PUNGGAWA
SOCIAL INQUIRY

Punggawa Social Inquiry
Volume 1, Number 3, 2026
E-ISSN: 3164-015X
Open Access: punggawajournal.com/psi

Promoting Positive School Culture through Conflict Management Strategies in Nigerian Secondary Schools

Rekiat Omolola Adefalu[1], **Afolakemi O. Oredein**[2]

[1] Department of Educational Foundations, School of Education, Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, Nigeria
[2] Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education, Lead City University, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria
Correspondence: adefalu.rekiat2230@fcesoyo.edu.ng, a.oredein@lcu.edu.ng

Article Info

Article history:
Received Sept 25th, 2026
Revised Oct 1th, 2026
Accepted Nov 14th, 2026

Keyword:
School culture; Conflict; Conflict resolution; Conflict management strategies.

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examined how conflict management strategies can promote a positive school culture in Nigerian secondary schools. It reviewed the nature and causes of school conflict, the responsibilities of school leaders, and the relationship between conflict resolution and shared values within school communities. The discussion was organized around the Thomas–Kilmann conflict-handling framework, which distinguishes avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating according to assertiveness and cooperativeness. The review identified communication difficulties, differing expectations, interpersonal competition, and perceived unfairness as sources of tension described in the cited scholarship. It argued that no single conflict-handling mode was appropriate for every dispute and that leaders needed to consider the parties, urgency, and consequences before selecting a response. Collaboration and compromise were particularly relevant to maintaining trust and participation, while competing and avoiding had more limited situational uses. The paper recommended professional development for school leaders, impartial and empathetic communication, and teacher education addressing conflict resolution. Constructive conflict management was presented as a means of supporting respectful relationships and an inclusive school environment.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Punggawa Legacy Center. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

INTRODUCTION

Conflict arises when individuals or groups have divergent interests, expectations, or viewpoints. In educational institutions, disagreements are an ordinary part of social interaction, but poorly managed disputes may obstruct school goals. Miscommunication, differing values, and interpersonal competition are among the sources described in studies of Nigerian schools (Aina, 2022). Unresolved tensions may disturb the learning environment, increase anxiety, weaken student engagement, and adversely affect school climate (Abdulgafar, 2020; Onyinyechi & Wichendu, 2021).

Concerns about fairness also shape school relationships. Thompson and Unachukwu (2022) associate perceived organizational justice with teachers' engagement, while Ughamadu et al. (2025) discuss the relationship between principals' conflict management strategies and teachers' organizational behavior. School administrators therefore need to attend to the working relationships, well-being, and expectations of teachers alongside students' learning needs. Constructively handled disagreements may support mutual understanding and more collaborative working relationships rather than producing continuing hostility (Aina, 2022).

This paper discusses conflict in education, leadership responsibilities, causes of disagreement, conflict management strategies, and their relationship to school culture in Nigerian secondary schools.

Its organizing framework is the Thomas–Kilmann approach to conflict handling, which considers the degree of assertiveness and cooperativeness in a response. The discussion brings together arguments from the cited studies to explain why a strategy suitable for one situation may be unsuitable for another and to identify practical directions for school leadership.

RESEARCH METHODS

The article uses a conceptual, narrative review of scholarship on school conflict, educational leadership, school culture, and organizational conflict management. The sources examined are the academic publications and theoretical discussions cited in the manuscript, with attention to Nigerian secondary schools and, where relevant, broader educational settings. No questionnaire, interviews, school observations, or newly collected empirical data were reported in the source manuscript; the analysis is therefore a synthesis of published arguments rather than a field-based assessment.

The discussion is organized thematically around the meanings and sources of school conflict, the role of school leaders, the five conflict-handling strategies, and implications for a positive school culture. Thomas–Kilmann's two dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness provide a conceptual structure for interpreting the strategies. Because a systematic search and formal quality appraisal were not documented, the discussion should not be taken as an exhaustive systematic review or as a quantitative comparison of strategy effectiveness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conflict in education

Conflict in schools refers to perceived incompatibility between individuals or groups regarding needs, values, behaviors, or goals. It may occur among students, between students and teachers, or between members of staff and school management (Emmanuel, 2024). Agua and Obiukwu (2022) discuss conflict in the relationship between principals and teachers, while Etele and Akunne (2023) describe conflict in terms of incompatible objectives and consequences. Such disagreements can create antagonism and weaken working relationships, especially where participants do not have an effective means of addressing them.

The existence of disagreement is not, by itself, evidence that a school is poorly managed. People enter educational institutions with different expectations, responsibilities, and experiences. Effective management seeks to limit the destructive effects of these differences while preserving opportunities for problem-solving and organizational learning (Agua & Obiukwu, 2022). Oredein and Durojaye (2013) likewise place conflict within the wider relationships of educational organizations. The key concern for leadership is how disagreement is recognized, communicated, and addressed before it becomes disruptive.

The role of school leaders in conflict resolution

School leaders have responsibility for creating an environment in which respectful communication and constructive dialogue are possible. Teachers, students, administrators, and parents need opportunities to express different perspectives and participate in resolving disagreements. Leaders influence this environment through their own conduct, the consistency of school rules, and the ways they facilitate discussions between parties. The educational leadership scholarship cited by Arar and Orucu (2024) and Zincirli (2021) supports attention to communication and institutional relationships, although the studies address contexts beyond the specific conflicts considered here.

An impartial response requires leaders to consider the concerns of all affected parties rather than privileging a preferred group or personal relationship. Listening, clarification of the underlying issue, and transparent explanations can reduce misunderstanding. Where disputes concern the treatment of teachers, leaders also need to consider whether administrative decisions have contributed to perceptions of unfairness (Thompson & Unachukwu, 2022).

Causes of conflict in Nigerian schools

Schools bring together people from different cultural, socioeconomic, and ideological backgrounds. Differences in expectations, interpersonal rivalry, ineffective communication, and perceived inequity can create tension among students and staff (Aina, 2022). Abdulgafar (2020) associates unresolved school conflict with concerns such as bullying, absenteeism, and diminished confidence within the school community. Etele and Akunne (2023) likewise discuss breakdowns in communication, working relationships, and organizational performance arising from unmanaged disputes.

Institutional performance also depends on the ability of school leadership structures to fulfill their responsibilities. Ogunode, Ayeni, and Olorundare (2024) discuss institutional functions in a broader Nigerian educational context, while Etele and Akunne (2023) address organizational approaches to managing disagreements. The accounts considered here indicate that conflict management cannot be reduced to an isolated response after a confrontation. Expectations, governance arrangements, and channels for raising concerns also shape whether tensions persist.

Conflict management strategies

The cited scholarship identifies five broad strategies for managing organizational conflict: avoiding, accommodating, competing, collaborating, and compromising (Ajudeonu & Ossai, 2022; Ogunode, Ayeni, & Samuila, 2024). Each approach entails a different balance between pursuing one's own concerns and addressing the interests of others. Their usefulness depends on the urgency of the issue, the relationships involved, and the consequences of delaying or imposing a decision.

Avoiding entails postponing or withdrawing from a disagreement. It may prevent unnecessary escalation where an issue is minor or the parties need time to regain composure, but prolonged avoidance can leave serious concerns unresolved. Accommodating gives priority to the other party's needs to maintain an important relationship. This can preserve cooperation, although habitual accommodation may leave legitimate concerns of one party unaddressed. Competing emphasizes a firm pursuit of one's own position and may be necessary where immediate action is required to protect safety or essential school rules; excessive reliance on this approach can strain relationships.

Collaborating seeks to understand the interests of all parties and develop an outcome addressing their underlying concerns. In school settings, this can encourage shared problem-solving and sustained cooperation. Compromising involves reciprocal concessions to reach an acceptable settlement when a fully integrated solution is not possible or time is limited. Both strategies can support continuing relationships, yet neither is appropriate in every case. School leaders need to assess the nature of a dispute before choosing the degree of negotiation, accommodation, or decisiveness required.

The concept of school culture

School culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, assumptions, expectations, practices, and customs that shape behavior in a school community. It is expressed through everyday relationships and routines as well as formal rules, ceremonies, symbols, and school traditions (Enwereazu, 2024). Mamdooha et al. (2022) associate school culture with the principles and expectations through which a school functions; Adem and Hurriyet (2021) also consider its relationship with student achievement.

Culture is experienced through how members treat one another and how conflicts are handled. A school may publicly endorse mutual respect while resolving disputes through favoritism or intimidation. Conversely, fair treatment, constructive communication, and consistent expectations can reinforce norms of cooperation. For this reason, conflict management is part of the everyday formation of school culture rather than a separate administrative activity.

Promoting a positive school culture through conflict resolution

The ways teachers and principals manage disagreement provide practical examples of behavior for students. When school leaders model respect, empathy, and collaboration, these practices can strengthen a climate in which members feel heard and valued. Erwin et al. (2025) discuss the relationship between school conflict management and educational performance, while Emmanuel (2024) connects leadership conflict management and team building with supportive learning conditions. These publications provide conceptual support for the argument that constructive handling of disputes can contribute to a positive school environment.

Maintaining such an environment requires more than the occasional settlement of a dispute. Leaders need reliable communication channels, equitable procedures, opportunities for dialogue, and the ability to distinguish urgent safety issues from disputes that benefit from joint problem-solving. Consistent and transparent responses can help teachers and students trust that disagreements will be considered fairly, reducing the likelihood that ordinary differences develop into lasting antagonism.

Thomas–Kilmann conflict mode theory and its relevance

The Thomas–Kilmann conflict mode framework organizes conflict responses along two dimensions: assertiveness, or the extent to which an individual pursues personal concerns, and cooperativeness, or the extent to which an individual seeks to satisfy the concerns of others. The resulting modes are competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. The theory offers a way to distinguish these strategies rather than treating all dispute resolution approaches

as interchangeable (Fajonyomi, 2025; Pembi et al., 2023). Hansen (2021) is also cited in the source manuscript for broader conflict management theory.

Competing combines high assertiveness with low cooperativeness and can be appropriate in emergencies requiring prompt, decisive action. Collaborating combines high assertiveness with high cooperativeness and is suited to complex disagreements requiring the integration of different perspectives. Compromising involves intermediate levels of both dimensions, allowing the parties to accept reciprocal concessions. Avoiding combines low assertiveness with low cooperativeness and may be useful when an issue is minor or discussion would cause greater immediate harm. Accommodating combines low assertiveness with high cooperativeness, prioritizing a relationship or a concern regarded as more pressing by the other party.

In Nigerian secondary schools, the framework helps school leaders consider how their responses affect relationships among staff, students, and administrators. Collaboration and compromise may help build trust and maintain teamwork where interests can be reconciled. Avoidance can be useful temporarily but may allow serious concerns to persist if it becomes a routine response. Similarly, excessive competition may damage morale even when decisive intervention is necessary in particular situations. The framework offers an interpretive structure; the manuscript does not provide original comparative data demonstrating that one mode is uniformly more effective across schools.

Directions for school practice

The recommendations presented in the source manuscript emphasize sustained professional development. Ministries and educational authorities can support principals through workshops, seminars, and conferences on communication and conflict management. Teacher education programs can likewise introduce prospective teachers to the sources, dynamics, and resolution of school conflict. Such learning should encourage leaders to identify the cause of a dispute before selecting a response, rather than relying on a single preferred style.

School managers should combine strategies according to the parties involved, the urgency of the issue, and the need to preserve fair treatment and constructive relationships. Personal preferences should not determine how complaints are handled. Providing opportunities for explanation and participation can make conflict resolution more credible and consistent with the positive school culture that leaders are seeking to cultivate.

CONCLUSION

Conflict is a recurring part of school life in Nigeria, but its consequences depend on the way disagreements are understood and managed. The conceptual discussion identifies avoiding, accommodating, competing, collaborating, and compromising as distinct responses to conflict, each with different strengths and limitations. The Thomas–Kilmann framework highlights why an effective response must consider both the pursuit of legitimate concerns and cooperation with other parties. Constructive communication, fairness, and empathy can help school leaders prevent unresolved tensions from undermining the school community.

Strengthening conflict management requires school leaders to understand the causes of disputes and apply strategies appropriate to the circumstances. Professional development, conflict-resolution preparation in teacher education, and impartial decision-making can support these efforts. The central implication is that a positive school culture is reinforced when teachers, students, and administrators experience disagreements as matters that can be addressed respectfully rather than as threats to their relationships.

REFERENCES

Abdulgafar, K. O. (2020). Challenges and strategies of conflict management in secondary schools. *Benin Journal of Educational Studies, 8*(2), 112–125.

Adem, B., & Hurriyet, A. K. (2021). The effects of school culture on students' academic achievement. *Internal Journal of Education, 9*(3), 99–109.

Agua, J. C., & Obiukwu, C. A. (2022). Influence of principal-teacher conflict on teachers' job performance in secondary schools in Anambra State. *COOU Journal of Educational Research, 6*(1), 133–141.

Aina, O. S. (2022). Conflict management in school organisation in Nigeria. *International Journal of Development and Management Review, 17*(1), 45–56.

Ajudeonu, H. I., & Ossai, A. G. (2022). Conflict resolution strategies and effective management of public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. *Journal of Art, Humanity and Social Studies, 2*(3), 146–153.

Arar, K., & Orucu, D. (2024). Post-migration ecology in educational leadership and policy for social justice: Welcoming refugee students in two distinct national contexts. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 52*(6), 1410–1433.

Emmanuel, O. K. (2024). *The role of conflict management and team building in school leadership effectiveness.* ResearchGate.

Enwereazu, U. P. (2024). School culture as influencer of students' academic achievement in secondary schools in Nigeria. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Education, 17*(2), 236–254.

Erwin, E., Reina, A., & Amandio de Araujo, S. (2025). Conflict management strategies in the school environment and their impact on educational performance. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning, 3*(5), 407–422.

Etele, A. V., & Akunne, L. I. (2023). A comparative analysis of the adoption of conflict resolution model for conflict management in colleges of education and universities in South-East Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports, 17*(9), 11–19.

Fajonyomi, A. (2025). Meaning, scope and framework of conflict resolution and management education. *Unilorin Journal of Lifelong Education, 8*(Special), 1–16.

Hansen, T. D. (2021). *The handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice (4th ed.).* John Wiley & Sons.

Mamdooha, I., Abdol, A. K., & Ferdous, S. M. (2022). Impact of school culture on school effectiveness in government schools in Maldives. *Participatory Educational Research, 9*(2), 261–279.

Ogunode, N. J., Ayeni, E. O., & Olorundare, A. S. (2024). Roles of tertiary institutions in curbing banditry, kidnapping and terrorism in Nigeria. *International Journal of Sharia Economics and Financial Literacy, 1*(1), 19–28.

Ogunode, N. J., Ayeni, E. O., & Samuila, T. A. (2024). Conflict management strategies and tertiary institutions management in Nigeria. *American Journal of Political Science and Leadership Studies, 1*(1), 27–31.

Onyinyechi, O. H., & Wichendu, C. O. (2021). School conflicts: Causes and management strategies in classroom relationships. *International Journal of Institutional Leadership, Policy and Management, 3*(3), 412–428.

Oredein, A. O., & Durojaye, T. G. (2013). International implications of conflict management in Nigerian universities. *African Journal of International Affairs and Development, 17*(1–2).

Pembi, S., Ikemefuna, M., Kibikiwa, G. M., & Zoakah, J. D. (2023). Conflict in organisations: An examination of its types, sources, effects and management strategies. *Organization and Human Capital Development, 2*(1), 53–65.

Thompson, C. C., & Unachukwu, G. O. (2022). Organizational justice as a correlate of teachers' engagement in public secondary schools in Anambra State. *International Journal of Educational Research, 5*(1), 23–33.

Ughamadu, U., Okafocha, C., & Chukwue, O. A. (2025). Principals conflict management strategies as correlates of teachers organizational behaviour in public secondary schools in Anambra State. *Journal of Educational Research and Development, 8*(1), 194–201.

Zincirli, M. (2021). School administrators' views on distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic process. *Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Technology, 9*(2), 52–66.