank or position, assertiveness in opinions and feelings, and learning of stating one’s position and standing one’s ground [55]. Less than half of the school heads perceived this method for the conflict resolution strategy because of its inherent weaknesses. Invariably, compromising smoothers over conflict and leaves room to fight again in the future without clearly pulverizing the opponent. Chances of the same conflict arising in the future are high. Compromising style of conflict resolution often include missing the target on project goals, diminishing confidence between members, and cynicism with some smearing of disparagement [62]. Collaboration and compromising seem to be two sides of the same coin. Compromising leads to collaboration and collaboration leads to compromising in the end. Mutual trust and respect is reinforced through collaboration leading to a win-win outcomes in conflict resolutions which is critical in teaching and learning where often the teacher has inculcated collaborative approaches to gain the pupil’s confidence being a second parent away from home [63].

The reasons for the disequilibria in response between good communication and governance amongst school heads as tools for conflict management could not be gauged in this study. All the school heads, pointed out that good communication was needed for conflict management but all of them said good governance was not necessary as a tool for conflict management. In other words, the heads of schools were indirectly saying that bad governance could result in good outcomes in conflict management or that no governance was necessary for conflict management. However, the same perceptions were noted where “unfairness” was observed by all HODs as not being one of the causes of conflict in schools although all the CRTs and DCMs had contrary views. Taken together, to the HODs when a teacher or pupil was treated unfairly there was no likelihood of conflict arising and that the presence of bad governance resulted in good conflict management in their respective schools.

On the contrary other writers contend that good governance and good communication create conducive working environment in an institution [53]. Therefore, HODs cunningly detected a point of conflict in answering questions that directly incriminated them and opted not to respond accurately but invariably skewing findings comparatively against them. By agreeing to the fact that unfairness was a cause of conflict and conflict was present in the schools, they would have been labeled as unfair since they were ultimate responsible authority and the buck ended with them. Also, by indicating that good governance was a potent conflict resolution mechanism, but conflict was escalating in schools, it would have pointed to the HODs as not practicing good governance otherwise conflict should have decreased or eliminated altogether. The HODs may have used another form of conflict resolution style referred to as avoiding strategy.

By avoiding to confront the question on unfairness as a cause of conflict and good governance as good conflict management styles, the HODs used the avoiding style of conflict resolution. The HODs somehow reasoned that the questions needed not be answered correctly and any answer would suffice.
The avoiding conflict resolution style taken by the HODs often occurs when no one is satisfied with what is going on and hope time will correct the point of conflict. By avoiding conflict, the ultimate outcome is delaying the progress of the work process through procrastination. In most instances, such a stance results in low-level input, decisions that are forced, a breakdown in communication, and problems that could have been solved much earlier are delayed. Such behaviours were buttressed by the HODs having indicated that they did not view good governance as potent conflict management tool and that unfairness did not contribute to conflict. Somehow, there seemed a self-serving attitude was taken by the HODs to preserve inadequacies in the Mberengwa Peri-Urban Cluster primary schools.

Arguments may be made that the HODs, by avoiding to answer certain questions on conflict management, may not have received adequate training on the subject. One of the skills a manager needs to possess is conflict management. Learning good conflict management skills is important for success and organizations that understand how to channel conflict opportunities are most effective [62]. The first step in dealing with conflict is identifying the specific cause of the conflict and this requires training of managers and workers on this aspect. Interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions in schools need to be inculcated into the curricular at such entry points as befitting the age of the participants as part of social intervention to the school community. While conflict was not reported between students and teachers, this may not be expected to continue and measures need to be put in place to avert the possibility of escalation of conflict into these spheres [47].

The school heads represent the highest level of resources accessor in the schools and they did not have adequate referral materials on conflict management, it may mean that information on conflict management is in short supply in schools. Lack of access to literature on conflict management may be a barrier to effective conflict management [47]. When the school heads did not associate conflict resolution with good governance practice or unfairness as a cause of conflict, it may be safely assumed that inadequate literal works on conflict management may have been the source of displayed dispositions. The gap created by lack of literature in schools can be closed by frequent staff development sessions and online searches for such materials. A disparity was observed between the frequency of conflict in schools and mitigatory measures taken through conducting staff development meetings on conflict management. The once-per-term meeting and the as-and-when-necessary approaches in dealing with conflict resolution training and conflict resolution itself by the HODs and DCMs, respectively, is insignificant. The conflict affected and afflicted persons may stay affected for a long period of time without recourse seriously encumbering organizational performance. This avoidance stance in dealing with conflict, in the Mberengwa Peri-Urban cluster schools, resonates well with the negative views given by school heads on good governance necessity for conflict resolution, unfairness as causing conflict and the lack of literature on conflict management in schools.

The DCMs seemed to be extensions of the HODs with only minor roles in eradicating conflict and possibly selectively carrying out their mandates at the behest of the former. More often than not, the DCMs is expected to take initiative to conduct conflict management training through staff development meetings to keep conflict in schools suppressed. The committees were rendered more of end-point intervention tools looking into misconduct cases that may arise in schools and not as sentinel proponents actively nipping off the nuance and malaise of conflict that insidiously crept into schools. The lack of literature on conflict management training may have caused this and hence great need for the committee to be trained as trainer of trainers as part of staff development.

The majority of HODs found it difficult to be neutral in a conflict. Being a neutral arbiter in a conflict may be difficult in a closed community like a school especially when conflict is between peers (teacher-teacher, DCM-DCM). However, an impartial approach is necessary in conflict resolution. Compromising is required in certain instances while a competitive approach is needed to be taken in others. Treating cases on their merits or demerits may be necessary to settle conflicts. Equipping every teacher with the skills for effective negotiation in conflict is necessary. Staff development and literature can be used to develop the teachers to be part of conflict resolution team of the school. Avoiding, collaboration, compromising, accommodating and competitive styles of conflict management need to be taught to teachers than allow for natural course of conflicts to take place and applied in different measures to suit each
On settling conflicts, during FDGs, one school head indicated that using assembly themes did influence positive behaviours in students through teacher-guided-student-leadership induction. Teachers themselves were also learning during this process. The HODs also indicated that students’ conflicts hearings were often held in the presence of teachers providing an aptly learning curve. The use of school prefects (student teachers) to monitor conflict development was unanimously the method of choice to use when teachers were away from the students. Keeping students occupied minimizes mischief and enabled teachers to be role models for the students. This means that learners’ leaders should be part and parcel of school management and should be well trained in conflict management strategies to keep conflict suppressed within schools.

5. CONCLUSION

Conflict is considered a common aspect of human life. In schools, conflict is bound to happen every now and again and Mberengwa Peri-Urban Cluster primary education schools were not an exception and is dependent on many factors. There was a disparity in educational qualifications amongst CRTs, HODs and DCMs with the majority holding either a Certificate or Diploma in education which may fuel conflict. The majority of teachers had high teaching experience (16-25+ years) which should make conflict resolution easier were it not for factors like inadequate resources, poor school governance, poor communication among teaching environment, political influences and affiliations and general unfairness in the management systems of schools. Conflict often strained relationships, divided teachers, disrupted teaching and learning, was time consuming, lowered production, caused stress and high blood pressure and diverted time from important school activities. However, benefits of conflicts were sited as conflict being a tool to smoothen creases in the schools’ social fabric and could be used beneficially when handled correctly. Good conflict resolution strategies were identified as compromising and collaborative approaches as they satisfied parties involved in conflict alike, although good governance was also key in conflict arbitration and mediated counselling. Surprisingly, the confrontational conflict resolution approach was applauded by all teachers as the best method to get quick results. Avoiding conflict as a conflict resolution strategy seemed to be practiced by HODs when they stated that good governance and fairness were not necessary for conflict resolution. Non availability of literature and training on identifying conflict, its causes and conflict management were perceived as the cause of lack of conflict resolution skills amongst HODs, DCMs and CRTs. Student-teacher conflict was not observed in the study but require to be protected against in the future. For continuous conflict mitigatory measures, knowledge and tools for managing conflict need to be taught in schools in the peri-urban clusters schools in Mberengwa as they are more prone to conflict.

DISCLAIMER

The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly use products in our area of research and country. There is absolutely no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for any litigation but for the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company rather it was funded by personal efforts of the authors.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

All participants gave written informed consent to participate in the study. Letters of permission to conduct the research were obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and the relevant School Heads. Participants’ names and schools were not included in the data collected. Collected data was kept under lock and not accessible to anyone else besides the researchers.

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Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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