

# CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: THE CASE OF NIGERIAN POLYTECHNICS

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## **Abstract**

*Conflict resolution is seen as a peaceful solution to individuals and groups that are in conflict. It is an important tool for reduction of violence and destruction in human society. The paper examines conflict and conflict resolution in Tertiary Institutions of Learning using the Polytechnics as a Case Study. The study discovered that students' unrest and disagreement are caused by some basic factors like, unresolved conflicts, increase in school fees, lack of communication, alienation of students from decision making, etc. These factors lead to conflict in institutions. Conflict on its own makes learning/teaching environment unsuitable, invariably it leads to economic losses on the part of school management, government and parents. Therefore, need for conflict resolution arises. Some recommendations were made; employing right personalities in conflict resolution, consultation with students' union government etc. Finally the conclusion is that every human conflict has a solution visa-vis conflict resolution.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Tertiary Institutions, Violence (Destruction)

The Complex nature of man induces conflict as part of human existence. The differences in beliefs, ideology, culture and environmental settings make conflict inevitable in nature. In order to subdue man's nature, man introduced politics to appropriate the limited resources.

The wide variety of activities that constitute politics all have one important characteristic in common: they arise from conflict. We conduct elections because we disagree about who should represent us in Federal house/State house of Assembly. We have set of rules for turning bills into laws because we disagree on which pieces of legislation will best serve the public interest, and we need a way to determine whether a bill's supporters or opponents have more public support.

In short, politics arises from conflict over resources - that is, who will get what-and-values-that is, over how we will government ourselves. What rules we will follow to make our decisions, and what sort of society we hope to have. In turn, government provides the primary means for managing if not always resolving conflict in society.

Conflict is an inherent feature of all societies because it springs from two roots that cannot be eradicated: Material scarcity and simply means that no country can provide its citizens with everything they may need or desire.

Conflict inevitably arises over who should get how much of the resources that are available because material resources are scarce and because people often subscribe to very different values, principles, and benefits, conflict becomes a common feature of societies, government in situations and individuals. Square, and Lindsay (1997).

Conflict not only exists in government or state, but also in higher institutions of learning. Conflict exists at every level of our academics in Nigeria. Conflict if not resolved could lead to violence -destruction of lives and properties and distortion of the teaching and learning in our Polytechnics. Today, students' militancy in the nation's tertiary institutions has come to be a very issue of serious concern. However, revolts, protests, unrests and violence as well as incessant closure of schools for months in the wake of unrest have become regular characteristics of Nigeria's tertiary institutions (Adeyemi, Ekundayo & Aonge, 2010). There is therefore, need to develop or adopt conflict resolution mechanism to combat the negative consequence of conflict in our tertiary institutions.

This study shall examine conflict and conflict resolution in tertiary Institutions, the case of Nigeria/Polytechnics, and proffer tertiary measures for effective conflict resolution the Polytechnics institutions in Nigeria, to foster qualitative education system.

### **Defining Conflict**

Conflict, pertains to the opposing ideas and actions of different entities, thus resulting in an antagonistic state. Conflict is an irrevitable part of life. Each of us

possesses our own opinions, ideas and set of beliefs. We have our own ways of looking at things and we act according to what we think is property. Hence, we often find ourselves in conflict in different scenarios: It may involve other individuals, groups of people, or a struggle within our own selves. Consequently, conflict influences our actions and decisions in one way or another.

Conflict can be described as a disagreement among groups or individuals characterized by antagonism and hostility. This is usually caused by the opposition of one party to another, in an attempt to reach an objective different from that of the other party. The elements involved in the conflict have varied set of principles and values, thus allowing such a conflict to arise. (Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, 2013).

Horowitz and Borden (1995) defined conflict as disagreement over social issues, beliefs and ideologies. Conflict has also been described over disagreement on the procedure of distributing power and resources in an organization. Basically, conflict is what occurs when two or more parties have divergent interests over distribution of . resources and/or issues touching on their development. It is what can come up, in the event of staff and student's interactions. It can emanate from school administrative cadre among students or sometimes it can come up between school and its host community.

Conflict as an expression of social tension and social struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or elimination their rivals. The phenomenon of conflict has two basic characteristics in a setting in which conflict occurs and human actors caning an identifiable group that is engaged in conscious opposition **to** one or more other identifiable human groups, because these groups are pursuing what are, or at least appear to be, incompatible goals.

### **Theories of Conflict**

- i. Structural conflict theory
- ii. Realist theory of conflict
- iii. Biological theories
- iv. The Frustration Aggression theory
- v. Physiological theories
- vi. Psycho-Cultural Conflict theory
- vii. Human Needs theory
- viii. Systematic theory of conflict

Conflict scholars can thus combine one or more points of view in the process of analyzing social conflicts or helping political and institutional leaders to develop the policies for dealing with conflict.

### **Structural Conflict**

Theorists as Marx, Engels, V.I. Lenin, etc believe that conflict is built into particular ways, societies are structured and organized. They looked at social problems like political and economic exclusion, injustice, poverty, disease, exploitation, inequality etc, as source of conflict. They maintain that conflicts occur because the exploitative and unjust nature of human societies domination of one class by another. (Shedrack, 2007).

### **Biological Theories/Theory**

The view that human kind is evil by nature has long tradition. The thinking is that since our ancestors were instinctively violent being and since we evolved from them, we too must bear destructive impulses in our genetic makeup. In their assessment of human nature classical theorists, like Thomas Hobbes, St Augustine Malthus, and Freud, expressed the belief that human beings are driven by natural instinct to self preservation. Hobbes described life in the state of nature as solidarity, poor, nasty, "Brutish and Short" To them, conflict is inherent in all social interactions and among all animals including human beings. (Shedrack Gaya Best, 2007)

### **Physiological Theories**

They believe that even though humans have the capability to be aggressive, this capability remains idle until stimulated by necessity or encouraged by success. Scott (1988) noted that the expression of aggression has a lot to do with learning. In essence, the psychological sources of aggressive behaviour are a function of several factors including human nature and the environment.

### **The Frustration-Aggression Theory**

The basis of the Frustration-Aggression theory is found in the works of John Dollard (a Psychologist) and his associates, in their pioneering work on the subject (Dollard et al, 1939), and in the later research work carried out by Leonard Berkowitz (1980-89).

Further reviews of this theory were undertaken or used in various studies by Zulman (1979), Dill and Anderson (1995) and Mawe (2004) among others.

This theory presents the idea of relative deprivation as a perceived disparity between value expectation and value capabilities. Or the lack of a need satisfaction defined as a gap between aspiration and achievement (Midlarsky, 1975).

Frustration, when it builds up, leads to the rising up of suppression emotions of anger, which is often directed against the part considered to be the source of deprivation of satisfaction. This strong emotion finally finds an outlet through aggressive and invariably violent disposition towards the environment.

Gurr (1970), the potential for collective violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity. If there is a significant discrepancy between what they think they deserve and what they think they will get, there is a likelihood of rebellion. Just as frustration produces aggressive behaviour on the part of an individual, so does relative deprivation predict collective violence by social groups (Maire 2004).

### **Types of Conflict**

- i. Interpersonal conflict: refers to a conflict between two individuals. This occurs typically due to how people are different from one another. Individuals vary which usually results to incompatible choices and opinions.
- ii. Interpersonal conflict: Occurs within an individual. This occurs in a person's mind. It is psychological individual's thoughts, values, principles and emotions.
- iii. Intergroup conflict is a type of conflict that happens among individuals within a team. The incompatibilities and misunderstandings among these individuals lead to an intergroup conflict:
- iv. Intergroup conflict takes place when a misunderstanding arises among different teams within an organization. For instance, the sales department of an organization can come in conflict with the customer support department. This is due to the varied sets of goals and interests of these different groups. In addition, competition also contributes for intergroup conflict to arise. Other factors adduce this type of conflict. Some of these factors may include a rivalry in resources or self identity. ("Mediation", Conflict Research Consortium, 2013).

### **Causes of Conflict in Tertiary Institutions (The case of Polytechnics in Nigeria)**

In the contemporary times our educational institutions had witnessed incessant conflicts. Causes of these conflicts are traceable to the economic hardship and corruption in the wider society affecting the tertiary institutions. Student's crisis is becoming more rampant in the tertiary institutions and the consequence has been to the detriment of teaching and learning atmosphere (Adeyemi: Ekundayo &

Alonge, 2010). It has become a matter of concern to parents, teachers and government.

The disagreement of lecturers over unpaid salary and entitlements, the disparity between the Federal and State Polytechnic salaries, the disparity in the worth of Certificates HND/BSc; these factors had at one time or another lead to strike in our Polytechnics even now.

Non fulfillment of government promises to lecturers is another cause of conflict in Polytechnics in Nigeria.

Academic restructuring and programming without the student's consultation leads to conflicts. It has been observed that the causes of students' crisis in tertiary institutions include wide communication gap between the students and the school authority: delay in meeting students demand by the school authority to guarantee security of lives and properties; students being forced to pay a special fee etc, (Adeyemi, Ekundayo & Alonge, 2010).

The Polytechnics in Nigeria are being confronted with countless challenges from internal and external sources which influence the kind of quantity of conflicts that arise within the Polytechnic. The Polytechnic community experiences countless conflict situations.

In addition, the current strike embarked on by the Polytechnics institutions in Nigeria for the past 6 months, Polytechnics in Nigeria, especially the Federal Polytechnic Nekede Owerri, Imo Polytechnic and others had been on strike for some of the following reasons; establishing their own commission as others like NUC, (Nigeria University Commission), Uniform Salary level with the University lecturers (Grade Level 16-17), good working conditions, ending the disparity between HND and BSc., disparity between State and Federal salary and so on. This particular conflict lingered so much that yesterday 12/5/2014 President Goodluck Jonathan constituted a Committee to look into their grievances and come up with solution. The, economic and social losses of this strike are enormous and it affects the national development of the youths.

On 5<sup>th</sup> May 2014 the Academic Staff Union of Abia State Polytechnic demonstrated to the Management of the School (The Rector and to Council) for non payment of salary for 8 months. It took the intervention of the Council Chairman who stopped the police from wanting to arrest the ASUP President in the presence of

students. This would have led to bloody destruction as the students were prepared for such if the ASUP President was finally taken by the police.

### **Conflict Resolution in Nigeria Tertiary Institution (Polytechnics)**

It is imperative that state/government, institutions and organizations establish a good and efficient mechanism for resolving conflicts in our tertiary institutions when they arise. This is important because conflict unresolved leads to aggression - wanton destruction of lives and properties - low national development.

Conflict resolution is seen by Miller (2003:8) as "a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflict". (Miall et al (2001:21), indicate that by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved and behaviour is no longer violent nor are attitudes hostile any longer, while the structure of the conflict has been changed. It is therefore, the processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution.

Since conflict is an attendant feature of human interaction and cannot be eliminated; therefore, its proper resolution and transformation is important for progress in human society. This is why conflict resolution is one of the most important challenges of governance. (Fatile, Jacob O. & Adejuwon, Kehinde D. 2011).

Conflict resolution is not a challenge to the state/government only but a matter of concern to the academia. Among the different initiatives, the academies were saddled with the introduction of "peace initiatives and Conflict resolution" as a course in general studies at the undergraduate levels of the educational curriculum (Adesina 2010).

### **Methods of Conflict Resolutions**

In resolving school conflicts, developing a constructive communication process and influential conflict negotiator's personality are very important. No doubt, schools cannot avoid experiencing one conflict or the other but a great deal of such conflicts can be managed and be guided from disrupting school efforts towards obtaining its manifest and latent goals if the conflicting parties are systematic in the way they communicate their grievances, situation of the conflict and their readiness to negotiate for peace and if the negotiator mediating the resolution process is of good personality. (Agbonna: Yusuf & Onifade, 2009). The escalating costs of conflict have increased use of third parties which may serve as conflict specialists to resolve conflicts.

Successful conflict resolution strategy in tertiary institutions (polytechnics) usually involves fostering communication among disputants, problems solving, and drafting agreements that meet their underlying needs. In these situations, conflict resolves often talk about finding the "Win"Win" solution; or mutually satisfying scenario, for everyone involved (Fisheuand Ury, 1981).

### **Conflict Mediation**

Across the tertiary institution (Polytechnics) when conflicts arise, one of the management strategies of peaceful solution is mediation. It is a right brain mental process, which emphasizes the use of initiatives, symbols and emotion in the resolution of conflicts. (Cooley, 1992). Here mediation provides an impartial intervener the opportunity of assisting parties in a dispute to achieve a voluntary settlement of their differences through an agreement, which promotes their continued relationship. Beer and Stief on their part define mediation as "...any process for resolving disputes in which another person helps the parties negotiate a settlement... Although there are situations where mediation is unsuitable. (Beer & Stief, 1997:3).

The recent dialogue between Federal Government and Academic Staff Union of Federal Polytechnics is being negotiated between the government Minister of Education, and the Federal Minister of Labour & Manpower Development.

In Arbitration; an arbiter such as a judge or lawyer settles the dispute. The arbiter may be selected by the disputing parties. Examples of arbitration include industrial arbitration such as employer-trade unions, e.g. the Academic and Non Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics. Arbitration employed in the current unpass between them and federal government. In one occasion union members (ASUPU) chased lecturers out of the classroom where they were teaching the Evening programme students (Nekede Polytechnics.)

Coercion includes both the violent and non violent methods of use of force. For example non payment of salary to the academic staff union members for refusal to teach in 2013.

Negotiation; (Fisher et al 2000:115) defines negotiation as "...a structured process of dialogue between conflicting parties about issues in which their opinions differ. Thus negotiation is a direct process of dialogue and discussion taking place between at least two parties who are faced with a conflict situation or a dispute. By talking to each other solution is achieved.



Conciliation, it is a third party activity which covers intermediary efforts aimed at persuading the parties to a conflict to work towards peaceful solution. It involves facilitation.

Adjudication is another non-violent method of conflict management. This involves the use of the courts and litigation processes. It is to take their case to court of law, before a judge of competent jurisdiction. Legal counsels may represent them. For example the striking lecturers of Ilorin University and a lecturer Mr. Oji of Abia Polytechnic about 2007/2008 was stopped work by the (School Management). He took the matter to court and won, he was restated to the Polytechnic.

All these mentioned and discussed methods of conflict resolution are applicable to conflict resolution in Nigeria Polytechnics. In the contemporary time (2014) conflict management and resolution is a compulsory course in the second semester curriculum e.g. Abia State Polytechnic, Department of Public Administration.

### **Conclusion**

The inevitability of conflict in Polytechnics institutions necessitated the study on conflict, X-raying its meaning, theories of conflict, since conflict is part of human existence, and it produces adversarial situations if not' resolved. The study of conflict resolution and methods, examining the application of any of these methods would help students and school authority/management to exist peacefully. It would reduce conflict degenerating into violence and aftermath of violence - destruction of lives and properties. Since Polytechnics are mainly made up of youths who are prone to recruitment into negative vices, the knowledge of effective conflict resolution mechanisms would go a long way in achieving peaceful resolutions of conflicts among students/management, personal/interpersonal, group/intergroup in our Polytechnics in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

The Nigerian Polytechnics and other related institutions will hopefully witness better and less conflict situations if the following recommendations are considered.

- a. The adoption and strengthening of conflict and conflict resolution education in the school curriculum as a compulsory course.
- b. The application of the right or effective conflict resolution method suitable to the situation arising to any conflict.
- c. Effective and efficient communication system being inbuilt into the system for school authorities to talk with the students.

- d. Employing the right personalities in conflict resolution in the Polytechnics.
- e. Good administration in the Polytechnic - Administration with human face).
- f. The student union government/leaders should be from time to time invited by the School Authority & Council for consultation in certain areas before taking decisions or making policy of the school.
- g. The application of the conflict resolution method involving students' representative should be adopted.
- h. The government should remove some emergency increase in fees that create room for conflict.

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