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Navigating Conflicts in the New Normal: Learnings and Insights of Primary School Heads in Davao de Oro, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Conflict management has been a critical responsibility of school heads especially in the new normal, where educational institutions faced unprecedented challenges. This study explored the learnings and insights of primary school heads in Davao de Oro regarding conflict management in the evolving educational landscape. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected school heads to examine their experiences, strategies, and challenges in handling conflicts. The findings revealed four key themes: fostering transparent and collaborative communication, cultivating a culture of passion, resilience, and mutual appreciation, nurturing spiritual, mental, and collaborative resilience, and institutionalizing structured conflict management for accountability and fair resolution. While participants affirmed the importance of open dialogue and emotional intelligence in resolving disputes, they also encountered resistance to change and emotional strain in conflict situations. The synthesis of findings highlighted the need for structured policies, continuous leadership training, and institutional support to enhance conflict management practices in schools. Practical implications emphasized the integration of conflict resolution frameworks into professional development programs, while policy recommendations called for the formalization of structured conflict management mechanisms at the institutional level. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these strategies on school governance and leadership effectiveness, particularly in crisis and post-crisis settings.

INTRODUCTION

The evolving landscape of education in the new normal has presented school leaders with unprecedented challenges, particularly in conflict management. Primary school heads in Davao de Oro must address disputes arising from remote learning adjustments, teacher workload concerns, and shifting parental expectations (Sergiovanni, 2018). Effective conflict management is crucial in maintaining a stable school environment, as unresolved conflicts can hinder both teaching efficiency and student learning outcomes (Bush & Glover, 2019). Given the rapid educational transitions, school heads must adopt innovative strategies to mediate disputes and foster collaboration (Fullan, 2020).

Conflict management in educational institutions involves addressing disagreements between teachers, parents, and students while upholding institutional goals (Rahim, 2011). The pandemic has intensified these conflicts, necessitating a shift from traditional resolution methods to more flexible, adaptive strategies (García-Morales *et al.*, 2021). School leaders must employ negotiation, active listening, and stakeholder engagement to ensure effective conflict resolution (Thomas & Kilmann, 2008). Understanding the insights and experiences of school heads in conflict management is crucial for developing leadership frameworks that are responsive to post-pandemic realities (Bush, 2021).

Despite existing studies on school leadership, there remains a gap in understanding how primary school

heads navigate conflicts in the new normal (Hallinger & Hammad, 2022). Previous research has explored general leadership challenges, but there is limited empirical data on conflict management strategies in post-pandemic education (Adusei *et al.*, 2023). Examining the learnings of school heads in Davao de Oro will provide context-specific insights into the evolving demands of educational leadership (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). Addressing this research gap is essential for informing policy recommendations and professional development programs for school leaders (Day & Sammons, 2016). This study has explored the conflict management experiences of primary school heads in Davao de Oro, focusing on their strategies, challenges, and insights. By examining their approaches, the research revealed the best practices and areas for improvement in school leadership during the new normal (Bush & Glover, 2019). The findings contributed to a broader understanding of how educational leaders can effectively manage conflicts in dynamic and uncertain environments (Fullan, 2020). Ultimately, this study offered valuable implications for strengthening leadership capacities in primary education (Hallinger, 2021).

Problem Statement

The shift to the new normal has brought unprecedented challenges in conflict management among primary school heads in Davao de Oro. With the integration of remote learning, evolving policies, and heightened stakeholder

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expectations, school heads must navigate conflicts among teachers, parents, and students while ensuring a conducive learning environment. However, there is limited research on how they adapt their conflict management strategies to these emerging challenges. Understanding their learnings and insights can provide valuable perspectives on effective leadership in post-pandemic education.

Research Question

How do primary school heads in Davao de Oro navigate and manage conflicts in the new normal educational landscape?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted educational systems worldwide, compelling primary school leaders to adapt swiftly to unprecedented challenges. In the Philippines, prolonged school closures have necessitated a rapid transition to remote learning modalities, presenting unique obstacles for school heads in managing conflicts among stakeholders (Gocen, 2021). The sudden shift to online education has exacerbated existing inequalities, as not all students have equal access to necessary resources, leading to heightened tensions between parents, teachers, and administrators (Motala & Menon, 2020). These disparities underscore the critical need for effective conflict management strategies in the new normal.

School administrators have reported challenges such as lack of preparedness for new teaching modalities, difficulties in securing parental cooperation, and barriers in communication and monitoring (Gocen, 2021). These issues have intensified conflicts within the school community, requiring leaders to employ adaptive strategies to maintain educational continuity. The uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of modular distance learning further complicates these dynamics, as stakeholders express varying levels of confidence in these approaches (Gocen, 2021). Consequently, school heads must navigate these complexities while fostering a collaborative environment.

Effective conflict management in this context involves the adoption of adaptive leadership practices. Research indicates that school leaders who demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness are better equipped to handle the evolving challenges posed by the pandemic (Gocen, 2021). By cultivating practices in crisis management and promoting inclusivity, leaders can address conflicts more effectively. This approach not only mitigates disputes but also enhances the overall resilience of the educational institution.

The role of communication in conflict resolution cannot be overstated. Clear and consistent communication strategies are essential in managing expectations and reducing misunderstandings among stakeholders (Gocen, 2021). School leaders must ensure that behavior and safety guidelines are effectively communicated to students and staff, as well as teach conflict resolution and behavior

management strategies (Gocen, 2021). This proactive approach helps in preempting potential conflicts and fosters a culture of transparency and trust.

Restorative practices have emerged as a valuable tool in conflict resolution within schools. Implementing strategies such as conflict resolution circles and restorative conversations can promote understanding and accountability among students (González, 2015). These practices not only address immediate conflicts but also contribute to the development of a supportive and inclusive school culture. By focusing on relationship-building, restorative approaches can reduce behavioral issues and improve the overall school climate.

In summary, the pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of effective conflict management in primary education. School leaders must employ adaptive leadership, clear communication, and restorative practices to navigate the complex challenges of the new normal. By doing so, they can foster a collaborative and resilient educational environment that supports the well-being and success of all stakeholders.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences, insights, and strategies of primary school heads in managing conflicts in the new normal. Phenomenology was appropriate as it allowed an in-depth understanding of how school heads perceived and navigated conflict resolution within their professional context (Moustakas, 1994). Through this approach, the study uncovered the essence of their experiences and the meaning they ascribed to conflict management in an evolving educational landscape. Given the complexities of leadership in primary schools, this methodology ensured that participants' perspectives were captured holistically and meaningfully.

The participants of the study were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that only primary school heads in Davao de Oro with substantial experience in managing conflicts during the new normal were included. A minimum of 10 school heads were invited to participate in in-depth interviews (IDIs) to gather rich qualitative data. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least three years of leadership experience and direct involvement in conflict resolution within their respective schools. To maintain ethical considerations, informed consent was secured before data collection, ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality throughout the research process.

Data collection was conducted primarily through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to openly share their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into emerging themes. Each interview was conducted either face-to-face or virtually, depending on participant availability and convenience. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and member-checked to enhance credibility and accuracy (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Additionally, document analysis of relevant school policies, memos, and reports related to conflict management supplemented the interview data to provide contextual validation.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, ensuring systematic identification of key themes. The transcribed data underwent coding, categorization, and theme development to highlight significant patterns in conflict management strategies used by school heads. To enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing and triangulation were conducted by comparing interview data with policy documents and existing literature. Finally, findings were interpreted in alignment with leadership and conflict management theories to contribute to the broader discourse on school leadership in post-pandemic education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Fostering Transparent and Collaborative Communication for Effective Conflict Management

The findings revealed that primary school heads emphasized open and transparent communication as a fundamental strategy in managing conflicts within their schools. Many participants highlighted that fostering an environment where teachers, parents, and students feel heard significantly reduced misunderstandings and tensions. According to Rahim (2017), collaborative communication enables leaders to resolve disputes amicably by ensuring all parties involved have a clear understanding of the issues at hand. Furthermore, school heads noted that regular faculty meetings, open-door policies, and proactive listening created a culture of trust and cooperation, leading to improved workplace relationships and conflict resolution.

Contrary to the prevailing view that transparency strengthens conflict management, some participants expressed concerns about its potential drawbacks. For instance, excessive openness in discussing conflicts sometimes led to misinterpretations and heightened tensions among stakeholders. Research by De Dreu and Van Vianen (2019) suggests that while collaboration is valuable, over-disclosure can escalate conflicts, especially in emotionally charged situations. Additionally, some school heads noted that cultural sensitivities and hierarchical structures in educational institutions made open discussions difficult, as not all teachers and staff felt comfortable voicing their concerns.

Despite the challenges, the findings affirm that structured and context-sensitive transparency is crucial for effective conflict resolution. While transparency should be encouraged, it must be implemented with empathy and discretion to avoid unnecessary escalations (Putnam & Mumby, 2020). School heads must balance openness with professionalism, ensuring that conflict discussions remain solution-focused rather than emotionally driven. A structured conflict communication protocol, such as mediated dialogue sessions and confidential reporting

mechanisms, can help mitigate risks while maintaining a culture of collaboration and trust in schools.

Theme 2: Cultivating a Culture of Passion, Resilience, and Mutual Appreciation

The study found that passion for teaching, resilience, and mutual appreciation among school personnel played a vital role in conflict management. Many participants emphasized that school heads who demonstrated enthusiasm and commitment to their leadership roles inspired teachers and staff to navigate challenges more effectively. Research by Leithwood *et al.* (2020) supports this, suggesting that emotionally intelligent leadership fosters workplace resilience and a supportive school environment. Furthermore, acknowledging teachers' contributions through appreciation and recognition strengthened relationships and minimized conflicts arising from dissatisfaction and burnout.

However, some school heads expressed concerns about the demanding nature of maintaining resilience and appreciation, particularly in high-stress environments. They noted that in some cases, teachers expected constant affirmation, and when unmet, it led to resentment rather than motivation. According to Spreitzer and Cameron (2019), while positive organizational behavior enhances workplace morale, over-reliance on recognition can create unrealistic expectations, making conflict resolution more challenging when appreciation is perceived as insufficient. Additionally, external pressures such as curriculum changes and administrative demands sometimes made it difficult for school heads to consistently cultivate passion and resilience among their staff.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of sustainable and balanced strategies for fostering passion, resilience, and mutual appreciation. Leaders should establish professional support systems that go beyond verbal recognition, such as mentorship programs, well-being initiatives, and professional development opportunities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2021). This approach not only sustains resilience but also ensures that appreciation becomes an embedded practice rather than a short-term morale booster. By integrating these elements into school culture, school heads can promote long-term cohesion and constructive conflict resolution.

Theme 3: Nurturing Spiritual, Mental, and Collaborative Resilience

The findings highlighted that many primary school heads relied on spiritual and mental resilience to effectively manage conflicts in the new normal. Several participants shared that faith-based leadership principles provided them with the strength and patience necessary to navigate challenging situations. Research by Lemoine *et al.* (2021) indicates that leaders who integrate mindfulness and spiritual grounding tend to exhibit greater emotional stability and decision-making clarity. Furthermore, fostering collaborative resilience—where school leaders, teachers, and staff support each other emotionally—was

found to be a key factor in maintaining a harmonious and conflict-free work environment.

Despite these benefits, some participants acknowledged that spiritual and mental resilience alone were insufficient in addressing complex conflicts. While personal beliefs and emotional stability were crucial, they sometimes led to passivity rather than proactive conflict resolution. According to Goleman (2020), an over-reliance on emotional resilience without structured conflict management strategies can result in avoidance rather than resolution. Additionally, some school heads noted that differing religious and personal values among staff sometimes led to clashes rather than unity, highlighting the need for inclusive and secular conflict management approaches.

A balanced approach to nurturing resilience is therefore necessary, combining mental and spiritual well-being with collaborative leadership strategies. School heads should integrate stress-management training, peer support groups, and inclusive conflict resolution workshops to build a holistic resilience framework (Brown & Brooks, 2019). By blending spiritual and psychological well-being with concrete conflict resolution mechanisms, school leaders can create a supportive yet structured environment that enhances both individual and collective resilience in managing conflicts.

Theme 4: Institutionalizing Structured Conflict Management for Accountability and Fair Resolution

The results indicated that structured conflict management protocols helped primary school heads ensure fair and consistent resolution of conflicts. Several participants emphasized the importance of clear policies, mediation committees, and accountability measures in preventing conflicts from escalating. Research by Lipsky *et al.* (2020) highlights that institutions with well-defined conflict resolution frameworks experience fewer workplace disputes and higher staff satisfaction. School heads who implemented formal grievance procedures and structured mediation strategies found that conflicts were resolved more efficiently and equitably, reducing tensions and fostering a positive school climate.

However, some participants noted that strict conflict resolution policies sometimes created rigidity rather than adaptability. In some cases, predefined conflict management protocols did not account for context-specific nuances, leading to dissatisfaction among stakeholders. Research by Ury (2019) suggests that while structure is necessary, excessive bureaucracy in conflict resolution can hinder flexibility and prevent school heads from addressing conflicts with situational awareness. Furthermore, institutionalized procedures can sometimes alienate staff, making them feel that their concerns are being handled mechanically rather than with empathy and understanding.

A balanced and adaptable approach to institutionalized conflict management is therefore necessary to ensure both fairness and flexibility. School heads should implement

structured conflict resolution policies that allow room for situational adjustments, ensuring that both procedural consistency and contextual sensitivity are maintained (Thomas & Kilmann, 2021). By incorporating alternative dispute resolution methods, restorative justice practices, and leadership training in conflict management, school heads can foster a culture of fairness, accountability, and adaptability. This ensures that conflicts are addressed in a manner that is both systematic and empathetic, leading to a more harmonious and well-managed school environment.

Implications of The Study

The study's findings offer practical guidance for primary school heads in Davao de Oro on managing conflicts effectively in the new normal. By adopting transparent communication, fostering resilience, and institutionalizing structured conflict resolution mechanisms, school leaders can create a more harmonious and collaborative work environment. These approaches can improve staff morale, enhance teamwork, and ultimately contribute to a more effective educational system. Additionally, equipping school heads with conflict management training and emotional intelligence development can help them navigate disputes constructively, ensuring that conflicts become opportunities for growth rather than sources of disruption.

The study underscores the need for educational policymakers to integrate conflict management frameworks into the professional development programs of school leaders. The Department of Education (DepEd) and local education agencies should establish policies that mandate structured conflict resolution mechanisms, ensuring fairness, transparency, and accountability in handling disputes within schools. Furthermore, incorporating mental health and resilience-building programs for school heads can be institutionalized to help them manage stress and lead with confidence. By embedding these policies into national and regional education governance, the sustainability of effective conflict management practices in schools can be ensured, ultimately leading to a more resilient and adaptive education system.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the essential role of primary school heads in navigating conflict management within the evolving educational landscape of the new normal. Through fostering transparent communication, cultivating resilience, and institutionalizing structured conflict resolution, school leaders can create a more harmonious and efficient work environment. While effective conflict management strengthens collaboration and professional relationships, challenges such as resistance to change and emotional strain remain significant barriers. However, by equipping school heads with the necessary skills and support systems, conflicts can be transformed into opportunities for growth, learning, and organizational improvement.

Beyond individual leadership strategies, this study underscores the need for systemic support through policy interventions and professional development programs tailored to conflict management. Schools must integrate structured conflict resolution mechanisms, resilience training, and emotional intelligence development into their leadership programs to empower school heads in addressing disputes constructively. The findings serve as a foundation for future research on leadership dynamics in education, particularly in the context of crisis and transformation. Ultimately, strengthening the conflict management capabilities of school heads contributes to a more resilient, adaptive, and thriving educational system.

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