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The Experience of Conflict Management of Public Secondary School Administrators: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract. The school administrators' skill in managing conflict and resolution is vital towards creating a peaceful and productive working environment. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of public secondary school administrators on conflict management. Using a purposive sampling technique, three school administrators participated in an in-depth interview. The data were analyzed using the recursive textual analysis aided by the framework of Lichtman. The study's findings show that school administrators primarily consider the source of conflict to understand the appropriate approach to apply. By classification, the conflict between teachers usually rooted in jealousy, faction, personal grudges, and pride. In contrast, conflicts between teachers and administrators would usually involve the performance of duties. Moreover, they believe that there is no single approach to be followed in the implementation of conflict resolution strategies since it depends on the situation and the parties involved. The findings suggest that each person is dynamic, and the beauty of dynamism of people enables them to understand and resolve conflicts in the end.

Keywords. Social sciences, conflict management, public secondary school administrators, phenomenology, Philippines

1. Introduction

School administrators' skill in managing conflict and resolution is vital towards creating a peaceful and productive working environment. According to Batool (2016), in order to propose a reasonable and realistic solution to the disputes, the school administrator must employ his personal abilities and traits. His personal qualities play an important part in the school's smooth operation and effective management. As a result, school managers' role in conflict management and resolution is critical to the efficient and effective operation of school administration. In this paper, conflict management refers to the ability to recognize and resolve school problems in a reasonable, fair, and timely manner. Only the emotionally intelligent educator, according to Dude and Harden (2017), can handle these circumstances with leadership, discipline, and diplomacy. Tancinco (2016) postulated that conflict management is one of the most significant parts of handling most of the challenges in today's organizations. There are no exceptions in the case of educational institutions. Saiti (2014) found that school conflicts are common, and they are mostly linked to both organizational and interpersonal reasons in her study done in Greece. Furthermore, her research reveals that these disputes are more likely to occur in urban schools. Mugwe (2016), in his study conducted in Kenya, found

that conflict in schools is most typically between principals and teachers, rather than principals and students or students and teachers.

Conflicts in public schools are on the rise in the Philippines, according to the Department of Education (DepEd). Unresolved disagreements between teachers and school authorities are among the factors. These have had a negative impact on the school's and pupils' academic achievement (Manila, 2016). Cognizant of the prevailing issues and conditions that school managers face, the Division of Negros Occidental also share the same predicaments; hence, the researcher is led to believe that there is a need to undertake research that will serve as a foundation for improvement aimed toward the welfare of school managers as they carry out their administrative and managerial tasks.

Nevertheless, most related literature and studies currently existing focus on conflict management and resolution strategies between teachers and school leaders in primary schools of Wolaita Zone, Ethiopia (Shanka & Thuo, 2017); conflict resolution of school administrators as a basis for an innovative administrative program (Icutan & Sagaoinit, 2017); conflict management styles and personality attributes (Baliton, 2012); conflicts at schools and their impact on teachers (Göksoy & Argon, 2016); and the relationship between the significant five personality factors and conflict management styles (Antonioni, 1998). So far, there has never been any attempt to advance the understanding of the lived experiences in conflict management of public secondary school administrators in the Province of Negros Occidental. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences in conflict management of public school administrators in the Province Negros Occidental, Philippines.

2. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach to gather more insights into the prevailing lived practices of the conflict management among the public secondary school administrators. Phenomenologists believe that people's life experiences can provide truth and understanding about life (Byrne, 2001). Using a purposive sampling technique, three school administrators participated in an in-depth interview while observing the necessary steps to ensure health and safety protocols of the Department of Health (DOH). Purposive sampling is the process of selecting sampling units at random from a population segment that has the greatest information on the feature of interest (Guarte, 2006). The goal is to focus on persons with specific qualities who will be better equipped to help with relevant research. In-depth interviews, on the other hand, are referred to as semi-structured by Esterberg (2002), who describes the process as less rigorous than structured interviews and allowing for a more free interchange between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Guided by the inclusion criteria, the participants should be DepEd (Department of Education) school administrators in the Province of Negros Occidental; must be at least 35 years old and above; have at least five years of proven experience and competence as a school administrator; degree holders of Doctor of Philosophy, Major in Educational Management/Leadership; and presently assigned to a large secondary school.

Three participants were engaged in interviews and were deemed enough for the nature of the study. All of the participants were referred to the author by several of his graduate school classmates. After being briefed on the study's purpose and objectives, they all agreed to the interview. The identities of the participants were kept confidential and pseudonyms were used to identify each participant rather than a real name. All conversations with the participants were recorded and notes were taken by the interviewer. The data were analyzed using the recursive textual analysis aided by the framework of Lichtman. The three Cs of analysis (Lichtman, 2013) are codes, categories and concepts in order to translate the raw data to meaningful concepts.

Findings were conveyed to selected participants for validation. They have consequently concurred with the results of the study.

3. Results

The goal of the paper is to explore the lived experiences in conflict management of public school administrators. To facilitate the discussion, this section has been divided into the sources of conflict, the classifications of conflict, suggested approaches for managing conflict, and the implementation of conflict resolution strategies.

Sources of conflict

Understanding the conflict management phenomena necessitates a look at how the participants as school administrators dealt with and resolved problems in their different schools. A common thing throughout the narratives of the participants demonstrates that the first stage in resolving conflict is to identify the source of the problem. By determining the root of conflict, they will be able to choose the best approach to take in a given situation.

Work-related conflict. Workplace conflict is a common occurrence in school, and it usually involves disagreements about work issues and objectives. The participants unanimously agreed that this form of issue is the easiest to resolve. They expressed the following:

“Although conflict is not so prevalent in this school, I can say that if it is a work-related conflict, ma-solve gid dayon. However, if it is a personal conflict, budlay gid e-solve.” (Although conflict is not very common at this institution, I can state that work-related conflict is much easier to resolve than personal conflict.)

“I do not usually meddle on their personal conflicts/issues. Mas budlay e-settle basta personal issues na. Kung work-related hapos lang. Amo na nga dapat you should first identify kung ang issue is work-related or personal para ma-apply mo kung ano nga approach ang himuon given the particular situation. Normal gid ang conflict sa school. Dapat maging strong ka gid.” (Personal issues are more difficult to resolve than work-related disputes. As a result, it is critical to first determine if the disagreement is work-related or not so that you can take the appropriate action in a given situation. In school, conflict is unavoidable. You must be courageous.)

“There is no denying that everyday conflicts arise. It is on a day to day basis. Some conflicts are managed by the individuals and parties, others are too complicated that it reaches the school head’s table. Conflicts among professionals related to school works and responsibilities are easily dealt with, resolved and at times held in the strongest essence of compromise. But I really find it very challenging whenever conflict involves personal issues or controversies.”

Relationship conflict. This type of conflict is over personal issues and not work-related. It develops over differences and disagreements between individuals or groups. As two of the participants put it:



“Halimbawa, ang problema sa pamilya/balay, indi pagdal-on sa obra. Do not bring your personal problems into our school kay maapektuhan ang mga students, as well as your responsibilities as teachers. There are times nga in dealing with conflicts as an administrator, ma-at stake man ang imo position especially if may ara mga hard headed.” (Family problems, for example, should not be brought to school because they would negatively affect the students as well as the teachers' work performance. When dealing with problems as an administrator, your position might sometimes be jeopardized, especially when there are hard-headed people involved.)

“If it involves personal issue/s, as an administrator, do not intrude in the personal problems of teachers. Advise them to act professionally and avoid bringing their problems to the school. Na-experienced ko na nga ang duha ka teachers nagdumugay. Ti that time ara ko sa isa ka school ky naga-observed ako didto sg demo. Baw gintawgan ako nga magkadto danay sa akon school kag e-settle sila nga duha. Ang halinan tsismis tsismis bala nga wala man lang sang pulos. Ti kundi kahuluya. Imbis tani mangin role model kita sa aton mga students kg colleagues. Ti gin-istorya ko gd sila. Mayo kay na-settled sila dayon.” (In my previous encounter, two teachers had gotten into a fight. I was at the other school at that time for demo-observation. I was taken aback when I received a call telling me that I needed to return to my office to solve a dispute between two teachers. The root of the problem was nonsense gossip. They are supposed to serve as role models who motivate our students and coworkers. As a result, I spoke with both of them, and thankfully, they chose to resolve their disagreement.)

Classifications of conflict

Because it brings together people from many social groups, each with their own personalities and values, the school becomes a locus for dispute. School conflicts can be classified based on the causes and parties involved. Two classifications are presented in this paper, namely:

Conflicts between teachers. Faction, envy/jealousy, personal grudges, and pride all emerged among the participants, resulting in an uncomfortable school climate. The following responses from participants reflected these realizations:

“I can say that the most common conflict in my school has something to do with faction or grupo grupo among teachers. Ang conflict sometimes naga-arise man sa jealousy among teachers. May mga naga-insinuate pa mo, dabukanay kis-a. Ina tani nga problem could be resolved at the school level. Indi na kinanglan dal-on pa sa division level, kag kung nagkasuhanay na, wala na ko da labot kay may legal na ina nga aspeto.” (Sometimes, conflicts arise due to jealousy among teachers. The problem is that there are those who insinuate it. Supposed to be the problem could be easily resolved at the school level, and there is no need to bring the matter to the attention of the Division office. Once it reaches in court, it is already beyond my power since it involves legal aspects.)

“Conflict in my workplace always occur when there is a new school head; when there are promotions, and when someone in their group is assigned as the head or the one to lead. Also, I have experienced the conflict between the master teachers of the school. So far, with my six years of experience as an administrator, I can say that envy or jealousy is the main cause of conflicts here. I think their problem is sometimes they don't keep their personal grudges



on themselves. Instead, they shared it with their friends, who are also their co-teachers, and they form faction."

"Ang hisa kis-a among teachers indi gid malikawan. Ang iban kataas sang pride and they failed to recognize their mistakes." (We cannot always prevent jealousy among teachers. Others have an inordinate sense of pride and have failed to recognize their mistakes.)

Conflicts between teachers and administrators. The interviews showed that the causes of conflicts between teachers and administrators would usually involve the performance of their duties and responsibilities. As two of them expressed the following:

"So far, the common conflicts in our school would involve the absences of teachers; the exercise of their duties and responsibilities like failure to accomplish reports and the like; head teachers encroaching the works of the principal..."

"Personally, I've had conflicts with my subordinates, particularly my head teachers. I advised them to be familiar with their functions as well as their limitations. They should always refer to the Civil Service 212, our position description form. Our roles and responsibilities are well defined there. This is significant because they occasionally encroach on the principal's authority, which I don't like."

Suggested approaches for managing conflict

There are a variety of approaches of resolving problems in school. The participants in this study discussed some of their useful approaches for confronting and resolving conflicts. They made the following suggestions:

Actively listen to both parties and allow them to admit their faults. Active listening is necessary to better appreciate each other's perspectives, feelings and viewpoints which can lead to some unexpected realizations. According to the participants:

"In my 16 years of service as a school administrator, dealing and managing conflict depends whether it sprang from personal or professional level. If it involves work-related conflict, you need to invite the parties involved and ask them what the conflict is all about. Listen to both sides of the story to understand their perspectives, feelings and viewpoints. Do not prejudge them. Finally, let them realize whether what they are doing is right or wrong. Allow them to identify their mistakes."

"Listening to both sides of the story between the parties involved is very important. In this way, the tendency of being bias will be avoided. *That's why when we settle the conflict, sila pahambala sa natabo kg ibalik sa ila ang ila ginhimo. Ask them if they are put into the other person's shoes, ano man ayhan iya mabatyagan?* Do not allow them to deviate to the main issue." (When we resolve the issue, we should let them tell the truth about what happened and allow them to admit their mistakes. Ask them if they would feel the same way if they were in the other person's shoes.)

"For example, whenever one of my teachers fails to complete their assignments, is frequently absent, or fails to submit their reports, I must address the situation

by writing a memorandum. Make a written invitation to the concerned teacher or teachers to come to my office. I pay attention. Then, I ask them whether what they did was correct in their opinion. I give them the opportunity to explain themselves. Allow them to reflect on their mistakes as a type of introspection.”

Use neutral words and have a calm demeanor when speaking. When resolving a problem, it is also important to remember to communicate in a calm and courteous manner. Choose your words wisely, and do not underestimate the power of your body language. These were shared by two participants:

“In other words, handle conflict in a precise and systematic manner. It is critical to choose your words carefully and to speak in a calm and courteous way. Keep an eye on your body language. People have the ability to change depending on the way we approach them.”

“Always remember to maintain your composure when dealing with disagreements. Take caution with your remarks. Select language that is appropriate. Otherwise, instead of resolving the conflict, it may aggravate it.”

Gather necessary information to analyze the conflict. This will help clarify the problem. As one of the participants explained,

“Based on my 12 years of administrative experience, I believe that in order to effectively manage conflict, you must first obtain relevant information about the root of the problem, identify the person or parties involved, and attempt to analyze the conflict in order to resolve it. As a school administrator, I must be able to function as a mediator in order to resolve any cause of conflict.”

Do not force a decision. Because this is their problem to address, allow the persons concerned to come up with a solution. As one of them put it,

“They must provide the solutions. Allow them to come up with their own solutions. Do not force a decision. Encourage them to keep an open mind, accept and acknowledge any mistakes they may have made, and remember that no one is perfect. Get up and fix yourself. Keep your personal principles and beliefs out of the situation.”

Litigation is not always the most effective solution. There are other methods for resolving disputes, and going to court is not always the best option. One participant stressed the following:

“It is crucial to remember that litigation is not always the greatest option because it is expensive, time-consuming, has a detrimental effect on your job, and leaves you feeling regretful. This is why the School Grievance Committee exists. Its goal is to resolve issues without resorting to litigation in court. Conflicts are unavoidable. Deal with them. It is, in fact, an indicator of a healthy environment.”

Implementation of conflict resolution strategies

Because various people approach conflict in different ways, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to conflict. As a result, the best conflict resolution will vary depending on the circumstances and persons involved. As the participants put it:



“Ang management style ko is contingency approach. Dependi na sir sa following factors: nature sang concern sang work, extent or gravity sang impact, urgency, kag importance. Kay may ara kita ginatawag nga compromise, competition, collaboration kag accommodation. May mga advantages na sila. Pero it is a no-no gid ang avoidance. Siguro kung mga deeply-rooted sa personal, basi pa lang pwede ang avoidance. Ang ginpang-mention ko effective na sila if used appropriately. Example, sa mga sophisticated job kag may expert sina like bookkeeping or accounting, ang ginagamit ko dira is compromise kag combination sang democratic kay mas nakabalo na ang staff ko sang sa akon kay skill nila na. Pero may element of control para wala sang abuse of authority on their part. Ang school dapat may ara gid Conflict Management Committee kay sila na ang in-charge for resolution. Wala na abi sa school ang Conflict Management Committee as ancillary services. Ang school lang na ma-create even without memorandum from higher office.” (My managerial style was based on contingency planning. The nature of the work, the scope or gravity of the impact, the urgency, and the importance all influence this style, sir. We also have compromise, competition, collaboration, and accommodation; each has its own set of benefits. However, I believed avoidance to be a no-no when it came to dealing with conflict. Unless it is deeply rooted on a personal level, avoidance may be an option. All of the things I have stated are beneficial only when they are applied correctly. In a complex job like bookkeeping or accounting, for example, I employed compromise and a democratic approach because my team knows better because it is their field of business. However, in order to prevent misuse of authority, there must be some level of control. The school should form a Conflict Management Committee to oversee the resolution process. Despite the fact that it is not listed as an ancillary service, the school can create it without a memorandum from a higher authority.)

“In a way, I am with the underlying belief that man is dynamic. Each person is dynamic and the beauty of the dynamism of people is when they get to blend well with one another. I have always believed that the dynamism of people enable them to understand and resolve conflicts in the end. Hence, for me there is no best or single method of dealing with conflict.”

Likewise, the study found that the participants mostly make use of two conflict resolution strategies in resolving conflicts, namely:

Collaboration. The participants believed that this was the most effective, but also the most difficult method of dealing with conflicts. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved. It seeks to find a solution that satisfies all parties concerned:

“Collaboration, in my opinion, is the most effective approach to conflict resolution. It is the school principal's way of neutralizing or finding a win-win solution based on two opposing parties. Although a win-win solution is the most difficult to achieve, it yields the best long-term results.”

“Based on my experience, collaboration or a win-win solution is the most effective mode of conflict resolution. It seeks a solution that truly satisfies everyone involved. Keep in mind that dealing with conflict necessitates the use of both technical and conceptual skills.”

Compromise. Participants agreed that sometimes compromise is the best way to resolve a conflict. Through negotiation, everyone involved gains and loses. When dealing with conflict in this manner, it encourages each side to make some significant sacrifices:

“Depending on the gravity of the issue/s, sometimes the best solution is a compromise between the parties. In this manner, one must make a sacrifice so that neither party receives exactly what they desire.”

“It is a relief for both individuals/parties to have resolved conflicts or even reached a compromise and better understand each other.”

4. Discussion

The results of the study revealed a number of significant insights into how public school administrators handled conflicts. The findings suggest that the ability to manage conflict in the school is an important factor in developing creative solutions to various problems. Conflict, according to Deutsch and Coleman (2000), is neither good nor bad. However, whether conflict is constructive or destructive is determined by how it is handled. According to the participants' experiences, one key conflict resolution skill is working to resolve conflicts before they worsen by simply identifying the source of conflict. The goal is to keep everyone focused on resolving work-related issues rather than being distracted by personal issues.

The salience of this study is enhanced by categorizing the conflict into its causes and those who are particularly involved. According to the participants, common problems among teachers include faction, envy/jealousy, personal grudges, and pride. As claimed by Beggy (2003), it is expected of the principal to use his personal characteristics to offer plausible solutions to grievances that arise as a result of conflict among school teachers so that the school's goals and objectives are not jeopardized. Conflicts between teachers and administrators, on the other hand, have been identified by participants as typically involving the performance of duties. Likewise, conflicts between principals and teachers, as maintained by Ezegebe (1997), can lead to administrative inefficiency, fighting, a breakdown in the teaching and learning process, indiscipline among staff and students, and a general failure in the delivery of education. Conflicts often tend to cast doubt on principal's managerial abilities, and weakening the hierarchy of authority in the affected schools.

The participants highlighted some notable approaches for managing conflict such as the following: actively listen to both parties and allow them to admit their faults; use neutral words and have a calm demeanor when speaking; gather necessary information to analyze the conflict; do not force a decision; and litigation is not always the most effective solution. These were found to be successful in most cases in conflict resolution as observed by the participants. Active listening ensures that the parties' feelings, thoughts, and points of view are both heard and considered. Allowing them to recognize their own faults, on the other hand, may promote a learning or reflective process from the experience. As a result, a practical and inventive solution is feasible. The use of words, body language, tone of voice, and remaining calm in the face of adversity are all crucial. They may have a big impact on the settlement process. Aside from in-person contact, the ability to analyze relevant details about the problem is needed to make an informed decision. In order to facilitate the conflict, one participant suggests that the school may organize the Grievance Committee who will be responsible of amicably settling the dispute and avoid the hassle of court litigation.

Nonetheless, when it comes to the execution of dispute resolution mechanisms, there are no hard and fast rules. The participants all agreed that it is generally dependent on the situation and parties concerned. Competing, avoiding, collaborating, compromising, and accommodating

are all common conflict resolution strategies. It appears from this study that the participants are more likely to resolve conflicts through collaboration and compromise. Collaboration, according to Ghaffar (2009), can be a particularly effective strategy for resolving and/or controlling disputes and loosening the grip of dissension when conflict includes stakeholders with disparate power and resources. Although compromising style is a middle ground approach to dispute resolution, it is successful when all sides agree to sacrifice certain concerns in order to reach an agreement.

School conflict is a common and unavoidable occurrence based on the participants' narratives. It can develop an individual, increase work efficiency, and foster good working relationships if handled effectively. After all, it is unrealistic to expect two people to agree on nearly all of the time. The goal is to learn how to resolve conflict in a constructive manner. Learning from the experiences of all participants, court litigation should be avoided as much as possible because it causes ill will and necessitates a significant amount of time, effort, and money. To be effective in dealing with conflict, we must first understand its nature. The reports revealed that if we can identify and consider the origins of conflict early on, we can build a strong lens to direct us through the conflict process.

5. Conclusion

In exploring the phenomenon, it came to light that each person is dynamic, and that this dynamism allows people to understand and resolve disputes in the end. Conflict emerges from differences in people's perspectives, attitudes, and feelings, and it often brings beauty and power to the organization. This necessitates a contingency approach, in which the dispute situation is first assessed, and then a solution is chosen that matches the party's goals. Our attitude and approach to coping with conflict is heavily influenced by how we view it.

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