



# Teachers' Coping Mechanisms in Confronting School-Based Conflicts: A Grounded Theory

## Article History

Receive Date: 2021/2/19

Revise Date: 2021/3/15

Accept Date: 2021/3/16

Publish Date: 2021/3/19

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## Abstract

Based on the personal lived-experiences of teachers, the research was set out to describe their views on school-based conflicts, the causal conditions behind them, their reactions and coping approaches in dealing with this phenomenon. This study adopted the Straussian Grounded Theory, a qualitative research methodology which allowed the exploration and abstraction of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives as the source of primary data. Data was collected from interviews of forty-one selected public and private school teachers who are teaching within Cavite City. All of the data were analyzed through open coding, axial coding, selective coding and theoretical coding to develop the core category and its properties. Dialogical-contemplative coping approach is the grounded theory abstracted out of the interplay among the responses of the participants, conditions, and consequences that the researcher has captured out of analysis. This conflict coping style developed in this study is characterized as eclectic and serves as a "double-edge defense" adopted by the teachers in confronting conflicts in the educational setting. The consistent results across the investigation revealed the impression that no matter what conflict perspective teachers do possess, a rich self-confirmation and validation of using dialogical-contemplative coping approach is described by the teachers. Whatever conflict management mode they utilize in retaliation to school-based conflicts, it has been proven that the teachers are committed on the shared use of communication/dialogue and spiritual-contemplation as a diplomatic and ethical tool in the examination of differences and resolution to arguments. Enhancing professional development programs, refining leadership and genuine collaboration between stakeholders could significantly curb conflicts in school environments.

**Keywords:** *School-based conflicts, coping mechanisms, grounded theory, educational setting, conflict management*

## Introduction

Communities in the world look up to schools as the primary institution that inform, reform and transform lives through education. Schools are now recognized as the main driver in providing education; so schools have now responsibility in addressing one of the strategic goals of UNESCO's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Education Goal (SDG 4) "...stakeholders should make every effort to ensure that education institutions are protected as zones of peace, free from violence, including school-related gender-based violence." It prominently highlighting the building and upgrading of educational facilities for a safer, non-violent learning environments for all.

One of the perennial issues that endanger the establishing of harmonious academic life is the occurrence of school-based conflicts. Educational institutions are among the

organizations in which conflicts occur frequently. Thus, it is crucial for school administrators to accurately analyse conflicts to successfully manage them and to be aware of the personal characteristics that shape humans and their behaviours (Yildizoglu & Burgaz, 2014).

Conflict is, "the outgrowth of diversity that characterizes our thoughts, our attitudes, our beliefs, our perceptions, and our social systems and structures" This diversity can be found in the workforce, families, and the larger society (Weeks, 2014).

While teachers, aside from delivering instructions and inculcate discipline; they are also playing the incomparable role of surrogate parents (Sudhakar, 2017). Teachers are the most valued assets of any country, they have a vital role to play; they educate the most valued assets of the country (Akhlag, Amjad & Mehmood, Seed-ul-Hassan, & Malik, 2010).

With the demands of 21st century education, teacher's work landscape had evolved drastically from the privilege of having professional autonomy and exclusive academic freedom (Blessinger and De Wit, 2018); today's educators are expected to participate collaboratively in creating decisions for the attainment of institutional goals (Bryan, Zugelder et al. 2018). Such academic alliances of teachers with school administrators, faculty, staff, parents and other stakeholders eventually will lead them to be confronted with conflicting perspectives, needs and interests. As a result, teachers endure greater job-related stress than other professionals, according to the National Foundation for Educational Research (Bussby, 2019).

With the onset of the issue about mental health crisis, it is relevant to investigate on the coping behaviours of teachers subjected to academic pressures, particularly school-based conflicts (Sharma, 2017). The use of effective coping skills can often help improve mental and emotional well-being. This study is underpinned by the need to gain a comprehensive insight on teachers coping styles in dealing with school-based conflicts as it influences the efficacy of the learning institutions (Clipa, 2018). Conflict situations can negatively affect the teachers' performance, as well as the performance of the institutions. A teacher is successful if he knows his students are proficient in his subject, knows the strategies of learning and educating, and knows how to cope with conflicts successfully (Ozgan, 2016).

This research will try to unravel the complexity of the interplay between school-based conflicts and teacher's coping mechanisms which had created a grounded theory which is "*dialogical-contemplative coping*" characterized as eclectic and would serve as a "double-edge defense" and proactive intervention by teachers in order to reduce the frequency of conflicts and its impact specifically in the educational setting.

### Materials and Method

Over the past decades, grounded theory is heralded as revolutionary in the history of qualitative traditions primarily in educational research. Grounded theory has several distinct methodological genres: classical GT associated with Glaser; evolved GT associated with Strauss and Corbin; and constructivist GT associated with Charmaz (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This research study adopted the Straussian approach with the justification that it provides highly complex and systematic coding techniques and permits a preliminary literature study to identify research problems and the areas in which to look for data. Strauss and Corbin (1990) designed a highly systematic and rigorous coding structure to create (rather than to discover) a rigorous theory which closely corresponds to the data. They classified four coding stages: open coding, axial coding, selective coding and theoretical sampling (Fig. 1). Constant comparison with existing data in the study was repeatedly done until saturation of data had been reached. Once the core category and related categories are established, the researcher reviews previous literature and integrates it with the current core category and categories through selective coding (Scott, 2009).

Once the validation is sufficiently complete, the researcher may move on to writing and publishing the theory.



Figure 1. The Coding Procedure of Straussian Grounded Theory

Source: Strauss & Corbin (1990)

The researcher conducted the purposeful subject selection as part of theoretical sampling (Ligita, et. al, 2019). Participants were selected public and private school teachers who can best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study (Table. 1). Upon the release of the Institutional Ethics Review Committee certification, the data gathering proceeded. Request letters were sent to the prospective schools and the qualified research participants moved on the interview stage.

Table 1: Profile of the Participants

Characteristics	Number	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	35	85.4
Male	6	14.6
<b>Age</b>		
20 – 30	11	26.8
31 – 40	15	36.6
41 – 50	10	24.4
51 – 60	4	9.8
61 +	1	2.4
<b>Years in Teaching</b>		
3 – 5	6	14.6
6 – 10	18	43.9
11 – 15	3	7.3
16 – 20	5	12.2
21 +	9	22.0
<b>Type of School</b>		
Public	30	73.2
Private	11	26.8
<b>Qualification</b>		
Bachelor Degree	35	85.4
Master Degree	6	14.6

The researcher prepared the open-ended semi-structured interview questions/guides. The intensive interviewing technique was employed, in order to enable the interviewer to ask for more detail, delve into an issue, go back and forth among important points and request for more explanation. The researcher digitally recorded each interview through video and voice recording. The digital recording was transcribed in verbatim for deeper analysis and understanding of the data and to maintain the meticulousness of the study. After which, the interview transcription was printed and used for open coding of experiences, for axial coding and for selective coding. Field notes presented an additional opportunity to collect data during in-depth interviews. Field notes provide an opportunity for the researcher to record and comment on his/her thoughts about the setting, the respondents and activities. Such data can contribute to further steps in

subsequent fieldwork and issues relevant during the analysis phase (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Grounded theory methodology has the following key major components – codes, concept, categories and theory – all of which are essential factors utilized for data analysis of this study. The data analysis process underwent different operation of coding in grounded theory methodology such as open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding started with a process referred to as microanalysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding identifies categories, properties and dimensions. The data gathered together were grouped according to the categories that emerged. The writing of memos also begins in this stage. During axial coding, categories are related to subcategories, the properties and dimensions of a category are specified and the relationships are tested against data (Saldaña, 2013). The last stage of coding is selective coding where it attempts to link-up the categories and properties to form a framework or model. Selective coding is first translated into the form of a table to determine the extent of the interconnection of data. It involves choosing one or more of the six conditional matrix of Strauss and Corbin (1990) to be the core category. Constant comparison and memoing are applied to this stage (Fig. 2).

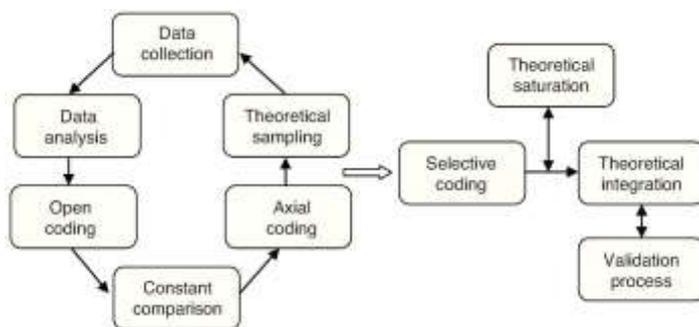


Fig. (2) Approach by Glaser and Strauss  
 Source: Based on Strauss and Corbin (2008).

## Results and Discussion

The general objective of the study was to find out the coping mechanisms pragmatically applied by teachers in confronting school-based conflicts, specifically in the locality of Cavite City.

### How teachers describe school conflict

The findings of the study revealed that the participants described school conflict in three distinct, yet related sub-categories, namely: a) *accepting as one of the realities in life's existence and relationships*, b) *causing troubles and complexities personally and professionally*, and c) *looking at conflicts as blessing in-disguise for learning and growth*.

The participants gave three significant views in describing the phenomenon- "school-based conflicts". It is interesting to discover that based on the response obtained, most of the participants treated conflict negatively with dysfunctional and damaging outcomes. Majority of the respondents associated the term "conflicts" to negative

experiences and challenges specifically whenever miscommunication and misunderstanding arises. This school of thought in conflict studies is called the "traditional view". Conflict was viewed negatively and discussed with such terms as violence, destruction, and irrationality to reinforce its negative connotation. Conflict was a dysfunctional outcome resulting from poor communication, a lack of openness and trust between people, and the failure of managers to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of their employees (Robbins and Judge, 2013). The other participants take a look at conflict either as a natural and unavoidable phenomenon (human relations view) or accepting conflict positively with functional and beneficial results in any institutions (interactionist view) (Robbins, 2005).

### Common conflicts encountered by teachers

The results of the investigations indicate that the participants shared four distinct, yet related sub-categories, namely: a) *encountering conflicts against self and others*, b) *deforming interpretation of the explicit/implicit meanings of communications*, c) *occurring tasks and relationship conflicts in institutions and d) opposing ideologies and instructions*.

Data gathered out of the valuable testimonies of the participants uncovered that the most common causes of school-based conflicts they have experienced and observed are organizational or institutional in nature involving *tasks and relationship disputes*. Teachers are confronted with various school-based conflicts triggered by different interest groups; these differences happen because of disparity in roles and tasks. A number of research participants imply that some of institutions role players and stakeholders, particularly the parents, behave in an arrogant manner and this makes dealings between each other often very sensitive. It is disappointing to discover that there are academics with interests that go against the nature of their profession. There are members of the academe who lack essential professionalism and values. They primarily care about realizing their personal interests without considering the possible harm they might cause to their colleagues. Furthermore, the issue of power, authority, and leadership weakens affiliates' integrity and loyalty, particularly in the aspect of decision-making and in observing existing policies and regulations.

### Conditions why conflicts prevalent in schools

The prevalence of school-based conflicts is being reinforced due to the occurrences of conditions that create opportunities for conflict to arise. Based on the paradigm model, these relevant conditions verified thru data as having a direct or indirect effect upon the phenomenon are the intervening and contextualizing conditions.

Determining intervening conditions were defined by the participants in four distinct, yet related sub-categories, namely: a) *leading scarcity of resources to competition*, b) *trying to meet all role player's needs*, c) *displaying antagonistic relationship of stakeholders to one another*, d) *differing beliefs and value system*.

The intervening conditions are any situation that affects the strategy to cope with research phenomena (Strauss and

Corbin, 2014). In this study, the most recognizable factor which the participants found an occurring condition for school-conflicts likely to happen has something to do with the role player's assertion of their identity, needs and concerns. It truly takes a village to raise and educate a child and the teachers proved how conflicting interests of the role players on different levels greatly affect relations within the institution. Among the stakeholders, it is the teacher and the parent who are often at odds because of discrepant views on child's needs and perspectives on how to properly discipline children (Kelly, 2017). The so-called helicopter parents can have a draining and often times damaging impact on a teacher's life, affecting the all-important relationship teachers need to have with parents (Holz, 2018). Parents as the natural source of child's discipline (Maguire and Cinneide, 2005), often collided with teachers when it comes to this issue.

Contextualizing conditions were described by the participants in two distinct, yet related sub-categories, namely: a) *giving unclear messages and images causes distorted information and influences*, and b) *bearing conflicts due to external forces that challenges administrative effectiveness*.

The research participants evaluated how communication breakdown served as the prime contextualizing condition which oftentimes lead to misunderstandings and allow barriers to be erected (Johdi & Apitree, 2012 and Shahmohammadi, 2014). Johdi & Apitree (2012) contend that both too little and too much communication can lead to conflict. This simple controversy over the improper method of disseminating information and messages oftentimes results to blunder into the many affairs of the school, according to the research participants. Apparently, the most common scenario is that the instruction has been communicated but the manner in which it is done causes confusion. As a result, miscommunication breeds uncertainty, incorrect assumptions, and workplace gossip.

#### **How teachers handle/ manage school-based conflicts**

Specifying strategies were described by the participants in six distinct, yet related sub-categories, namely: a) finding mutual grounds thru negotiations, b) working-out collaboratively to generate innovative solutions, c) acting as "conflict absorber" with tactics of appeasement, d) seeing-no evil, hearing no-evil and speaking no-evil in dealing with conflict, e) standing-up with forcing behaviour in defending one's position, f) giving God-control and seeking divine intervention.

Out of the data, the specifying strategies taken by the respondents were categorized into six concepts from which out of the six concepts, five were found congruent with the Thomas-Killman Conflict Handling Model (2008) namely: a) compromising, b) collaborating, c) accommodating, d) avoiding and e) competing.

It is important to note that the choice between different conflict management strategies depends on the conflict level and the various situations that must be managed effectively, that is, to manage conflict functionally, it is important to recognize that one strategy may be more appropriate than another, depending on the conflict

situation, being considered appropriate if its use leads to the effective formulation or resolution of the conflict (Rahim, 2002).

Respondents described utilizing the *compromising approach* to school conflicts by seeking mutual grounds thru negotiations and making concessions (Cadiz, 2016). It also appears that teachers suggest that there should be willingness and humility to initiate the negotiations to settle conflicts. Understanding where another person is coming from will often help them to gain a greater level of perspective, making compromise easier to attain. The findings relate to results by Morillos (2018) that among the specifying strategies employed by the participants in confronting school-based conflicts, it is the *collaborating style* which is very much practiced. This means that teachers cooperatively work with their colleagues to resolve issues through assertive dialogue until they come up to an amenable solution. The study affirms that most of the teachers want to maintain a highly assertive, yet humane manner of managing conflict through appropriate communication and open mind. This validates that dialogue and communication is an effective tool in addressing conflicts. The *accommodating option* applied by the participants by means of acting as "conflict absorber" with tactics of appeasement. Saeed et al., (2014) view that the accommodating or obliging conflict management style is used to protect and maintain a good relationship with others, instead of keeping and meeting one's own concerns. What matters most to teachers in times of disagreements is preserving the relationship more important than winning the issue at hand. The "blame game" scenario that the teachers often feel in dealing with difficult parents most of the time ends up in this kind of pattern or approach. There is a tendency for teachers to bend and yield on to the opposition for arguing is only time-consuming and exhausting. The *avoiding conflict management style* of teachers in this study is portrayed by seeing-no evil, hearing no-evil, and speaking no-evil in dealing with conflicts. It is a style which links to withdrawal or dodge from the problems; thus, it is indirect and uncooperative (Saeed et al., 2014). The findings also revealed that teachers do not frequently use or adopt *competing strategy* in resolving conflicts for they wanted to maintain professionalism and consider as well as its administrative and legal implications. Although some of them said that they are just doing their job but once provoked, they have the tendency to compete once their rights and integrity are violated.

Among the five conflict managing styles, the data revealed that the participants engaged mostly on *collaboration* in handling conflicts. Another meaningful conflict management technique comes to surface based on the lived-experiences of the participants which is spiritual in origin – prayer. In the *spiritual conflict management style*, the individual is acting in "obedience" rather than competing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising, or collaborating. This style does not exist as one of the five styles of conflict management because the rationale for the

decision resides internally founded on the principles of God (Rittle, 2008).

The findings evaluated the two most evident modes of coping mechanisms of the teacher participants in dealing with school-based conflicts, namely: direct cognitive-dialogical approach and spiritual-reflective-self-help approach. Direct-cognitive-dialogical approach adheres to the most “educative” form of confronting the conflicts through “dialogue”- as a reflective form of communication. Harper (2004) advocated that the process of dialogue is useful in offering those engaged in conflict and disputes an opportunity to manage the conflict and resolve the dispute. In the ordeal of handling conflicts, teacher participants are active in rationalizing the problem and ensure to collaborate vertically (internally) and horizontally (across departments) seeking support in order to achieve dynamic resolution of conflicts. On the other hand, spiritual-contemplative-self-help approach features how the teacher participants project their spirituality by means of praying as a coping function in preventing and solving conflicts. Participants have developed perceptions concerning the functions of prayer when coping with personal difficulties (Bade and Cook, 2008). The domain of religious/spiritual coping has established itself as a unique and valid practice employed by the participants in this study as this result is empirically supported by Belavich & Pargament (2002) as they have investigated the increasing scholarly acceptance and relevance of spiritually faith-based coping methods.

Aside from prayer, the respondents also resort into some kind of self-help creative positive coping outlets just to divert themselves for a while from conflict. Another study by Kimanzi (2014) has similarities with the current study and found that some of the coping strategies among the participants included practice of good time management, taking out time for leisure and rest, setting priorities, seeking counselling services, physical exercises, drinking water, nature tripping, praying and bible reading.

#### **How to help teachers handle conflict appropriately**

The results of the study presented that the participants developed two distinct, yet related sub-categories, namely: a) Dialogical Cognitive-Direct Approach and b) Spiritual Reflective-Self-Help Approach.

Studying the behavioural and emotional responses of teachers towards conflicts in school, it appears that they often undertake self-initiative to discover the grassroots of conflicts and they look for ways of creating an exploratory dialogue which is a crucial prerequisite to eventually bringing light behind the disputes. “Talk cure” has the precondition of taking place in a most ideal climate, proper timing, and dispositions of the concerned parties. And then, it can grindingly begin to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable and to seek out the eventual compromises upon which any long-term settlement should inevitably be built (Lothian, 2015). In the midst of conflicts, teachers become bridge-builders, truth-finders, and agents of synergy. Not unlike ordinary crimes and mysteries, teachers would not settle for any conflicts to remain unsolved. The narratives prove that they want to be involved and take action in fixing the conflicts in a most

diplomatic manner. Dialogues might be considered as “therapeutic conversations” within the “treatment meeting” (Olson et al., 2014). The open dialogue approach is very comprehensive. It is an approach that cannot be adopted by a lone practitioner; it requires a team and a surrounding context that is open enough to accommodate it. Otherwise, there will be much frustration. The solution here may lie in the satisfactory reward, experiencing the difference between a therapeutic talk and a dialogue, which can be, in itself, fulfilling in normal life. But I guess it unfolds its full potential in the field that it was developed for – helping people experiencing severe crisis (Schutze, 2015).

Religious coping manifested through the use of prayers by teachers has been consistently demonstrated in this study. Religious functioning, which involves both internal (spirituality) and external (religious activities such as praying) components, is a potentially important area of functioning with implications for distress. For many people, religious functioning is part of coping with stressful life events (Schuster et al., 2001). Achour (2013) conducted face to face interviews with five Muslim female academicians from the University of Malaya, Malaysia. Achour concluded that most Muslim women academicians are aware of the difficulties related to balancing work demands and family roles and that most interviewees use religiosity as a strategy to cope with the various conflicts. This is exactly the same scenario which I experienced while gathering data through interviews. In conditions of trouble for instance, reliance on God turns into a powerful tool of stress management in the sense that it generates ample space for divine intervention in human affairs, and the basis that God never abandons those who place their trust in Him (Acour et al., 2015).

**Dialogical-contemplative coping** is the result of the most “observable” consequences undertaken and promoted by the participants as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” in dealing with school-based conflicts. Dialogical-contemplative coping aims to help teachers in developing a framework that will urgently transform them to become effective in school conflict management process.

#### **Conclusions**

The present study attempted to investigate the realities behind teacher’s struggles and challenges in coping school-based conflicts. The research showed how educator participants viewed conflicts in varied lenses and perceptions, identified its major causes and described their personal individual coping strategies in facing this phenomenon. The consistent results across the investigation support the impression that teachers formulated their own coping mechanisms based on the qualitative analysis of their lived-experiences. Thus, out of their functional and empowered character, the most influential technique contributed by the participants that also served as the grounded theory of the study - is the **dialogical-contemplative coping approach** in dealing with school-based conflicts. A more thorough study should be made on this dynamic coping style which had emerged and applied by teachers in every occasion of conflicts in

school. Thus, the institutionalization of conflict management skills not only of teachers but to all stakeholders becomes now highly imperative to establish an effective learning and teaching environment.

### Recommendations

Developing this Straussian grounded theory has allowed the identification of a number of practice implications relating to the coping mechanisms in dealing with school-based conflicts on the following:

a) To the administrators: Awareness and application of these findings can contribute on reducing the school-based conflicts associated with the position, increasing administrative effectiveness, and refining their leadership.

b) To the teachers: Further professional development program and venues that would give them an opportunity to share their experiences, express their views, and discuss emerging issues and challenges like school-based conflicts that would help them reduce their impact.

c) To the parents: Take action using genuine advocacy skills instead of resorting to “blame game”. Adherence to true collaboration and prudence that enables parents and school professionals to work together in the best interests of the child should be practiced.

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