



Examining Conflict Management Strategies Used in Tanzania's Secondary Schools: A Case in Biharamulo District, Tanzania

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The study delves into the pervasive issue of conflicts within secondary schools, emphasizing their inherent nature in human interactions. It emphasizes the vital role of effective conflict management in maintaining a conducive learning environment. The research objectives cover the identification of conflict root causes, assessment of implemented strategies, and their impacts, and provision of recommendations for improved conflict management approaches in schools. Employing qualitative methodology, the study utilizes in-depth interviews, group discussions, and document reviews to collect data. Findings reveal the persistence of conflicts, notably attributed to the lack of a universally accepted resolution framework. Ad hoc methods are employed, lacking consistency and alignment with specific conflict natures, resulting in profound consequences such as student

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dropout, prolonged conflicts, fear, resentment, and hindered academic progress. The study recommends government intervention in training teachers, rigorous evaluation of school administrators' qualifications, and improvements in teacher welfare coupled with strict punitive measures for teachers' inappropriate behavior. It concludes by highlighting the ongoing nature of conflicts and the urgent need for a practical approach, urging schools to prioritize understanding conflict causes, implementing effective management actions, and prioritizing the well-being of both teachers and students.

Keywords: Conflict; conflict management; management strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts in schools are inevitable due to the diverse and dynamic nature of school environments [1]. Schools bring together individuals with varying backgrounds, perspectives, and interests, including students, teachers, parents, and administrators. These differences naturally give rise to disagreements, whether they involve academic matters, interpersonal relationships, or institutional policies [2]. Moreover, schools are not only places of learning but also social settings where individuals navigate complex interactions and power dynamics [3]. As a result, conflicts become an inherent part of educational institutions, necessitating effective conflict management strategies to foster a positive and conducive learning environment. Embracing the inevitability of conflicts allows educational institutions to proactively address issues, promote resolution, and cultivate valuable skills in conflict resolution among students and stakeholders. Being in conflict is not a problem; the problem is when the conflict is poorly managed [4]. From this view, it is clear that management teams have a crucial role in turning the existing institutional conflicts into a potential constructive benchmark for the development of the school rather than destroying the school with wrong choices and uses of conflict management strategies [5].

Conflict is a common occurrence in schools worldwide, transcending the boundaries of both developing and developed countries, highlighting its inevitable nature in educational settings. In America, for example, several conflict cases have been reported, one of which happened at a California high school where students rioted and even used deadly weapons, resulting in the campus's lockdown in 2006 [6]. This suggests that conflict occurrence has nothing to do with school socioeconomic status; the existence of human likes and dislikes is what facilitates conflicts [4]. Several severe conflicts in Tanzanian schools have had significant

consequences. In 2015, Kiteto Secondary School experienced a tragic incident when a teacher caned a student to death, sparking chaos and disputes between teachers and parents [7]. Similar incidents occurred in 2018 in the Kagera region, where a 13-year-old student was allegedly beaten to death by a teacher, leading to imprisonment, terminations, and a decline in parents' trust in teachers [8]. In 2023, a conflict arose in Kagera over a head teacher's unconventional punishment method for students, resulting in teachers' dismissals and exacerbating the school's workforce shortage [9]. Additionally, in the Mara region, a conflict in 2023 resulted in the death of a school principal due to a power struggle [10,11].

These conflicts highlight the critical need for effective conflict management mechanisms to ensure students' safe and conducive learning environment. School leaders should acknowledge interpersonal or intergroup conflict to avoid severe damage when a conflict arises [4]. Any failure to manage conflicts in educational institutions harms the working relationships of all parties involved. Schools, too, are frequently replete with one or more types of conflict. Some conflict management writers, for example, Robbins (1974), believe that conflict management is a "planning and evaluating of conflict levels." Various planning and organizational activities are carried out, ultimately resolving school conflicts. Any organization, including schools, will develop only if conflict management functions are clearly understood [12]; conflicts are always treated as catalysts and potent stimulants for organizational innovation. At this stage, the leader does not consider resolving conflict but instead looks for ways to manage conflict that require individuals to change, be flexible, and be responsive [13]. Conflict management generally consists of diagnostic processes, negotiating strategies, and other intervention techniques to avoid unnecessary conflict and reduce or resolve excessive conflict [14,15].

Conflicts, traditionally viewed as destructive phenomena to be avoided Robbins, (1989), as cited in Mekonnen (2020), are now positive forces required for organizations to exist [16]. Therefore, the focus should be on how to manage the process instead of how to define it as a concept. In other words, how conflicts are resolved, which approach should be used, and where it should be used in conflict management are crucial for the effective performance of the school. Any failure to manage conflicts in school results in an unproductive learning environment [17,18]. Thus conflicts in Tanzanian secondary schools have had a wide-ranging impact on the education sector. These consequences included the school's closure, hatred between teachers and students, and the expulsion of some teachers. Others resulted in the resignation of heads of schools, and some students were suspended from school for their roles in inciting others to strike (Citizen, 2013). The conflict also resulted in a chaotic environment and the closure of schools before the appropriate time (The Guardian, 2013). According to Miya et al., (2023), other effects include lowering teachers' morale and property destruction, increased absenteeism in secondary schools, and a lack of trust between teachers, parents, and students.

In some cases, secondary school students and teachers conflicts resulted in the sexual assault of school staff members. This was evident at the Bagamoyo secondary school protest in 2012, where a female teacher was raped by eight of her secondary school students, causing the victim and other members of the school community both physical and psychological pain [19]. The worst conflicts' effects in Tanzania's education history are those that resulted in the death of students after teachers' aggressive punishment of students [7,20]. Generally, conflicts in Tanzanian schools are a severe issue that cost not only government funds for re-establishing new infrastructures after destruction but also people's dignity and life especially young students, and thus can stagnate students' performance.

Despite the government's efforts to address conflicts in secondary schools through legislative policies and educational initiatives, the prevalence of such conflicts remains a concern [21]. The contingency approach aimed at reducing student strikes and riots has not yielded the expected results. While there have been measures to inform students and teachers about the importance of unity, harmony, and

disciplinary guidelines, the problem persists. The lack of a thorough investigation into the root causes of conflicts in secondary schools and the absence of evidence showing productive resolution suggest that these conflicts continue to be a challenge in the country. All these make this study important.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two prominent theories, namely the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Theory and the Holton Conflict Resolution Theory, to comprehensively understand conflict dynamics in secondary schools. The Thomas-Kilmann model, which categorizes conflict resolution styles into five modes (competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating), helps analyze how stakeholders in secondary schools approach and manage conflicts [22]. On the other hand, the Holton Conflict Resolution Theory emphasizes the significance of engaging all relevant parties in conflict resolution to ensure a comprehensive consideration of viewpoints [23]. Integrating these theories enhances the study's analytical framework, allowing for a nuanced exploration of conflict management strategies and their impacts on the learning environment. Applying these theories is crucial in offering insights into effective conflict resolution practices and guiding recommendations for more harmonious school environments.

1.2 Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This research aimed to accomplish four primary objectives: firstly, to identify the underlying reasons for conflicts in secondary schools; secondly, to delineate the conflict management approaches adopted by principals, teachers, and students within Biharamulo District Council; thirdly, to evaluate the repercussions of these conflict management strategies on the teaching and learning process; and fourthly, to propose the most effective conflict management strategy tailored for secondary schools in Biharamulo.

In pursuit of these objectives, the study addressed four fundamental questions. Firstly, what is the status quo of conflict in Biharamulo district secondary schools? Second, what causes conflict in secondary schools in Biharamulo District? Third, what strategies are most employed by the heads of secondary schools, teachers, parents, and students in conflict management in Biharamulo District? And its

impact? Lastly, How to improve conflict management strategies used in secondary school?

2. METHODOLOGY

The study is guided by qualitative research methods, employing interviews, focal group discussions, and document analysis to gather data. The qualitative approach is chosen for its flexibility, adaptability, and inductive nature, allowing a deeper exploration of conflict management in secondary schools. The sample size, drawn from five secondary schools, includes 75 respondents, comprising ward education officers, heads of schools, teachers, students, and parents. Sampling techniques involve simple random and purposive sampling. The data analysis plan incorporates thematic content analysis using Microsoft software. The study ensures validity through content validity, triangulation, and rich-thick description, while reliability is maintained through triangulation. Ethical considerations involve obtaining clearance, informed consent, confidentiality, and avoiding duplication in research. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of conflict management in Tanzanian secondary schools.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents in the study provided a comprehensive overview of the participants involved, including their age, gender, and working experience within the school environment. Student participants ranged from 16 to 22 years old, representing the younger cohort directly experiencing conflict within secondary schools. In contrast, teachers and other adult respondents were aged 30 years and above. This age distribution ensured a diverse range of perspectives on conflict resolution strategies, drawing from the experiences and maturity of both students and more experienced educators and staff members. While age can influence conflict management skills, it is not the sole determining factor, as individual diversity and life experiences also play crucial roles [24].

Gender was another important demographic variable considered in the study. All interview

and focus group discussion participants disclosed their gender information to ensure a balanced representation of various stakeholders within the educational system. The study included both females and males among the Ward Education Officers, Heads of School, parents, teachers, and students, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of gender-related factors in conflict resolution and management strategies. This diversity helped address potential gender bias issues in schools, thereby enhancing the study's validity.

The selection of respondents with specific ranges of working experience, particularly among teachers and students, aimed to ensure a substantial level of familiarity and engagement with school environments and conflicts. Heads of schools, Ward education officers, and teachers with 5 years and above of teaching experience were chosen to provide insightful perspectives on conflict management. Similarly, students with 3 to 4 years of studying experience were selected to offer informed insights into the dynamics of conflicts they have encountered during their academic journey. Including participants with this level of experience within the school system contributed to the research's validity by tapping into their depth of knowledge and familiarity with school-related conflicts.

3.2 Existence of Conflicts in Secondary Schools

The survey findings show that conflicts are quite common in secondary schools. Most school heads reported frequent encounters with conflicts, indicating that managing and resolving conflicts is an ongoing challenge for administrators. However, one school head mentioned occasional conflicts, suggesting a relatively more peaceful school environment in that case. For teachers, a majority reported facing conflicts regularly, highlighting that teachers, who interact directly with students, often experience conflicts. Some teachers mentioned occasional conflicts, indicating that such incidents are not rare but do not occur every day. A few educators reported rarely facing conflicts, suggesting a more peaceful experience for this minority. In summary, the results highlight the widespread occurrence and varied frequency of conflicts in both administrative and teaching roles within secondary schools.

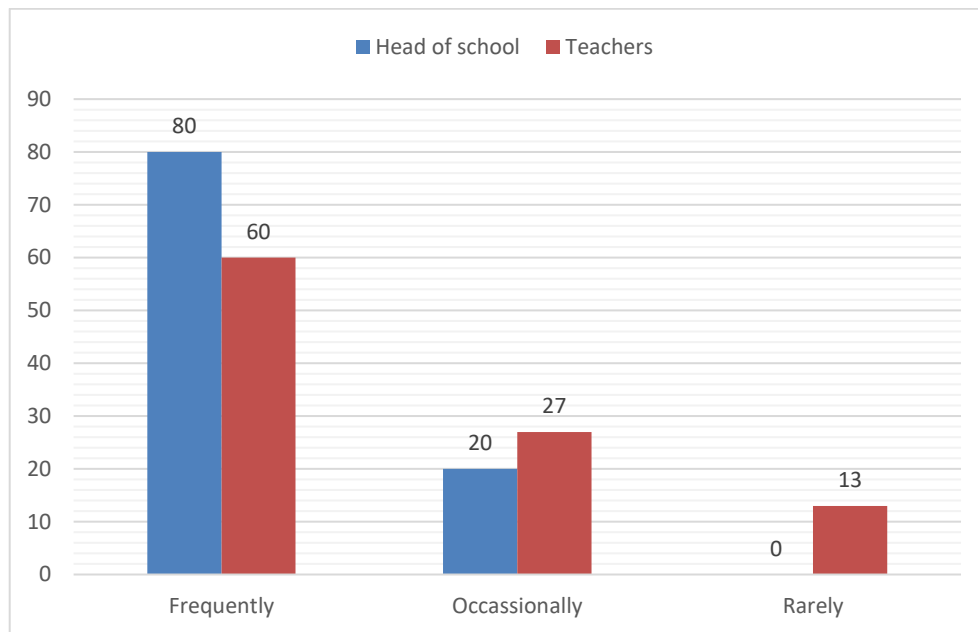


Fig. 1. Frequency of conflict incidents in secondary schools

These findings align with other studies conducted in Tanzania [25-28], confirming the presence of conflicts in schools. These conflicts, as revealed by various research, show differences in how often they occur and the level of seriousness [27]. Essentially, conflicts exist in school settings, but the frequency and severity can vary. This consistency with previous research emphasizes that conflicts are a shared reality in Tanzanian schools, and understanding their patterns and dynamics is crucial for their effective management and resolution. This study is supporting [26,28] studies that identified five primary parties commonly involved in conflicts: heads of schools and teachers, teachers themselves, teachers and parents, teachers and students, and an internal dispute of teachers against the government. Conflicts between heads of schools and teachers often arise from perceived breaches of work guidelines, leading to tensions over issues like teacher punctuality [25]. Teachers' conflicts among themselves are fueled by laziness and differences in opinion, creating a divisive atmosphere. Conflicts between teachers and students result from disciplinary actions, with students resisting punishments that disrupt their academic pursuits [27]. Parents cite disagreements over academic performance and corporal punishment as triggers for conflicts with teachers, while teachers point to parents making decisions without verifying facts [29]. An internal conflict emerges between teachers and employers due to low wages,

teachers taking part-time jobs, and violating employer requirements [25].

3.3 Causes of Conflicts in Secondary Schools

The causes of conflicts in secondary schools were identified through interviews conducted with various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and students. Additionally, relevant literature was consulted to support and contextualize these findings. The results revealed several key factors contributing to conflicts within secondary schools.

3.4 Financial Strain and Conflicts Arising from School Meal Contributions

Interviews with parents revealed that despite the policy of tuition-free education, they are still required to financially support their children's meals at school. However, many parents, often farmers dealing with unpredictable yields, struggle to meet these financial obligations [30]. This situation frequently leads to conflicts with teachers and school committees when parents are unable to pay for school meal contributions [31]. The primary reason cited for this financial strain is the meager harvests resulting from insufficient rainfall. These findings highlight the significant challenges faced by parents in meeting their financial responsibilities to support their children's education, which often results in

conflicts with school authorities. A parent stressed;

"The primary source of conflict with the school is food contributions. As farmers, there are times when we have limited agricultural yields, making it challenging to provide for our families. It becomes a contentious issue when asked to contribute our produce to the school for student meals. The core concern is that, with the free education policy, many of us expect the government to be responsible for providing meals for students in public schools" (Parent 2).

Consequently, this creates tensions between parents and teachers. [32]. Additionally, students become entangled in conflicts, facing punishment for not reminding their parents about these contributions. The clash between community expectations and the educational system's financial demands is evident [33], with some parents even opting to withdraw their children from school to avoid conflicts associated with contribution committees.

Administrative incompetence of the school principals: Administrative incompetence of school principals emerges as another significant cause of conflicts. The lack of essential administrative skills and the tendency to resort to authoritarian methods create teacher tension [34]. Interviews with teachers showed that the overlap of roles, with principals acting as accountants and discipline masters, fosters hatred. Furthermore, financial mismanagement, including the alleged embezzlement of school funds, strains relationships and leads to conflicts between teachers and school administrators [25]. The leadership style that excludes teachers from decision-making processes and the mismanagement of school resources (Mwabungulu, 2015) has been a catalyst for conflicts between teachers and school administrators in secondary schools. Referring to the incident where a head of school publicly caned a teacher in front of students, a teacher stated that some school administrators have transformed into semi-gods, harshly treating their fellow teachers. They believe that by exerting power in this manner, they gain respect and trust.

"The heads of secondary schools turn out to be semi-gods in schools, and they do not want to be challenged. They want to

dominate everything and overlap to the extent that they see teachers falling under the same level as their students by directly assaulting teachers in front of students" (Teacher D3).

Corporal punishment, teacher-student relationships, and parental involvement: In focal group discussion, students pointed out that Poor management of student misbehavior is a crucial source of conflicts, focusing on excessive corporal punishment. Students express frustration at the reliance on punishment over counseling, leading to hatred towards teachers. Disturbingly, inappropriate relationships between teachers and students also contribute to conflicts, as rejected advances result in harsh punishments from their teachers [35]. The power dynamics in such relationships, coupled with the lack of appropriate mechanisms for reporting such incidents, contribute to an environment where students feel powerless and vulnerable [36]. This not only harms the students' mental well-being but also perpetuates a culture of fear and resentment within the school community [37]. In the absence of these measures; clear reporting mechanisms, counseling support, and disciplinary actions against teachers involved in inappropriate conduct this situation contributes to the persistence of conflicts in schools.

"Punishment is frequently used by teachers to discipline students who misbehave. Unfortunately, some teachers with questionable ethics exploit this method to punish students who resist their inappropriate advances. This situation has led to conflicts within the school" (Student).

Furthermore, in interviews with parents, it was observed that conflicts in schools often escalate when students are punished excessively, resulting in injuries. Parents highlighted that teachers tend to involve them in parent-teacher discussions only when the situation has already worsened, and the student requires hospitalization. A parent expressed their concern, saying,

"Teachers should involve us in discussions before matters get out of hand. It's frustrating to only be called when our child is seriously injured and needs medical attention"(Parent 4).

Parents are critical of teachers' inadequate parenting methods, emphasizing the unfairness

of punitive actions without involving them in discussions about their child's wrongdoing [36]. The prevalence of corporal punishment exacerbates conflicts with parents and within the school community.

Communication barriers: Communication barriers among education stakeholders emerge as a pervasive factor contributing to conflicts. Breakdowns in communication channels and the exclusion of teachers, students, and parents from decision-making processes lead to misunderstandings and mistrust [28]. Teachers feel ignored and undervalued when their proposals receive no feedback, fostering frustration and conflicts within the teaching staff [25]. Students also express feeling excluded, eroding trust in teachers and school committees. The study reveals that students have become significant victims of exclusion from school decision-making processes, observing school activities as if they are not part of the institution. Students cited examples such as school development projects, including infrastructure construction, where they witnessed buildings being erected without being informed about the projects. This situation makes them feel isolated and not integral to the school community. Consequently, it fosters resentment towards their teachers. Effective communication is identified as a key aspect of preventing and resolving conflicts within secondary school [38].

3.5 Conflict Management Strategies Used in Secondary Schools

The research delved into conflict management strategies within secondary schools, uncovering a diverse array of approaches adopted by stakeholders based on their roles.

Strategies used by school principals: The research findings indicate that school administrators often rely on authority and power, which sometimes exacerbates conflicts by inhibiting open communication [25]. However, collaborative approaches were also identified, with some school principals engaging in staff meetings and involving committees and school boards not only in conflict resolution but also in decision-making processes, aiming to create a more inclusive environment [39]. According to teachers, conflict management strategies employed by school principals vary depending on the conflict's source and the parties involved. When conflicts arise due to the actions of the principals themselves, they tend to use their

authority to protect their status and reputation, leading to feelings of mistreatment among teachers and resulting in unresolved conflicts [40,41]. A teacher expressed this sentiment, stating,

"Some school principals tend to use their authority to protect their status and reputation, which can make teachers feel mistreated and lead to unresolved conflicts" (Teacher E1).

Teachers' strategies for managing school-related conflicts: Furthermore, the research examined how teachers navigate conflicts with school principals in secondary schools. It revealed that teachers often employ strategies such as avoidance to safeguard their jobs, possibly due to perceived power imbalances (Balay, 2006). Some teachers choose to comply with directives, prioritizing a smooth working relationship over expressing their own needs. A teacher shared,

"Many of us choose to comply with directives from school principals to maintain a smooth working relationship, even if it means prioritizing the principal's needs over our own" (Teacher A3).

Moreover, the study identified that teachers utilize behavioral change techniques, like human relations training and disciplinary measures, as methods to handle conflicts within the school environment. These approaches are primarily applied when dealing with conflicts between students, conflicts involving students and their, and occasionally conflicts between teachers and students' parents [42], especially when there are inappropriate relationships, like romantic involvement, between teachers and students [37].

Students' strategies for managing conflicts: It was further revealed that students, often considered a vulnerable group [37], tend to comply or endure conflicts, particularly when accused by educators. Coping with conflicts, some students resort to absenteeism, impacting their academic advancement. Furthermore, to escape the school environment and the associated conflicts, some students engage in alternative activities, such as farming [18]. A student expressed,

"When conflicts arise, especially with teachers, some of us choose to avoid the

situation altogether. We often end up missing school, which affects our studies. Some of my friends have even started farming to avoid going to school because of the conflicts" (Student).

Importantly, conflicts have the potential to lead to students dropping out of school, especially when they feel a lack of support from Teachers and parents [43]. This sheds light on the serious consequences conflicts can have on students' education, emphasizing the need for effective conflict-management strategies to ensure a supportive and conducive learning environment.

Parents' strategies in conflict management: It was found that parents tend to adopt constructive approaches, such as engaging in staff-parent discussions, to resolve conflicts when there is cooperation with the school. This cooperative relationship enables open communication and problem-solving [38]. However, in situations where relationships are strained, some parents opt to transfer their children to another school as a last resort to find peace of mind. The research also unveiled that parents, especially those unable to transfer their children to conflict-free schools, opt to terminate their children's education as a means of distancing themselves from school conflicts. This revelation surfaced during discussions with parents who expressed that if they couldn't afford their child's school meals and preferred to avoid conflicts with the food committee and teachers, it was better for their child to leave school for the sake of peace. This underscores the extent to which conflicts in schools impact not just students but also drive parents to make difficult decisions regarding their children's education.

3.6 Impacts of Conflicts in Secondary School

Ineffective teaching and learning: The study reveals that conflicts within secondary schools have a detrimental impact on the teaching and learning process. Disputes, especially those involving teachers and school administrators, disrupt the planning and execution of lessons [25]. Teachers may refuse to attend class, leading to missed lessons and a compromised learning experience for students. The emotional toll on teachers affects their morale, hindering their ability to provide quality education [44,45]. A vivid example from a student's perspective illustrates how a conflict between a teacher and

the school principal resulted in disrupted lessons, impacting students' preparation for exams.

"Last term, a big argument was between one of our teachers and the school principal. The teacher believed that the principal was interfering with their teaching methods. In protest, the teacher stopped coming to class for a week. We, the students, were caught in the middle. Lessons were disrupted, and we couldn't proceed with the curriculum. It was frustrating because we had exams coming up, and this conflict impacted our learning" (Focal Group Discussion).

Poor academic performance: Conflicts negatively correlate with academic performance, creating an environment where students may avoid classes involving conflicted teachers. The discomfort caused by conflicts leads to a decline in students' performance in subjects taught by the conflicted teacher (Al-Shara, 2015). Teachers' responses during conflicts, such as withholding answers and neglecting grading, contribute to students' academic setbacks. There is a contradiction between conflicts and the role of teachers as positive role models [46]. The situation worsens when the conflict involves other teachers against students, exacerbating the situation and creating a hostile environment for students, further impacting academic performance. The collaboration of teachers in the conflict against students not only intensifies the emotional strain on the students but also contributes to an atmosphere of tension and discord that hampers the conducive learning environment that schools should ideally foster [46].

Absenteeism, truancy, and transfers: Findings show that Conflicts manifest in absenteeism among both teachers and students, showcasing a preference for avoiding the individuals involved rather than confronting misunderstandings. It was revealed that Teachers avoid coming to work, and students choose to be absent to escape uncomfortable situations [18]. Additionally, conflicts lead to unplanned transfers of both teachers and students. While this might provide a short-term solution, it often creates issues in other schools and contributes to a decrease in the overall workforce [47]. Furthermore, parents resorting to transferring their children illustrate the serious implications of conflicts in the school environment and the need for intervention with effective conflict management strategies. Teachers' imposition of

severe punishment as a conflict resolution strategy is criticized for suppressing conflicts without addressing their root causes, leading to negative attitudes, disengagement, and potential long-term consequences for students [48].

3.7 Enhancing Conflict Management Strategies in Secondary School

Improving school principal selection criteria:

As the last objective of the research, it explored ways to enhance conflict management strategies in secondary schools. One critical finding was the necessity of evaluating the competence of school Principal in conflict resolution during their appointment. Despite existing criteria, these criteria often lack a specific focus on school principals' conflict resolution skills [49]. Stakeholders, including Ward Education Officers, emphasized the importance of enhancing these criteria to ensure that appointed individuals possess the necessary skills to address conflicts effectively.

"We must revisit the criteria for appointing school principals and incorporate measures to evaluate their conflict resolution skills effectively. Our school leaders should be equipped to handle conflicts contextually and adeptly, which requires reevaluating our selection criteria" (Ward Education Officer 1).

The guidelines for selecting school principals don't include the ability to resolve conflicts as one of the qualifications for the position [50]. The absence of this requirement in a clear manner leads to the selection of school principals without considering their conflict resolution skills. This oversight in the selection process contributes to ongoing conflicts in schools [51]. Parents highlighted instances where unqualified school heads led to issues like the misuse of authority, underscoring the urgency of a more rigorous selection process [25].

Provision of both pre-and in-service conflict management skills:

The research uncovered a lack of formal conflict resolution training for teachers, both before and after employment. This gap leaves teachers reliant on personal growth rather than systematic training [52]. Participants, including Ward Education Officers and experienced school heads, stressed the importance of incorporating conflict resolution training into teachers' professional development. Such training would not only bridge the gap between experienced and novice teachers but

also equip them with practical conflict-resolution skills [12].

"For over a decade in teaching, I have never received training that guides me in conflict resolution. The absence of conflicts in the school has solely relied on personal efforts, but there has been no formal training support" (Head of school 4).

The absence of formal conflict resolution training for school administrators can lead to ineffective handling of conflicts, resulting in their escalation rather than resolution. Without proper training, administrators may lack the necessary skills to de-escalate disputes, leading to strained relationships between teachers, students, and parents[53]. This could create a challenging and tense atmosphere within the school, negatively impacting the teaching and learning environment. Effective conflict resolution requires specific skills, such as active listening, negotiation, and mediation, which can help address conflicts constructively and prevent them from escalating. Therefore, providing formal training in conflict resolution for school administrators is essential for maintaining a positive and harmonious school environment. [49]. It underscores the importance of incorporating conflict resolution training to empower teachers with the tools needed for a more harmonious educational environment.

Establishing active gender desk in schools:

The establishment of a Gender Desk for Students' Grievances was identified as a proactive measure to address gender-based conflicts. This specialized desk provides a confidential platform for students to report concerns related to harassment and discrimination [37]. The creation of such a resource aims to empower students to voice their grievances and ensure fair and sensitive resolution of gender-related conflicts. Stakeholders, including Ward Education Officers, emphasized the critical role of this desk in fostering inclusivity and creating a safe space for students to report sensitive issues such as teachers' inappropriate behaviors of seducing their students. The study by [28,37] found that Female students find it challenging to express their conflicts, especially those related to romantic relationships with teachers because there is no specific desk for gender issues in schools. During discussions with students, it was revealed that some students find themselves in conflicts with their teachers due to rejecting romantic advances. Unfortunately, these

students endure threats from their teachers, leading to a hostile environment. The absence of proper channels to address such conflicts contributes to continuous threats, causing these students to frequently skip classes or, in some cases, drop out of school altogether [37]. This situation highlights a critical need for effective mechanisms to address conflicts arising from inappropriate teacher behavior, ensuring the safety and well-being of the students and creating a conducive learning environment.

Enforcement of disciplinary measures:

Enforcing disciplinary measures for teachers who violate ethical standards and job guidelines was highlighted as essential. This approach serves as a deterrent against repeated misconduct and communicates a clear message that inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated [54]. Participants, including school heads, emphasized the significance of taking decisive action against those responsible for conflicts. The teacher said,

"The recurrence of conflicts in our school is primarily due to the lack of action taken against those responsible. For instance, there are teachers known for their inappropriate advances towards students, yet no measures are taken, despite clear evidence of their actions" (Teacher C1).

Various studies show that lack of accountability is a key reason for the recurrence of conflicts in schools, both among teachers and between teachers and students [25,26,28]. The study found that conflicts in schools sometimes persist because teachers make repeated mistakes without facing disciplinary actions as a warning to others. This lack of consequences appears to function as an inadvertent endorsement of such behavior, allowing the conflicts to persist. The absence of corrective actions not only hampers the resolution of specific issues but also sets a precedent that might encourage a culture of repeating the same mistakes without accountability [55]. Consequently, it creates an environment where the root causes of conflicts are not effectively addressed, contributing to their persistence over time. The study emphasizes the importance of instituting appropriate disciplinary measures to break this cycle and promote a healthier and more conducive educational environment.

Abolishing students' corporal punishment:

The research also recommended the abolishment of corporal punishment in schools.

Participants argued that punitive measures, especially corporal punishment, contribute significantly to conflicts and exacerbate the issues. Parents, teachers, and students stressed the need to review laws regarding corporal punishment, emphasizing that dialogue and understanding should replace physical punishment in schools.

"These beatings make us hold grudges against our teachers even after leaving school. I've witnessed a teacher being pelted with rotten eggs during a celebration because he preferred using the cane over dialogue" (Focal Group Discussion).

It is clear that Corporal punishment not only causes physical harm but also prolongs conflicts as students harbor resentment toward their teachers. Reports and research indicate that many conflicts in schools stem from the administration of punishments that cause harm or lead to the deaths of those involved in the conflicts [7,10,20,51]. This suggests that the nature of punishments plays a pivotal role in escalating tensions and disputes within the school environment. The severity and harm caused by such punishments not only fail to address the underlying issues but often exacerbate conflicts, creating a hostile atmosphere [36]. It underscores the need for a reevaluation of disciplinary methods, focusing on non-harmful and more constructive approaches to conflict resolution in educational settings.

This study identified two prominent issues contributing to conflicts within the school in Biharamulo district. Firstly, conflicts often arise from school meal contributions required from poor families. Despite the government's policy of tuition-free education, parents are still expected to financially support their children's meals at school [30]. This expectation often leads to tensions between parents, teachers, and school committees when parents are unable to meet these financial obligations. The study by Pessambili and Novelli in the Massai rural area in the northern part of Tanzania supports that the financial strain faced by poor families, particularly farmers dealing with unpredictable yields, exacerbates the situation, leading to conflicts within the school community [32].

Another significant issue identified by the study is the misappropriation of behaviors by teachers, including attempts to seduce students and severe punishment when rejected. This behavior

not only creates conflicts between teachers and students but also extends to conflicts between teachers and parents, as well as within the teaching staff. These findings are supported by Hassan's research in Tanzania that power dynamics in teacher-student relationships, coupled with the lack of appropriate mechanisms for reporting such incidents, contribute to an environment where students feel powerless and vulnerable [35]. Moreover, the failure to punish suspected teachers for their inappropriate behavior exacerbates conflicts within the school community, leading to a breakdown of trust and communication.

The study also found that school stakeholders lack professional conflict management skills and often rely on ad hoc techniques to address conflicts. The results align with research conducted by Lasarati & Raharja that each stakeholder tends to resort to unique techniques they deem appropriate, which sometimes exacerbates conflicts rather than resolving them [56]. This highlights the importance of providing both in-service and pre-service conflict resolution strategy skills for teachers, parents, and students. By equipping stakeholders with the necessary conflict-resolution skills, schools can create a more conducive and harmonious learning environment [26]. Additionally, involving students in school matters and decision-making processes can help foster a sense of ownership and belonging, reducing conflicts and promoting a positive school culture [26].

In conclusion, addressing the issues of school meal contributions and teachers' inappropriate behavior is crucial for mitigating conflicts within Biharamulo district secondary schools. Implementing professional conflict management training for school stakeholders and involving students in decision-making processes can help create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. By addressing these issues and equipping stakeholders with the necessary conflict resolution skills, schools can effectively manage conflicts and promote a positive school culture conducive to teaching and learning.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that a significant cause of conflicts in schools is parents' inability to pay for their children's meals while at school. This is primarily because food is a daily necessity for students, and parents are required to contribute

to cover these costs. This type of conflict involves various parties, including teachers, students, parents, and school food committees. Despite the government's tuition-free education policy, parents, often farmers facing unpredictable yields due to insufficient rainfall, find it challenging to meet the financial demands associated with school meal contributions. This economic pressure becomes a contentious issue, leading to conflicts between parents and teachers. The clash between community expectations and the educational system's financial demands is evident, creating tensions within the school community. Moreover, students become unintentionally involved in conflicts, facing punishment for their parents' inability to contribute. Some parents, in response to these conflicts, even consider withdrawing their children from school to avoid further disputes associated with contribution committees.

To address this challenge, the research recommends several steps for the government, teachers, and parents to resolve the issue of students' meals at school while helping reduce conflicts associated with this cause. The proposed measures aim to create a more collaborative and supportive environment for all stakeholders involved.

Firstly, the government should reevaluate its education policies, especially regarding the financial burden on parents for school meal contributions. Considering the economic challenges faced by parents, particularly farmers dealing with unpredictable yields, there could be a need to revise or supplement the tuition-free education policy to include provisions for meals. This could involve allocating additional resources to ensure that students receive meals without placing an undue financial burden on parents.

Secondly, teachers and school committees should adopt a more empathetic and understanding approach toward parents facing financial difficulties. Rather than punishing students for their parents' inability to contribute, teachers could explore alternative solutions, such as seeking support from local communities, and NGOs, or revising the contribution structures to make them more flexible. Furthermore, Teachers can also harness the students' workforce to produce crops such as maize, especially during the farming season, for use in school meals after harvesting. Doing this could alleviate conflicts with parents, although this method requires careful coordination to avoid becoming another

source of conflicts within the school. Open communication between teachers and parents, involving them in decision-making processes related to financial contributions, could help foster a collaborative and supportive school environment.

Thirdly, parents should actively engage with schools and communicate their financial constraints. Transparency and open dialogue with teachers and school committees can lead to more informed decision-making. Parents could also collectively advocate for policies that alleviate the financial strain associated with school meal contributions, working with local authorities and educational policymakers to address these challenges.

In summary, a collaborative effort involving the government, teachers, and parents is crucial to finding sustainable solutions. This includes policy adjustments, a more compassionate approach from educators, and active participation and advocacy from parents to ensure that the education system is equitable and supportive of all students, irrespective of their financial backgrounds.

CONSENT

As per international standards or university standards, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standards or university standards written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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