Exploring the Sources of Conflict in Zimbabwean Teachers' Colleges

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is inevitable in all organizations including learning institutions. The occurrence of conflict demands a management strategy that will minimise its impact on interpersonal relationships and the teaching and learning processes. Zimbabwean teachers' colleges encounter various conflicts that involve management, staff and students. The focus of this study was to explore the sources of conflict at teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe and provide recommendations on how to minimise their impact on teaching and learning processes. The study employed an interpretivist paradigm undergirded by qualitative approaches. A multiple case study design was used to capture and synthesise the responses of 30 lecturers who were purposively selected from six teachers' colleges. Data were collected through focus group discussions which were arranged and conducted with six lecturers from each college. The major findings revealed that conflict was prevalent in colleges owing to poor communication processes, gender stereotyping, language differences, unclear policies, political issues and interactional patterns. The study proposed recommendations such as the need for all stakeholders in teachers' colleges to undergo capacity development in conflict management through workshops and short courses to enable them to identify sources of conflict and manage it before it becomes destructive. Further recommendations included the empowerment of college management in inclusive and transformational leadership skills to assist college management to identify diverse skills within their subordinates and ensure all stakeholders' involvement in decision-making.

KEYWORDS

Conflict; college management; facilitators; students; gender stereotyping.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict, which occurs in various forms, affects various sectors ranging from the personal to the institutional level. Rue and Byars (2003) regard conflict as "an overt behaviour that results when an individual or group of individuals think a perceived need of the individual or group has been blocked or is about to be blocked". (p. 285). In addition, Onwe et al. (2014) note that conflict refers to disagreements, misunderstandings, disharmony, confrontations and struggles over values that arise from a clash of interests and interdependence of activities, which may or may not be expressed violently. This shows, as noted by Fisher et al. (2007) that, conflict is experienced at all levels of human relationships and occurs when two or more people or groups of people have or think they have goals that are not compatible. Conflict can also occur within the individual as indicated in Wright's observation 1951 (as cited in Sellman, 2003) that conflict can occur psychologically as emotional distress between mismatched wishes within a person. Thus, conflict is natural and inevitable and finds expression wherever human relations exist (Madziyire et al., 2010), just as it is in the various teachers' colleges studied in this research. It is pertinent that researchers examine the nature of conflict and the perceptions of some lecturers in Zimbabwean teachers' colleges regarding conflict in their institutions.

While Conflict is normally associated with negative feelings such as anger, mistrust, harm, fear, disappointment, resentment, and damage, it provides opportunities for renewal and personal and intellectual growth if it is well managed (Seval, 2006). In this regard Lederach (2003) and Akiens (2014) (as cited in Leshem & Halperin, 2020) perceive conflict as not necessarily a threat or a bad occurrence in society but an opportunity to increase social relationships, one's understanding of social structures and interactional patterns within a given social institution or society. Tjosvold (1991) notes further that conflict is an important part of thinking, watching, performing and managing in an organization and will continue to exist as long as there are differences among groups of people based on their values, beliefs and cultures. Kerzner (1998) also underlined the inevitability and importance of conflict as noted in his assertion that conflict is an essential part of social change in humanity and institutions without which social processes may grind to a halt (Heirich, 2006). This study considered the above-reviewed definitions and observations on conflict to find out the causes of conflict in teachers' colleges. The assumption here is that failure to monitor conflict at teachers' colleges may result in severe negative consequences on the national educational goals.

Various scholars propose different ways in which conflict can be resolved. Scholars such as Lederach (2003) (as indicated in Paffenholz, 2013) and Galtung (1985) (in Leshem & Halperin, 2020) developed different theories that focus on conflict resolution and transformation. They also observed that a viable transformation of conflict requires more than the problem-solving skills associated with intercession, negotiated settlements and other fundamentals of conflict resolution. The reality is that conflict resolution entails the redress of genuine grievances and the formation of new relationships characterised by superiority and fairness according to prescriptions of human dignity and the common good. This means that conflict resolution

interventions must be accompanied by conflict transformation for long-lasting solutions to build peace (Chimbi & Jita, 2023; Nyika & Motalenyane, 2023). Regarding Zimbabwe, there exists research that was carried out to determine how matters of conflict resolution were being handled in the country's teachers' colleges (Chimbunde et al., 2023; Dube, 2019; Hove & Dube, 2022). For instance, a study conducted at Mutare Teachers' College in Manicaland by Shumba, et al. (2005) focused on how the teachers' college addressed issues related to growing up and sexual maturation among students. The Mutare Teachers' College study revealed that there was limited or no production of knowledge on interpersonal relations, which is one aspect of conflict resolution.

Observations from further studies on Zimbabwean colleges are significant here. A study conducted by Makoni (2015) at two teachers' colleges in Mutare urban found that both colleges were not offering peace education courses in their programmes. In addition, a study on conflict resolution between school heads and teachers (and by extension teachers' colleges) carried out in the Masvingo District in Zimbabwe indicated that heads conflicted with the teachers or teachers had conflict amongst themselves every month (Makaye & Ndofirepi, 2012). Some of these studies aimed at resolving conflict at the school level, however, this study focused on the causes of conflict in Zimbabwean teachers' colleges and how best the college stakeholders could bring stability and tranquility in their institutions. We assume that the introduction of sound conflict management practices will facilitate harmony in teachers' colleges and this will lead to effective teaching and learning and enhanced student learning outcomes in the colleges.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to attend to conflict at a very early stage to avoid complexities. In his studies of conflict, Lederach (1997) identified seven stages of conflict in different setups, and these are the latent, emergent, escalated, manifest, de-escalation and negotiation, dispute and settlement and peacebuilding stages. Lederach (1997) further highlights that conflict resolution is useful for post-conflict situations and as a preventative measure in environments that have not yet experienced conflict. In addition, while functional conflict can present opportunities for improvement, dysfunctional conflict is unhealthy, and destructive and can create an unwanted divergence in the learning environment as well as shift the focus of lecturers and students from the work to be done to the conflict itself and the parties involved (Opoku-Asare, Takyi & Owusu-Mensah, 2015). This study thus sought to explore the causes of conflict in selected teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe so as to provide measures to minimize the incidences of conflict.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by three theories. First, there is the violence triangle theory which suggests that conflict can be visible or invisible in cases where attitudes and contradictions lie hidden and not visible while evident behaviours would be indicative of the conflict (Galtung 1985 as cited in Leshem & Halperin, 2020). This study seeks to find out some of the visible and invisible issues that give rise to conflict at teachers' colleges and find ways of resolving them.

The second theory here is Akiens' (2014) Social Learning Model which offers different ways of resolving and transforming conflict among groups that are at different stages of conflict. Social learning enables former opponents undergoing transitional justice interventions to create conditions necessary for the creation of sustainable peace in post-conflict societies. The third theory considered in this study is Lederach's (1997) three-level pyramid theory which focuses on the different levels that exist in institutions. Lederach hypothesizes that peace will prevail if members at each level play their appropriate roles. The theory also identifies the three levels, which are the top level occupied by the top management at college institutions, and the second tier. consisting of lecturers occupying the middle range level, and level three (the grassroots) occupied by students. This pyramid gives a better understanding of how conflict can be transformed into peace by using different approaches at the different levels of the institutions.

Research question

To address the problem of the study, the following research question was posed to direct the study.

- *How prevalent is conflict in teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe and what are its main causes?*

Sub-research questions

The following sub-research questions were developed to give the study a specific focus.

- *What are the main sources of conflict in teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe?*
- *How can conflict be managed in teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe?*
- *What capacity development is needed by college staff to enhance their conflict management skills?*

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we sought to understand how conflict is experienced as a human phenomenon at teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe. The interpretive paradigm was chosen to undergird this study. This is because the interpretivist paradigm seeks to understand human beings by learning to ''stand in their shoes, looking through their eyes and feeling both their pleasure and pain'' (Taylor & Medina, 2010, p47). Within the context of a qualitative approach, we employed the multiple case study design in which the particular participants were lecturers from five teachers' colleges in different provinces of Zimbabwe. Six participants were drawn from each college through the purposive sampling strategy. Strict ethical protocols, including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage, anonymity and confidentiality, were observed throughout the study.

Data were gathered from focus group interviews with 30 lecturers consisting of six per college. Each focus group session lasted for about 35 minutes. The researchers recorded the discussion which was transcribed at a later stage in preparation for data analysis. We ensured member checking on collected data by asking the participants to go through the summarized data from the focus group interviews and indicating any omissions and misrepresentations. Data

analysis was done concurrently with data generation using themes, which is in line with the qualitative research method (Cohen et al., 2005; Creswell, 2014).

Ensuring the reliability and validity of the study

In this study, several considerations were undertaken to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. First, the researchers critically reflected on the methods and methodology used in the study to ensure that it promotes the collection of data of sufficient depth and relevance. As data were generated through focus group interviews, the two researchers kept on comparing and verifying its accuracy in terms of form and context. This comparison helped ensure that different perspectives were represented. The use of two researchers in itself, was important as it helped reduce the bias of a single researcher and thus produced more comprehensive findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Merrian, 1998). Rich and verbatim descriptions of participants' responses were also used to support findings. In line with qualitative tradition, respondent validation was also used to enhance the validity of findings. This involved inviting the participants to comment on the focus group interview transcripts to ensure that the final themes and concepts adequately reflected the phenomenon being investigated (Maxwell, 2012). The triangulation of three theoretical models in a single study was also considered critical to the generation of credible data as alluded to by (Yin, 2014).

Research design

In line with qualitative research, a case study design was used to determine the lived experiences of the lecturers about conflict. Yin (2014) regards a case study as an empirical inquiry that explores a phenomenon in depth and its natural settings. This study explored the issue of conflict in five different teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe and hence each college was treated as a case. In addition, the multiple case study design was selected to enable cross-case analysis. The use of such a design enables researchers to gain insight into differences and similarities between cases (Merrian, 1998).

The population

The population of this study comprised the 13 teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe, four of which are secondary and nine primary training colleges. Four of the 13 are situated in rural areas while nine are in urban areas. From this population, five colleges were purposively selected as research sites for the study, three primary and two secondary teacher training colleges. The location distribution of the selected five colleges was such that, one was situated in the rural area while the other four were urban-based.

Sample and sampling procedures

Five colleges were purposively selected to represent both primary and secondary and the rural and urban set-ups. The participants from each college consisted of six lecturers who were randomly selected from a list of lecturers who had spent five years or more at the college. The selection criteria sought to ensure that only those who had adequate experience of teaching at the colleges were included. The assumption was that lecturers who had spent five years or more at a particular teachers' college would have had experiences with various forms of conflict and

be able to provide deep and insightful information about the incidences and causes of conflict. A total of 30 lecturers 15 males and 15 females were selected with an age range of 35 to 50 years. Of these 10 lecturers had experiences of 5 to 10 years, while the other 10 had experiences of 10 to 15 years and the last 10 had experiences of 15 to 20 years. This criteria ensured that both lecturers from the middle to senior level were included in the study. In line with qualitative tradition, the selected lecturers would be able to provide meaningful and information-rich data about the incidences of conflict and its causes at the colleges (Yin, 2014).

Data collection and analysis

Data from lecturers were collected through face-to-face focus group discussions with the selected lecturers. Focus group discussions were organised at different colleges with the help of the college administrators. Each focus group discussion lasted about 35 minutes and was audio recorded, which recordings were transcribed later with the participants' permission. In preparation for data analysis, the researchers read and re-read the transcripts several times to get a sense of the whole. Data analysis was carried out concurrently with data generation using themes, which is in line with the qualitative research method (Cohen et al., 2005; Creswell, 2014). Finally, data presentation and analysis were supported by discussions that integrated information from different scholars.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main aim was to understand the sources of conflict at selected teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, data for this study was presented and analysed under the themes, of *involvement of staff and communication processes*, *gender stereotyping; language and cultural differences, unclear policies and political issues*, which emerged during data analysis and synthesis. These themes guided the presentation and discussion of the data, as presented below:

Involvement of staff in decision-making and communication processes

There were general concurrences among the six colleges that some form of conflict existed between the management team and lecturers. A running thread throughout the discussions revolved around the lack of or inadequate involvement of lecturers in decision-making processes. Closely related to this issue was the concern that subordinates were not being accorded ample space to articulate their views, opinions and grievances in meetings or other decision-making engagements. One participant from College A had noted that;

> *At our college, if you question anything, you become an opponent. Even during discussions, management dominates all the time. In most cases, decisions are dictated to subordinates and there is very little or no room for us to contribute in any meaningful way. This induces a feeling of less importance on the part of the subordinates, leading to either withdrawal from college activities or resentment.*

In the same vein, a participant from College C pointed out that communication channels were not open to everyone at their college as there was no transparency. He stated that:

At our colleges, some individuals are more privileged to certain information than others. Usually, before important announcements are made on pertinent issues in the college a few individuals will have already got the information. How they get such information remains everyone's multi-million-dollar question.

Shahmohammadi (2014) underlines the importance of good communication in any organisation and contends that poor communication *is a* common cause of conflict which leads to misunderstandings, mistrust and the erection of barriers. This point is also noted by Johdi and Apitree (2012) in their observation that clear, brief, precise and timely communication of information helps to ease both the number and severity of conflicts. The point of departure here is predicated on the view that both too little and too much communication can lead to conflict because when there is too little communication the concerned teachers and departments have limited information about each other's intents, goals and plans and, hence, misinterpretations are more likely to occur, which can lead to conflict. In addition, the existence of too much communication may give rise to confusion and result in conflict. Therefore, it can be partially concluded that one major way to reduce conflict is to ensure good communication across divisions, departments and units at these colleges.

Gender stereotyping

Gender stereotyping was highlighted by some of the participants as one of the sources of conflict in colleges. Ellemers (2018) asserts that gender differences are embedded in people's brains and deeply rooted in society's cultures that reflect the different roles of men and women. During the focus group interviews with lecturers, it was revealed that the environment and practices at three teachers' colleges were not gender-neutral nor gender-sensitive, which invariably gave rise to some form of conflict. The following extract from one of the participants aptly captures this:

Through gender stereotyping, some staff and students have come to believe that certain roles and responsibilities in the colleges should only be performed by either men or women and yet there is no empirical evidence to support that. Over time, such stereotypes tend to affect how staff relate with each other or how staff relate with management, particularly when the gender issue is involved.

Another participant from one of the selected colleges situated in urban areas mentioned that:

In our college female leaders tend to be given less respect than their male counterparts and sometimes they are even jeered on account of their gender. This creates conflict as important instructions can be ignored just because they are coming from a female leader, and this leads to conflict.

In a related matter one participant from a college in the rural area indicated that in some instances leaders tend to give preferential treatment to staff of their gender at the expense of those from the opposite gender. The reality here is that a conflict becomes imminent once the rest of the staff become aware of this practice. She remarked as follows:

At our college, all departments headed by females are well catered for because our principal is a lady, she likes women more than men.

The role congruity theory (Koch, D'Mello & Sackett, 2015) proposes that attitudes are more positive towards male than female leaders and potential leaders. Consequently, it is not always easy for women leaders to become leaders and where they do, it may be difficult to achieve success in their duties as leaders, due to conflict that arises from gender stereotyping by their male counterparts.

Further study observations are significant here. Williams and Tiedens (2016) note that female supervisors who display leadership in a feminine manner are less likely to stimulate threat responses in their male subordinates. This suggests that those female leaders who may not like to be feminine in their leadership approach may experience resistance from their male subordinates. In addition, Schein (2007) holds the view that the expectation that a woman will fail is maintained through viewing instances of success as not arising from the woman's ability or by regarding a woman's success as incidental and dependent on exceptional circumstances. The same author notes that the persistent stereotypes that associate management with being male are a major hurdle for women in management in all countries and a cause of conflict.

Language and cultural differences

Language difference was indicated by some participants as one of the causes of conflict between management and staff, and between students. One participant indicated that discriminatory tendencies were sometimes evident when the principal dealt with lecturers who spoke different languages from his or her language. The observed tendency was that those staff members who speak the same language as the principal tended to receive preferential treatment than those who speak other languages. This was summed up well by a participant from college C who pointed out that:

Our principal is very discriminatory because she speaks a different language from us. She likes people from her own culture and as a result, it's causing a rift between staff members as well. We now have camps in the college.

The above responses, while certainly not desirable, are consistent with the postulations of the social identity theory. This theory suggests that people tend to put themselves and others into various social categories, which explains why people belonging to different social groups can have a conflict of interests and opinions (Ryan et al., 2007).

Furthermore, participants from three other colleges reported that they faced no challenges arising from language differences among staff. However, they confirmed that language differences generated misunderstandings and conflict amongst students from different ethnic backgrounds. These generated misunderstandings ultimately ended up involving lecturers as well, thus becoming a potential source of conflict.

One participant from College D summed this up;

There are several cases involving students from different cultures that come to the college disciplinary committee now and then. Most of these cases relate to accusations and

counter-accusations on the use of hate speech by students from different ethnic groups, sometimes involving students and staff from different cultural backgrounds.

A participant from College A also made similar responses. He stated that:

Some lecturers tend to believe that their ethnic groups or cultures are superior to those of others, and this creates a spirit of ethnocentrism, which is a belief in the superiority of one's culture over others. The belief in the superiority of their cultures and the perceived inferiority of other cultures will influence their relationships with others and this often gives rise to conflict. In many instances, it induces the spirit of unhealthy competition rather than cooperation.

The participant from College E pointed out that:

In several cases, lecturers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds call each other derogatory names. This also happens with students from different cultural backgrounds. This name-calling practice leads to ethnocentric behaviour which is associated with hate, segregation and unhealthy competition among peers. This practice often gives rise to conflict at the college.

Therefore, this study noted the potential of language and cultural differences as sources of conflict at the teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe.

Unclear policies

Participants from three teachers' colleges (College A, C and D) attributed the occurrence of conflict to the absence of policies or unclear and poorly articulated policies in the cases where the policies were in place. The participants elaborated further that in some cases policies are both unclear and not known by the majority of lecturers, particularly those at lower levels. This, as emphasised by the respondents, often leads to conflict as members felt that there was no consistency in the administration and implementation of practices, procedures and principles that regulate staff behaviour.

The specific responses presented below are significant here. Firstly, a participant from College C raised an apt comment that:

Our policies are not very clear when it comes to certain issues. Most of the things are just discussed without the guidelines of written down policies. Usually, policies are brought to one's attention when one is implicated in a case which one has to answer and that is when you start to know the existence of certain policies. Lack of clearly articulated policies leads to members pursuing undefined goals or objectives which also leads to people doing what they feel is good for them, hence, leading to unnecessary conflict with management. If goals are clear, then everyone will know his/her roles in the organisation.

Secondly, a participant from College D pointed out that:

At times we hear things through talks in the corridors, unfortunately, there will be no one to ask hence leaving us in darkness all the time. Things come from management just as directives, they do not seek our contributions even on issues that affect us directly and this causes conflict.

The above responses show that the need for adequate and written policies to regulate practice is of paramount importance for sound relationships in the colleges. This concurs with the postulations made by Francis (2011) and Gwakwa (2015) who observed that the stakeholders within any organisation need to have a shared vision of what they are determined to achieve as well as clear objectives for each team, department and even individuals to ensure that the organisation becomes effective and competent towards achieving its goals. Furthermore, the extracts from the participants suggest that while the existence of policies may be necessary, their mere existence may not be sufficient enough to curb the incidences of conflict as policies that are not known by the people for whom they were made serve very little or no purpose.

Political issues

Participants from all five colleges agreed that political affiliation was a major cause of conflict among staff and students alike. This is not surprising in that colleges in Zimbabwe, being microcosms of society, draw their staff and student population from all over the country, and from people with diverse political persuasions. The following extracts were insightful:

> Our lecturers are always at each other's throats because of political matters, especially those that relate to different political parties. Some of our college lecturers hold political positions in different political parties in the country. This often leads to clashes, rivalry and conflict among different lecturers and this may even spread to students [Participant from college C]

In the same vein, a lecturer from College D mentioned that:

> While the employer preaches that we should be apolitical when it comes to politics, a lot of staff members have their political parties, though they do not show it openly. We see this when there are funded projects to be implemented in the colleges. Those who share the same political persuasion as the project coordinator have a high chance of being involved in the project. This always ignites conflict among staff members and even with management.

> During political parties' campaign season, lecturers subscribing to different political parties often clash with each other. Such clashes may take various forms and levels of magnitude ranging from sharp disagreements, non-sharing of resources and even violence at the extreme.

The above responses resonate with Saiden's (2017) and Madziyire, et al. (2010) observation that educational institutions consist of teachers of different ages, cultural backgrounds, ethics, values, beliefs, goals, attitudes, socioeconomic status and political persuasions. Therefore, there is bound to be conflict when teachers and students with such diverse perceptions on issues come to work and study together. This also applies to teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research, which are consistent with the reviewed literature, have shown that various conflicts are experienced in institutions of higher learning including teachers' colleges. This is not surprising given that colleges draw their staff and student populations from diverse communities who bring with them different expectations, cultural values, personality characteristics and goals. In this way, conflict becomes inevitable at all teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe and elsewhere.

This study has also shown that conflict also results from malpractices by staff or management, poor communication protocols, policy ambiguities and the non-involvement of staff in decision-making processes. Conflict needs to be well managed so that it does not impede organizational development. This raises the need for personnel at teachers' colleges to undergo regular staff development programmes, such as workshops, short courses and structured activities of study, which are meant to equip them with skills for managing conflict. As noted in the study, a conflict that is timeously identified and well managed has the potential to lead to organisational renewal and yet if it is left unattended it can lead to the grinding down of operations and stagnation. Therefore, the early identification of sources of conflict, its various manifestations, and the ability to manage it remains key to continuous organisational improvement at teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. The main limitation of the study is that it was a multi-case study of five teachers' colleges and participants were purposively selected. This means results cannot be generalized outside the individual colleges that were involved. Furthermore, the study may not easily allow repeatability since participants were not selected through a rigorous random sampling technique as would be the case in a quantitative study. The study also relied on one mechanism of collecting data namely, the focus group interview process.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, arising from the findings and conclusions of this research, are made to inform policy and practice:

- Management in institutions of higher learning, including teachers' colleges, should be capacitated with sound and effective conflict management skills to enable them to timeously identify sources of conflict and apply appropriate strategies to manage and deal with conflict.
- The government, which is the employer for all personnel at teachers' colleges, should ensure that all principals and their management teams possess formal qualifications in conflict management, as a prerequisite for appointment to management positions, while all those who were appointed without these are assisted through in-service staff development programmes.
- College management needs to be empowered with inclusive and transformational leadership and management skills so that they can identify, harness and deploy the talents that reside in their subordinates towards the overall well-being of the

organisation. This is important since some conflicts are the result of non-involvement of subordinates in important processes. Here, staff involvement in college processes can be enhanced through participation in various committees in the colleges.

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