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## Taming Emotions: Conflict Management of School Heads

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore and define the conflict management practices of school heads by identifying the underlying dimensions that characterize how they address and resolve conflicts within their school environments. A descriptive-qualitative approach was used and interviews were conducted to school heads from three congressional districts of North Cotabato, Philippines. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted. Results show themes on conflict management in schools such as: Understanding and Diagnosing the Conflict, Empathic Communication, Mediation, Professionalism and Respect, and Monitoring and Preventative Measures. These themes reflected actual experiences and principles practiced by school leaders in managing conflict, with a consistent emphasis on empathy, fairness, and structured engagement.

### Introduction

School heads play a crucial role in creating a conducive learning environment, yet they often face significant emotional and conflict-related challenges among personnel and even with stakeholders. The situation is inevitable. Effective emotional regulation in conflict management is essential for the school heads. However, the struggle to balance these demands, and when conflict remained unaddressed, the situation may lead to stress and decreased job performance.

Disagreements or differences of opinion between people are referred to as conflict, and they have the potential to be harmful to any organization. In the workplace, it usually entails a conflict between individual objectives, viewpoints, or plans and those of the team or group. It is the goal of conflict management to find a solution to these disputes that benefits the team as a whole or makes all parties happy (Ronquillo et al., 2023). Larasati and Raharja (2020) emphasized that the principal, as the highest authority in the school, must effectively manage conflicts to ensure positive outcomes and prevent negative consequences.

Bano et al. (2013) highlighted that school administrators can manage conflicts by adjusting structures or processes, while Kipruto and Kipkemboi (2013) emphasize the role of fostering personal responsibility among teachers to minimize conflicts. Effective dispute resolution strategies, such as negotiation, collective bargaining, and mediation, are also recognized as vital tools (Mapolisa & Tshabalala, 2013). Doe and Chinda (2015) argue that conflicts in schools often arise from interdependence and differing role expectations, with schools typically addressing these through strategies like integrating, dominating, or compromising. Furthermore, Ada (2013) suggested that increasing resources can serve as an essential intervention to manage and resolve conflicts effectively.

The literature review reveals a notable research gap regarding the absence of a conflict management model tailored to specific contexts. As noted by Larasati and Raharja (2020), the effectiveness of conflict management styles varies because the nature of conflicts differs across schools. This proposed study aimed to address this gap by focusing on rural schools with culturally diverse populations, contributing new insights into conflict management in such contexts. Rural schools often face unique challenges that may not be adequately addressed by existing conflict management models.

By understanding contextual factors influencing conflict, this study would equip school leaders with the tools to address conflicts more effectively, improve teacher-student relationships, and foster a collaborative and harmonious school environment. The findings could also guide school heads in implementing policies and practices that promote long-term conflict resolution, enhance teacher satisfaction, and improve overall school performance.

### Research Question

What are the themes that emerged from the interviews on conflict management of school heads?

## Research Design

The research design employed in the study was a descriptive qualitative approach with the goal to gather in-depth information, providing the foundational knowledge necessary for finding out themes that would capture the conflict management of school heads. Qualitative research is particularly useful when exploring new or poorly understood phenomena, allowing for flexibility and a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The use of descriptive qualitative design was appropriate in this phase. Qualitative research allows for the identification of key themes, patterns, and variables that might not be immediately evident through quantitative methods.

The study was conducted across different schools in the Division of Cotabato in Region XII. Each school presents a unique context, offering a valuable opportunity to examine the factors influencing conflict management practices among school heads selected through purposive sampling. Participants were provided with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, their role, and how their data will be used. Interviews were scheduled based on the availability of the school heads. The interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable setting to foster open communication. Thematic analysis (Clark & Braun, 2006) was used to analyze the qualitative data collected from interviews with school heads and. Thematic analysis is an appropriate method for examining patterns and themes within qualitative data, particularly when exploring perceptions, experiences, and attitudes related to conflict management. This approach allowed the researcher to identify recurring ideas or concepts in the responses, enabling a deeper understanding of how participants view conflict resolution and management.

## Results and Discussion

From the responses of 15 school heads who voluntarily participated in the study, the thematic analysis to the data revealed the themes in conflict management such as understanding and diagnosing the conflict; emphatic communication; mediation; professionalism, and respect; monitoring, and preventative measures.

**Understanding and Diagnosing the Conflict.** This theme is about the initial steps in conflict resolution, where the goal is to recognize, understand, and evaluate the nature of the conflict. It focuses on identifying the signs of conflict and thoroughly assessing its context and causes before taking action.

For the school heads, conflict identification and understanding is fundamental to resolving conflicts effectively. They shared that their initial steps of recognizing and analyzing the conflict is by gathering information from all parties involved. As narrated by one of the participants:

*Dili dayon ko mo-comment about sa nahitabo nga conflict. Gusto nako nga magkuha ko ug impormasyon gikan sa tanan aron klaro ang mga hinungdan sa problema." (I give comment right away. I want to gather information from everyone so that the causes of the problem are clear.) SH2*

*When I notice tension between the teachers during meetings, I prepare interventions. I need to talk to them right away. Kay lisod sad ug magdako. (It is difficult when it escalates.) SH6*

Similarly, other participants pointed out that understanding the perspectives of each party, and exploring the root causes of the issue are significant steps in conflict resolutions in their schools.

*Kailangan ko munang pakinggan ang bawat isa, para malaman ko kung ano talaga ang sanhi ng kanilang conflict. Minsan, hindi lang isang bagay ang sanhi, maraming factors. (I need to listen to each side first so I can understand the real cause of their anger. Sometimes, it's not just one thing causing it, there are many factors.) SH1*

Moreover, another school head also verbalized that by carefully identifying the nature of the conflict, school heads can approach the resolution process with a clear understanding of what is at stake, the concerns of the involved individuals, and the best way to address the situation.

*Laging kinakailangan na malinaw kung anong klaseng conflict ang kinakaharap natin, kung ito ba'y personal, professional, o may kinalaman sa sistema. Yan ang gabay ko sa pag-resolve ng conflicts. (It is always necessary to clearly understand what kind of conflict we are facing, whether it's personal, professional, or related to the system. This is my guide in resolving it.) SH5*

The school heads shared they are assessing the significance of the conflict and determining the appropriate level of intervention needed. They emphasize that there is a need to ensure that as school heads, they can prioritize their time and resources effectively, addressing the most pressing issues while allowing smaller conflicts to resolve on their own.

As a school head,

I make sure to prioritize conflicts that truly affect the school's operations or the students' well-being. If I notice a minor issue between staff members that's not affecting the classroom environment or student performance, I let them handle it on their own. This way, I can focus my time and energy on more pressing matters that require my immediate attention. SH7

For the participants, there is also a need to evaluate conflicts properly as it helps prevent unnecessary escalation and ensures that interventions are tailored to the situation at hand.

*Naa gani parents niadto sa school kay sa grades lagi saiyang anak. Bisag busy ko, akoo jud giistorya about saiyang plano, about saiyang complain as I need to get more information about it... unya giingnan jud naku nga dili lang magyawayaw jud or unsa pay istorya about sa school. (There was a parent who came to the school because of their child's grades. Even though I was busy, I made sure to talk to them about their plans, their complaints, and I told them not to just complain or talk negatively about the school.) SH4*

Based on the results, school heads emphasize the importance of gathering information from all parties involved, recognizing early signs of conflict, and understanding the root causes before taking action. They also highlighted the need to prioritize conflicts based on their impact, ensuring that significant issues are addressed while allowing smaller conflicts to resolve naturally.

**Emphatic Communication.** Emphatic Communication is a key approach used by the participants in resolving conflicts. They emphasized the importance of active listening and understanding, and ensuring that everyone feels heard and respected.

The participants emphasized the importance of creating a space where conflicting parties feel safe to express their views and concerns. One of the initial steps in this process is to set up private meetings for conflicting parties, ensuring that both sides have the opportunity to speak.

There should be a room for the meeting with both parties. So they can freely express their concerns. SH2

Similarly, another participant stressed the importance of ensuring that both parties feel heard and respected.

*Need mo talaga pakinggan muna ang both parties before yan sila magharap. Istoryahon ko gid na sila isa-isa eh...separately. (I need to talk to them separately.) SH13*

By actively listening and showing that their perspectives matter, I believe I can build trust. SH15

As one participant noted, showing empathy by acknowledging different perspectives is essential in understanding the emotions and viewpoints of all involved. Before jumping to conclusions or suggesting solutions, the participants pointed out the need to ask clarifying questions.

By asking questions to both parties, I can ensure that I fully understand the nature of the conflict and the concerns of both parties. SH9

It can be inferred from the responses that by taking the time to hear both sides, clarify concerns, and reframe the discussion, school heads can address conflicts in a way that is thoughtful, fair, and beneficial to the whole school community.

Encouraging Positivity based on what have been shared by the school heads, is essential for creating a productive and supportive environment during conflict resolution. The participants emphasized the importance of recognizing emotions as important in ensuring that all parties feel understood. As noted by the school heads:

By acknowledging emotions such as frustration, anger, or concern, school heads can create an environment where individuals feel safe to express themselves without fear of judged. *Mao na magsiling ko...sige Nanay, ok lang...isiling lang tanan...willing ko mamati. Wala ko na ginabara... SH8*

The participants pointed out that showing empathy and acknowledging emotions plays a significant role in calming the situation. As one participant stated:

When we recognize and validate their feelings, it shows them that we care about their concerns. SH9

Encouraging a calm and solution-focused discussion is vital. The participants shared that maintaining focus on resolving the issue rather than getting caught up in past grievances helps the parties involved remain calm and objective. Based on the results, the task of the school head in conflict resolution involves encouraging positive behaviors so conflicts can be resolved respectfully and collaboratively.

**Mediation.** Another theme generated from the responses of the school heads is their mediation to the conflicting parties. The participants highlighted the importance of a structured, neutral space for discussion through mediation. These methods help create lasting, mutually beneficial outcomes and foster a cooperative school environment where conflicts are seen as opportunities for growth and improvement. Facilitating Solutions involves guiding conflicting parties for a collaborative problem-solving. This approach ensures that the conflict is resolved in a way that addresses the concerns of all parties, leading to a positive outcome without imposing one-sided solutions. A key step in facilitating solutions is allowing both parties to actively participate in the problem-solving process.

By encouraging them to suggest potential solutions, I believe I can empower the parties involved, so they can also share what to do with the conflict they have. SH8

Moreover, one school head shared that a win-win approach ensures that the resolution is beneficial for everyone and helps maintain positive relationships between the parties involved.

I always aim for a win-win outcome. It's not about one person winning over the other; it's about finding a solution where both sides feel satisfied and respected. SH11

When resolving a conflict, I guide them to look for solutions where both sides can benefit. SH13

Based on the result, it can be understood that, by encouraging both parties to suggest solutions, school heads help foster collaboration and ownership in the resolution. Through careful guidance, school heads ensure that the solution is mutually acceptable and that both sides feel respected. The focus on

win-win solutions and fair resolutions ensures that conflicts are resolved in a way that promotes cooperation and maintains positive relationships. The mediation process in conflict resolution focuses on guiding conflicting parties toward a mutually beneficial outcome through a structured, neutral discussion.

**Professionalism and Respect.** Professionalism and respect play a fundamental role in building and maintaining strong, positive relationships within the school environment. They focus on relationship building strengthens trust, collaboration, and harmony, which are key for long-term conflict resolution and maintaining a healthy school atmosphere. Relationship Building is a crucial aspect of conflict resolution, as emphasized by the participants in their role as school heads. As shared by the school heads, it is the importance of using respectful language and avoiding blame or accusations which really help preserve relationship, the goal of the school heads when dealing with conflicts.

*Wala gid ko iban ginaisip, kundi maging ok ang tanan. Kaya, siling ko, (I never think of anything else expect for the parties to be settled...)...mag talk kita pero no foul language ha...kay we need to respect each other. No name calling or whatever ah...just say something about the issue. SH15*

As rejoinder to this, one of the participants also said that:

... by focusing on the issue at hand rather than placing blame on individuals...this is a dialogue to earn understanding. SH10

Additionally, the participants highlighted the need to express personal stances while maintaining professionalism, ensuring transparency in their decision-making while being considerate of others' opinions. This approach allows them to convey their views clearly without disrespecting those involved.

We need to stay professional...this is my reminders to both parties. While of course we need nga iingon unsay gusto nato...unsay stand nato sa issue...pero still..irespecto nato ang usag-usag kay same ra man tag goal. SH6

Furthermore, they emphasized the significance of prioritizing relationships over personal interests, as decisions must be made for the collective good of the school community, fostering trust and cooperation.

When I experienced that personally, I was also involved in conflict, I always remind myself that the decisions I make should benefit the entire school community, not just reflect my personal views. When conflicts arise, I focus on what's best for the students and staff, not on what may be personally more convenient for me. By doing this, I build trust and show that I'm looking out for the greater good. SH11

Encouraging ongoing collaboration is another key strategy mentioned, as it helps build teamwork and collective problem-solving, strengthening the school's culture and relationships.

Collaboration is key to resolving conflicts and maintaining harmony. I make sure that even after a resolution, we continue working together and exchanging ideas. This ensures that everyone is on the same page.. SH5

When conflicts arise within the school environment—whether among teachers, parents, or students—the school head often finds themselves at the center of the situation. For them, commitment to upholding the principles of fairness and respect, regardless of the disagreement. As explained by one of the school heads:

The key element of fairness in resolving school conflicts is ensuring that no individual or group overpowers the dialogue or influences the outcome unfairly. School heads must be mindful of maintaining balance during mediation. SH10

School heads also ensure that:

I always remind myself that conflict resolution should result in a shared understanding among all parties involved. Mutual agreement and clarity are essential in reaching lasting and respectful resolutions. SH3

As emphasized by the school heads, procedures and protocols are vital for managing conflict in schools. Applying them fairly and consistently demonstrates institutional integrity and reinforces trust in school leadership.

Our school has systems in place for addressing grievances, and it is essential that these are implemented fairly. SH12

As indicated in the responses, fairness and respect must be the guiding principles in every aspect of conflict resolution within the school setting.

**Monitoring, and Preventative Measures.** For the school heads, resolving conflict in school does not end with just reaching an agreement. They explained that for a solution to work in the long run, they need to keep an eye on whether everyone is following what was agreed, take steps to avoid future problems, and make sure school rules are applied fairly.

School heads shared that once a conflict is settled, it's important to write down what everyone agreed on. This helps avoid confusion later and makes sure everyone remembers the exact terms.

We always write down the agreement," said one school head. "This way, we have something to go back to if the problem comes up again. SH12

They also mentioned the need to check if people are following what they agreed to. This means observing the situation and sometimes speaking again with the people involved.

I don't just assume everything is fine. I check in and ask how things are going. If someone is not following the agreement, we talk about it right away. SH8

Another school head emphasized the importance of checking for unresolved issues.

“Sometimes, people agree just to end the meeting, but they’re still unhappy. So I ask again after a few days—‘Is there anything still bothering you?’ SH 4

To make sure things are moving forward, the school heads said they confirm if the agreed steps are really being done.

We ask simple questions like, ‘Has this change started?’ or ‘Is everyone doing their part?’ It helps us see if the solution is really working. SH12

School heads also employ preventive strategies. School heads explained that they try to prevent problems by planning ahead and identifying situations that may lead to disagreements. They also highlighted the importance of paying special attention to how parents and other stakeholders are treated.

Parents don’t always see what’s happening in school. So we give extra time to explain things and answer their concerns, because their trust is very important. SH11

Another key strategy is knowing when not to handle conflict immediately—especially if emotions are high.

Sometimes, it’s better to wait. We let people cool down first, then talk when everyone is calmer. This helps us avoid saying things we might regret. SH2

According to the school heads, prevention is not about avoiding responsibility but about handling issues with intention, empathy, and patience. By taking small, thoughtful steps—such as planning ahead, listening carefully, and responding wisely—they help create a school environment where conflicts are less likely to grow and more likely to be resolved peacefully.

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### Implication and Concluding Remarks

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into practical and effective conflict management strategies that school heads can implement to foster a positive, respectful, and collaborative school culture. First, the emphasis on early recognition and diagnosis of conflict underscores the importance of proactive leadership. By identifying the roots and dynamics of disputes before they escalate, school heads can intervene with clarity and sensitivity, promoting timely and appropriate responses.

The theme of emphatic communication highlights the need for school heads to serve as compassionate listeners and mediators who create safe spaces for dialogue. When school leaders actively listen and affirm stakeholders’ concerns, they model empathy and foster an environment where trust and openness are cultivated—an essential condition for resolving interpersonal issues constructively.

Likewise, mediation and collaborative problem-solving practices point to the value of shared ownership in resolving school-based conflicts. By guiding stakeholders to co-create solutions, school heads not only restore relationships but also strengthen accountability and mutual respect. These techniques encourage stakeholders to view conflict not as a threat, but as an opportunity for dialogue and growth.

The emphasis on professionalism, fairness, and respect has critical implications for school leadership development. Maintaining professional decorum, especially in emotionally charged situations, ensures that decisions are anchored in ethics and the common good. This promotes a school climate rooted in equity, transparency, and unity.

Furthermore, monitoring and preventative measures offer a strategic lens through which school heads can ensure long-term resolution. The use of written agreements, follow-up checks, and cooling-off periods demonstrates how sustained leadership attention can prevent conflict recurrence and build a culture of consistency and reflection. Proactive planning, emotional regulation, and clear communication are vital tools for prevention that strengthen overall school functioning.

Collectively, these results suggest that school heads play a central role in shaping a conflict-responsive school environment. The practical strategies shared by the participants provide a framework for current and aspiring school leaders who seek to maintain harmony, support staff and community relationships, and foster inclusive decision-making practices.

Saiti (2015) emphasized that school leaders play a crucial role in managing conflicts through effective communication, diagnosis, and mediation. The author highlights the importance of emotional intelligence, respectful dialogue, and collaborative resolution—principles that align with the strategies shared by school heads in this study. Meanwhile, Ronquillo, et al. (2023) underscores the universality of effective conflict management principles across different organizational settings.

While the results of this study are rooted in the lived experiences and conflict resolution practices of school heads, the emergent themes—such as conflict diagnosis, emphatic communication, structured mediation, and professionalism—hold broader relevance. These approaches can be adapted and explored in other institutional settings such as community organizations, corporate environments, or higher education, where interpersonal dynamics and organizational leadership play equally pivotal roles. Future studies may investigate how these themes manifest in different leadership contexts to further enrich our understanding of effective conflict resolution strategies across diverse fields.

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