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Michael Jude Denis PhD  
*College of Education, Afaha Nsit*

Salamat Amos Umoh  
*College of Education, Afaha Nsit*

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## Collaboration as an Effective Conflict Management Technique for Maximizing Classroom Productivity

Michael Jude Denis

Salamat Amos Umoh

*College of Education, Afaha Nsit, Nigeria*

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### ABSTRACT

The fundamental goal of the classroom is to model behaviour through interaction between students and the tutor. This cannot be achieved in a chaotic environment occasioned by clashes of interests and other forms of incompatibility. Hence, there is a need for effective conflict management techniques applicable to the classroom environment. Using the Choice Theory by Glasser (1965), this work explored the impacts that collaboration as a conflict management technique has within the classroom. The methodology used in this work is a preliminary review of literature from journals and textbooks. The findings from this review revealed that effective conflict management brings about effective learning and cordial relationships. The study recommended, among others, that in order for the purpose of the classroom to be achieved, Peace and Conflict Resolution as an academic discipline should be made a necessary part of teachers' training curriculum.

### Keywords

Collaboration, Classroom, Conflict Management, Productivity

### INTRODUCTION

Conflict is said to be an inevitable phenomenon in every human relationship or interaction. It can also be latent in the form of intrapersonal conflict such as feelings of indecisiveness within a person. According to Robbins (2005), conflict is traditionally conceived as a malfunction, disruptive, unnatural and something that must be dreaded. It often manifests as discord, contest, struggle, disharmony, clash, feud, rivalry and violence (Denis, 2019). However, beliefs and attitudes differ about conflict. These beliefs and attitudes determine our responses and eventually the positive or negative consequences of our responses. Every behavior (maladaptive or adaptive) is an attempt to meet needs. Conflict is an attempt to meet needs. Resolving it meets needs and may include a host of positive outcomes. Corroborating this view, Schellenberg (1996) avers that conflict can neither be good nor bad, but one of the fundamentals in human social life. Robins (1998) says that conflict is a positive force and necessary for efficient output. If conflict is not an end in itself, it points to how relevant conflict management is, as the positivity or negativity of every conflict is predicated on it. As admitted that conflict is an integral aspect of human life, it is seen in every fabric of the society. Conflict is also present in the school system as a human institution. Whitaker (1996) remarks that about forty percent of head teachers' time in school is spent on conflict management. The classroom as a learning environment cannot achieve its aim without recognizing and limiting conflict. Therefore, this research aims to study the role of collaboration as a conflict

management technique in bringing about high productivity in the classroom.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The classroom needs a calm atmosphere for proper, productive, and successful learning and teaching to be achieved (Atieno et al., 2016). However, the classroom environment increasingly faces enormous challenges. The persistence of such challenges produces inadequacies and brings about a reduction in productivity. Consequently, conflicts or poorly managed conflicts constitute serious barriers to high productivity in the classroom. The manifestations of poorly managed classroom conflicts have become evident as society experiences increasing negative behaviour in interpersonal relationships despite efforts to provide formal education for the populace. Conflict management as a means of employing skills and creative ways to resolve disputes and disagreements is distinct from behaviour management, which could be considered a proactive step taken to build standards conducive to learning through mutual understanding and respect among learners. Hence, this study examined the relevance of collaboration as a conflict management technique in enhancing productivity in the classroom through objectives such as investigating the nature and source of classroom conflicts, the approaches to classroom conflict management, and the effects of resolving conflicts in the classroom.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study is guided by the tenets of Choice Theory. Choice theory is a strand of Reality Therapy developed in 1965 by Glasser. The fundamental assumption of this theory is that individuals have the power to control their behaviour but are limited in their power to control the behaviour of others. The Choice theory, therefore urges individuals to take responsibility for their choices while also helping others to be responsible for their own choices (Glasser, 1965). These choices are generally determined by the quest to satisfy the basic needs of continued existence, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Donna et al., 1994). Glasser emphasized the relevance of the Choice theory to the classroom, suggesting that students have responsibility to make decisions about their learning and as means to solving classroom problems (Bechuke, 2015).

According to Sullo (2011), within the purview of the Choice theory, teachers perform the role of managers by guiding the students to realize the importance of personal freedom and responsibility. The teacher builds a trusting relationship with the students and also exposes them to practical learning experiences as means of developing the student's capacity for success. Hence, the child believes/trusts that the teacher is there to meet the child's needs, not just educational rather holistically. Additionally, to maximize productivity, the teacher ensures that learning materials and lesson plans are designed to suit the needs of the students. Sullo continues that the three common features of Choice theory include minimizing coercion

by substituting a trusting relationship between the teacher and the students for the promise of reward and threat of punishment; focusing on quality by encouraging the practical application of what the students have learnt; self-evaluation by involving them in active decision making.

Sullo (2011) also remarks that when Choice theory is applied in the classroom, learning is enhanced while disruption is diminished being that the learners believe that they have been given the opportunity to relate, have a sense of belonging and power, possess some freedom and are secured in a safe environment. In an attempt to relate this theory to conflict management within the classroom, this study shall further examine the nature and sources of classroom conflict.

## NATURE AND SOURCES OF CLASSROOM CONFLICT

The more teachers and students understand the nature of conflict, the more they are able to manage it positively (Kinard, 1988, as cited in (Shahmohmmadi, 2014). Conflict in the classroom may appear more subtle and less violent than any other form of conflict, yet very substantial for social harmony. Conflicts that affect classroom management can take different forms ranging from intrapersonal and interpersonal to intragroup and intergroup conflict. It can arise from individual differences such as personality traits, attitude, values and perceptions. According to Thakore (2013), intrapersonal conflict is a conflict between incompatible goals within a person. Such tendencies may manifest in the classroom as indecisiveness on the wrongness or rightness of an action. Other forms of intrapersonal conflict may ignite feelings of frustrations which may later be manifested overtly in forms of sobriety, apathy, boredom, absenteeism, deviance, lousiness, destructive behaviours or one form of addiction or the other. However, it is noteworthy that not all child maladaptive behavior is due to intrapersonal conflict, whereas it can also emanate from interpersonal relations (Koruk & Kara, 2018).

Consequently, in the classroom, conflict may be expressed in the form of truancy, disrespect for teachers, disobedience, theft, bullying, fights, noise making, teachers not teaching well and so on. Often, conflicts spring from one's disturbance of other students, verbal and physical abuse and vandalization of classroom facilities. Shahmohmmadi (2014) identifies student's sources of various forms of disruptive behaviour as students' personalities, family, and cultural environment. A highly heterogeneous class with students having big gaps in ages, differences in cultural background, values and ethics is very prone to conflict (Rahim, 2001). The preoccupation of the teacher is to modify the behaviour of the learner. Conflict ensues when the activity of the teacher becomes ineffective in modifying behaviour or serving the needs of the learners as identified by Glasser (1998), namely survival, freedom, power, belonging and fun. Conflict takes place in the classroom when there are discrepancies between the needs of the teachers and the needs of the students. This can be caused by:

(i) Ineptitude of teachers and lack of mutual trust

Method of lesson delivery could be a major source of conflict in the classroom. Since conflict is basically differences of opinion, it manifests in the class if the students' opinion on the style of teaching differs from that of the teacher. This in turn may lead to some forms of misunderstanding. Theatt and McCroskey (1996) in Ahmad (2014) observe that students may further become afraid of the teacher or end up disliking both the teacher and the course of study. In order for the need of survival, safety and security to be met, Glasser's theory recommends that there must be mutual trust between the teacher and the learners. The learners trust the teacher to provide them with adequate learning experiences, while the teacher in turn trusts the learners to be committed to the tasks given to them (Irvine, 2015).

(ii) Favouritism and feelings of alienation – Belonging

Belonging needs (Glasser, 1998) can be met if favouritism and feelings of alienation are eschewed from the classroom. Students ought to be treated equally and given equal attention as much as possible. When in situations there are students that have some special needs in order to measure up with others, any form of negligence or insensitivity on the part of the teacher can bring about hateful or feelings of alienation. Corroborating this view, Kearney and Plax (1992) observe that learners who feel distanced from other members of the class and the teacher's concern often exhibit aggressive and provocative behaviour.

(iii) Lack of support for cognitive autonomy

Patall et al., (2010) notes that the learner's need for power as postulated by Glasser is undermined when there is no freedom of choice, lack of promotion of deep-level thinking and opportunities for learners to evaluate their growth. On the other hand, when the learner is given opportunity for brainstorming, planning, contributions, discussions and decision making, there is bound to be active participation while the students grow in self confidence and some level cognitive autonomy.

(iv) Classroom environment or setting

Glasser proposes that fun is one of the five major psychological needs (Irvine, 2015). This fun need is very essential for learning as it could help learners recall what occurred in class even after many years. This could be characterized by a sense of playfulness, humor or sessions of recession. The classroom environment can also enhance fun. The classroom setting or the learning environment has to be conducive enough such as not to breed discomfort or dissatisfaction. For instance, a well ventilated, well-lit classroom, a classroom filled with stimulating, didactic and adequate learning materials will bring about a greater satisfaction of the student's fun needs.

(v) Value differences

Oftentimes there are frictions among students and between students and the teachers on the basis of values be it moral or religious values. The student may prefer certain norms, while

finding faults with others due to personal beliefs and value systems. A teacher may become very rigid, scrupulous and disciplinary beyond the provisions of the school laws on the basis of specific values or personal worldview. For instance, a particular teacher may frown at a certain dress code which is generally accepted by the school authority. Students may develop feelings of dislike for teachers who hold on to and project particular political ideology, cultural bias or religious sentiments that are not in tandem with their own values. Conflict therefore ensues because the need for freedom as assumed in Glasser's theory has not been respected.

### **COLLABORATION AS AN EFFECTIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGY WITHIN THE CLASSROOM**

More often than not, teachers think of resolving conflicts in terms of the model of confrontation aiming at win-lose results. However, Maharaj-Sharma (2008) suggests that compromise (win-lose/win-lose) orientation appears as the rallying point of the complicated issue of discipline in schools because many teachers often choose from only two approaches of either being strict or lenient, authoritarian or permissive, tough or soft. This is in acknowledgment that children in the school have little power which springs from their freedom of choice. Albeit, there could arise misunderstanding and unrealistic expectations of children, wherein as a consequence, students see their teachers as enemies and dictators meant to be resisted by all means or on the other hand as softies that they can ignore, disrespect or even take advantage of.

Hence, the traditional collaboration conflict management strategy is among the social skills that fit very well into classroom management. Collaboration is a style of conflict management in which parties work together to resolve a conflict (Crystal, 2007). It is an assertive or cooperative style of conflict management. In collaboration, the parties involved project their standpoints but beyond these they seek for new alternatives. Kofman (2015) in Atieno et al. (2016) explains that by expressing or exposing the positions of the parties, collaboration provides the opportunity for them to understand each one's needs and work together for a new option through the help of the school counselor or other school personnel. Lucy and Jonathan (2016) in Atieno et al. (2016) opine that collaboration involves accepting alternative ways to satisfy all parties.

Fundamental to classroom conflict management is the obligation that the teacher has to teach the students. Thapa (2013) in Thapa (2015) recommends proper communication, inculcating maturity and training students in the techniques of conflict management as some important steps in creating a conducive atmosphere in the school environment. If students are taught conflict management skills, they will be equipped with the basic knowledge and techniques necessary for solving their own problems in more productive manners without even the intervention of the teacher. In support of this opinion,

Glasser (2000) argues that the classroom is well managed when individuals control their behaviour as reduction in external control will enhance compliance, academic success and proper social behaviour.

According to Stronge (2002), effective classroom management goes beyond establishing rules, regulations and modes of discipline for the students. He notes that to manage the classroom efficiently requires involving the students proactively in the process of making and maintaining the rules and regulations. This will make a deeper impact in the life of the student because of the involvement they already have in the decision making process which also provides them the opportunity not just to learn but also interact with the teacher. Hence, the influence of teachers on their students, their methods and strategies for classroom management are very remarkable for enhancing positive attitudes toward learning (Stronge, 2002).

A good illustration of students' involvement in establishing norms is for the students to come up with the classroom rules and say what happens if the rules are broken, in terms of consequences. They should also understand the meaning of the rules and why they are put in place. For instance, to maintain orderliness, it is necessary that one person should talk at a time. The teacher then establishes that the norm guiding this is the raising up of hands and subsequent recognition. The students should then be allowed to suggest what happens if someone talks without raising up their hands. (Peaceful Classroom Model, 2017). By doing so, any student who exhibits a causal behaviour that contravenes this particular rule has already known the consequences. This process also measures the student's level of personal responsibility as it behooves them not to go against the law they collectively legislated.

Teacher-Students collaboration also gives room for peer mediation as one of the effective means to resolving classroom conflict. Mediation is a dispute resolution technique where a neutral party assists disputants to reach a jointly satisfactory resolution (Bentley, 1996). Conflicts between students can as well be handled by student mediators. Students should therefore undergo training on the act of mediation so as to become effective mediators among their peers within the classroom (Stern, 2001, as cited in (Shahmohmmadi, 2014). This is important for a peaceful class where a particular dispute seems to rob the class of the time that should have been used in teaching. Such issues are then referred to trained student mediators for an appropriate time.

In managing conflict within the classroom, the teacher must not respond impulsively or aggressively, they must not share the weaknesses of the learner disclosed in confidence to them with another student or even a teacher on the basis of gossip to avoid being used against such students (Dettmer et al., 2009, as cited in Conderman, 2011). The teacher must learn to address the issues and not the 'person' of the student so as not to spur a sense of intimidation leading to low self-esteem and inferiority

complex. Teachers must not dig up past experiences, encounters with students or project other unrelated issues in a bid to address a specific fault. This may ignite a feeling of hatred towards the student. Dettmer et al. (2009) also observes that resorting to a one-for-all method of handling conflict by using the same approach for different kinds of situations is not the best. He adds that total avoidance of conflict should never be an option.

## RELEVANCE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

Conflict management is an integral part of classroom management. Effective conflict handling brings about a peaceful classroom. Conflict management is important for minimizing the negative results of conflict and increasing the positive outcomes for the purpose of improving learning (Rahim, 2002). Thapa (2015) avers that if there is no congenial, peaceful, democratic environment, teaching and learning will not take place in the proper manner.

A classroom where conflict is improperly managed will be deficient of trust. When fair judgments are not made over disputes and clashes of interests, the students may lose trust in themselves as well as in the teacher or even the teacher may also lose trust in the students. When this happens, its stiffness openness and creates a barrier for the sharing of knowledge. When a dispute is rife, both the teacher and students can get frustrated and become less committed. For instance, the teacher may no longer feel any obligation towards teaching obstinate students or feel accountable for such students' achievement.

As noted previously, methods of conflict management which are appropriate in one case may not necessarily be appropriate when applied to a conflict generated from another source. The choice of appropriate conflict management mechanism from the broad range of approaches for a specific conflict situation within the classroom helps to facilitate effective teaching and learning. On the other hand, if a wrong choice of strategy is made, there is bound to be a disruption of the learning process and will most importantly ruin relationships. Beyond a doubt, the role of conflict management in administering the classroom certainly goes beyond aiding learning but also building relationships that transcend the classroom.

As part of classroom administration, the teacher's conflict management strategy is at once a toolkit for managing conflict and also serves as a learning tool for students who indirectly learn how to mitigate or solve basic problems. When conflict is effectively managed within the classroom, cooperation will be reinforced among the learners and between the learners and the teacher, there will be free and peaceful interactions and students, having seen how profitable it is, will learn to resort to nonviolent alternatives in the face of conflict situations.

For Woolfolk and Hoy (1990) regulation of behaviour in the classroom is of paramount benefit since it enhances active

participation of the students. Considering the fact that the classroom is made up of young adults with youthful exuberance who in addition emerge from different backgrounds, there is bound to be an exhibition of attitudes that may not favour other individuals in the class or behaviours that are inconsistent with the new knowledge that the teacher is trying to impart.

When it is properly managed, it is an opportunity for the class to gain a higher level of understanding, for the instructor to gain more insight into classroom dynamics and for improvement on the curriculum or lesson design and delivery style (Ahmad, 2014). It may also be an opportunity for the teacher to offer more explanation on a particular subject matter that may not be clear to the students.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study acknowledged that conflict is inevitable in human relationship and therefore very evident in interaction within the classroom. Remarkably, among the different types of conflict, intrapersonal conflict appears to be one of the most fundamental conflicts within the classroom. A child who comes from an abusive home or environment characterized by high handedness, insensitivity, violence, starvation or some other forms of deprivation easily experiences intrapersonal conflict. Such a child eventually isolates oneself from the company of other children and may also have poor cognitive capacity. Consequently, reactions to these experiences of pressure, frustration, depression, burden, irritation which are actually intrapersonal become antecedents to disturbance, teasing, bullying, loss of concentration and other forms of misbehaviour manifest in the classroom as interpersonal conflicts. Hardly would a child suffer internal conflicts without manifesting or affecting behavior, though often adults could successfully create a dichotomy between their actions and internal struggles. Close monitoring of the learner's behavior and changes in mood with effective counseling can help diagnose such intrapersonal conflicts thereby making efforts to meet the needs of such a child through adequate intervention.

Conflict management is critical for running an effective classroom and for maximum productivity. It starts with proper diagnosis, readiness to resolve the conflicts and use of best conflict practices. One of the challenges to managing conflict within the classroom is that most teachers are ill-equipped with

the techniques to manage conflicts because their training programmes may not have adequately underlined conflict management as expedient for classroom management. Therefore, good knowledge of the basic conflict management techniques becomes expedient for the classroom teacher so that when conflict arises, such a teacher can spontaneously choose the best approach. The impact on relationships must be a major determining factor for every choice.

Creating a peaceful classroom where the teacher is looked up to as a model, students are satisfied by the teacher's efforts and where there is a large amount of turnover is an effort achievable with the right application of these conflict management approaches. Finally, it is pertinent to state that this topic has not been well represented in previous literature, hence its novelty. However, the study has certain limitations on the ground of being a purely qualitative study. Further, research on a similar topic or subject matter using a qualitative method of analysis through case studies would be a great innovation. Despite this limitation, this study makes the following recommendations:

- Peace Studies and Conflict Management should be made a basic course of study in the curriculum for teachers training.
- Teachers should model a behaviour such that it is worth emulating by the students and by doing so they will learn maturity by example.
- It is the collective responsibility of the school administrators to make the classroom and at large the school environment conducive for effective learning.
- Teachers must measure the ability of the students so as not to have high expectations of them in terms of the quality of their work and their behaviour towards other students as well as their reaction to issues.
- Adequate learning materials should be made available for the students so as to make learning easier and less tense.
- Extra-curricular activities which aid recreation can go a long way to influence the performance of the student in the classroom, hence, it should be encouraged.
- Students should be involved in the decision making processes within the classroom so as not to force compliance through applying discipline.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Michael Jude Denis, PhD hails from Ediene in Abak local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. He holds a Doctorate Degree in Peace and Security Studies from the University of Port Harcourt. Michael Lectures in the Department of Political Science, College of Education, Afaha Nsit, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Salamat Amos Umoh hails from Atai Otoro in Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. She is a graduate of Economics from the Adekunle Ajasin University, Ondo State. She is an assistant Lecturer in the Department of Economics, College of Education, Afaha Nsit, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.