Conflict management style of principals as perceived by intermediate school teachers in Bahrain

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the nature of conflict management style (CMS) of school's principals and to identify any significant difference in the perception of CMS practiced by the school principal from the view point of intermediate school teachers in Bahrain based on gender. A mixed method of descriptive research design was employed in this study. The data were collected through questionnaire and interview. This study involved 327 teachers selected based on stratified random sampling from 37 intermediate schools in Bahrain in the questionnaire survey. Besides that, five senior teachers have been selected purposively to provide further feedback in the interviews. The findings indicated that most of the school principals have adopted compromise and collaboration styles of conflict management, and empowering senior teachers to help resolve conflicts and a reform of the procedures in schools are needed to maintain a healthier working environment for teachers.

Keywords: Conflict management styles, intermediate schools, teachers, gender, Bahrain.

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1. Introduction

The aim of Vision 2030 in Bahrain is to provide 'a better life for all the Bahrainis' which could be achieved through reforming the education system and further developing it (Bin Hindi, 2014). The ministry of education (MOE) is exerting every effort in order to develop the educational system and improve the organisational behaviour of school principals by offering numerous training programmes for teachers and school administrators. In 2014, the MOE offered training programmes for 4,632 teachers and 117 school leaders as reported in Alwasat Newspaper (2014). Besides that, the MOE had also developed curricula in cooperation with some famous publishing houses in and outside Bahrain. Eventually, these efforts should have improved the teaching quality and school administration which should be reflected in students' results and teachers' satisfaction. Unfortunately, the reality in schools is still far away from much desired behaviour as teachers to some extent are still complaining of their conditions and administrative behaviour of their heads (Al-Hamidi, 2008).

In fact, school principals are supposed to be the top management in schools who are responsible for supporting teachers, motivating them and enhancing their job satisfaction according to the position description as specified by the Civil Service Bureau (2010). Ideally, the principals should provide a healthy working environment that will motivate teachers to be active and productive in their classrooms. In view of this, the conflict management styles (CMSs) of school principals play an important role in making the working conditions in schools stable and productive which will eventually result in a form of high job satisfaction among teachers. Involving teachers when making decisions can be another factor that may enhance job satisfaction. This can be done successfully by involving teachers in decision making, avoiding conflicts through solving problems and supporting teachers with needed resources.

Ideally, the aims of implementing the reform projects as mentioned earlier are good to reform education according to the government's scheduled plan. Unfortunately, as every new project has both sides, positive and negative ones, these projects have brought new problems to school administrators, teachers, students and parents (Bin Hindi, 2014). Newspapers in Bahrain highlighted such problems, which were mainly complaints about the MOE or school administrators. These complaints were related to teachers' welfare such as payment, promotion, professional development, disrespect, assault, extra work load of new projects and excessive school time.

When the school principal is not able to resolve conflict in his/her school, especially between him/her and other staff, the conflict will become worse and will eventually exceed the walls of the school and be known to the public. For example, 27 female teachers have complained in Alayam Newspaper (2010) of their school headmistress by claiming that the headmistress 'fights and argues with them in front of their students', which have embarrassed them and eventually encourage students to misbehave in classes. In addition, there were a huge number of interrogations of teachers for minor things by the MOE. Besides, there were incidents of forbidding teachers from going to see doctors and not allowing them to have the two hours of breast feeding for their babies and much more things (Alayam Newspaper, 2010). As a result, 15 teachers were transferred to other schools, three teachers have requested early retirement and one teacher had resigned after the incidents (Alayam Newspaper, 2010). These incidents showed that conflicts in school still have not been managed wisely, and a survey into this matter is much desired.

2. Review of literature

There are four levels of conflict management, namely, interpersonal, intrapersonal, inter-group and inter-organisation as reported in the literature. However, this study will only focus on interpersonal conflicts. According to Schermerhorn, Osborn, Uhl-bian and Hunt (2012), 'interpersonal conflicts occur between two or more individuals who are in opposition to one another'. Rahim (2001) calls it dyadic conflict and he defines it as 'conflict between two or more organisational members of the same or different hierarchical levels or units'. Hence, the studies on superior–subordinate conflict are relating

to this type of conflict. The concept of conflict has developed significantly since the 19th century when managers considered it as a trouble making issue which should be avoided, while in the 20th century, they looked at it as a disturbing issue but could be fixed through the cooperation of different parties in the organisation. The view in the 21st century has become clearer and experts these days have considered conflict as a normal part of any organisation.

Table 1. Summary of CMSs development

Study(ies)	Dimensions/CMSs
Follett (1940)	Primary styles: Domination, Compromise, Integration. Secondary styles: Avoidance, Suppression
Bales (1950)	Agreeableness, Activeness
Blake and Mouton (1964)	Concern for production, concern for people
Blake and Mouton (1970)	Forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, confrontation
Thomas 1976	Assertiveness, cooperativeness/competing, collaborating, Avoiding, Accommodating, compromising
Rahim and Bonama (1979); Rahim (1983)	Concern for self, concern for others/integrating, obliging, dominating, Avoiding, compromising
Putnam and Wilson (1982)	Control, Non-Confrontation, Solution Orientation
Pruitt (1983)	Yielding, problem solving, inaction, contending
Hocker and Wilmot (1991)	Avoiding, competition, collaboration

Source: Riaz, Zulkifal and Jamal (2012).

In fact, researchers in the field of behavioural organisation have identified many different CMSs over the past years. For instance, Follett (1940) divided CMSs into primary styles like domination, compromise and integration and secondary styles included avoidance and suppression. Another researcher, Bales (1950) stated two CMSs which are agreeableness and activeness. Furthermore, Blake and Mouton (1964) divided CMSs based on concern for production and concern for people. Following this, later Blake and Mouton (1970) have identified five styles of managing conflicts which are forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising and confrontation. CMSs have become clearer as Thomas (1976) sets two dimensions for styles of conflict: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Thomas (1976) also identified five styles of conflict that can be classified them into competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating and compromising. Later, Rahim (1983) and Rahim and Bonama (1979) have divided styles of managing conflict into concern for self and concern for others. They also came up with five different styles, namely, integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. Putnam and Wilson (1982) then suggested a new division of CMSs based on control, non-confrontation and solution orientation. Moreover, Pruitt (1983) suggested four styles which were yielding, problem solving, inaction and contending. Finally, Hocker and Wilmot (1991) have classified CMSs into three styles only which were avoiding, competition and collaboration. Table 1 summarises the historical development of CMSs in literature.

According to Gunarathna and Fernando (2013), the dual concern theory was proposed by Pruitt and Rubin (1986) regarding conflict management which is based on considering self and other party when they are involved in the conflict. This theory of conflict management was later adapted by many researchers. The Thomas–Kilmann model has become one of the most famous models for helping people to understand how different conflict-handling styles affect interpersonal and group dynamics and for equipping them with the appropriate style for any situation. Soon, the Thomas–Kilmann model identifies five CMSs: (1) avoidance, (2) competition, (3) accommodation, (4) compromise and (5) collaboration. This Thomas–Kilmann model (see Figure 1) describes conflict styles along two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness refers to concern for self, while cooperativeness represents concern for others as reported by Nujjoo and Meyer (2012). However, the CMSs used in this study are based on a quite similar model introduced by Northouse (2012) in his book of 'Introduction to leadership: concepts and practice' which has divided the CMSs into five, namely, collaboration, accommodating, competing, avoidance and compromising.

Figure 1. Styles of approaching conflict. *Source*: Nujjoo and Meyer (2012).

These five different styles of conflict management have been reported as common styles as practiced by the organisational heads in the past studies (Khakimova, 2008; Schmittou, 2012; Su'udy, 2009). All these three studies have found that integrating and compromising were among the most popular CMSs in the educational institution. Further investigation has also found that there is a relationship between CMS and gender existed in many past studies (Altmae, Turk & Toomet, 2013; Croucher, Holody, Hicks, Oommen & DeMaris, 2011; Goel, 2012; Harper, 2004; Havenga, 2008; Issa, 2009; Marzooq, 2011; Monn, 2012; Ozkalp, Sungur & Ozdemir, 2009; Su'udy, 2009; Schmittou, 2012; Wang, 2010). The general idea about gender when it comes to conflict is that females are easy going, relaxed and calm, while males are tough and tend to clash with other parties. According to Ozkalp et al. (2009) and Monn (2012), female managers adapted compromising CMS higher than male managers. Wang (2010) indicated that gender had a significant relation with integrating and dominating styles between male and female managers. Schmittou (2012) also showed that integrating and compromising environment in the institutions were more effective than other CMSs, and these CMS has different preferences between genders. Meanwhile, Goel (2012) also revealed that gender does predict compromising and dominating styles of conflicts between males and females. However, there are different findings have been identified in the past studies. For example, the studies conducted by Alzawahreh and Khasawneh (2011); Bartlett (2009); Khanaki and Hassaanzadeh (2010); Salleh and Safarali (2013) and Vestal (2011) have showed that gender did not predict CMS of the leaders at the workplace.

3. Method

Since this study aims to describe the CMS based on gender, the descriptive research of mixed method was considered to be the most appropriate method because this method allowed the use of quantitative and qualitative data in a single study. By using a mixed method, triangulation has been made possible to converge the feedback from the open-ended questions with the interview data in a convergent parallel design. According to Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark and Smith (2010, p. 8), the convergent parallel designs is 'to merge concurrent quantitative and qualitative data to address the study aims'. Moreover, Creswell et al. (2010) also find that convergent parallel designs could be used as a method that 'focuses on collecting, analysing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study'. All these researchers believe that 'the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone'.

As the teacher population are from different schools, the researcher used a random stratified sampling method to ensure that representative sample from the selected schools, which according to Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2011, p. 95) 'is a process in which certain subgroups or strata are selected

for the sample in the same proportion as they exist in the population'. This kind of sampling is important because 'it ensures that key characteristics of individuals are in the sample' (Fraenkel et al., 2011, p. 95). The required sample is 327 and because there are more female teachers than male teachers, a total of 60% of female teachers which equals 196 female teachers and 40% of male teachers which equals 131 male teachers have been selected as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of samples

Gender	No. of Schools	No. of teachers	Percentage of proportion	Required sample
Male	16	938	40	131
Female	21	1,259	60	196
Total	37	2,197	100	327

Self-administrated questionnaire and interviews were used to collect data from the respondents. The conflict management questionnaire was designed to describe the CMS of the current school principal. Items of CMS were adapted from Northouse (2012) which consisted of 26 items. It is a five-point Likert type questionnaire comprised of five subscales, which measure the five different CMSs. Items 1–6 measure the avoidance CMS, items 7–11 measure the competition CMS, items 12–16 measure the compromising CMS, items 17–21 measure the accommodation CMS and the items 22–26 measure the collaboration CMS. The survey questionnaires have been administered to 327 teacher respondents. Besides that, five senior teachers have been selected purposively to provide feedback on CMSs of their school head. The five informants have been labelled from R1 to R5 to mark their respective responses. Finally, the data collected were analysed through descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviation. Besides that, the data were also analysed with inferential statistics such as t-test to identify any significant difference in the perception of the teachers based on gender on the CMS of their school head. Meanwhile, the interviews sessions were analysed by verbatim transcription to support the quantitative data.

4. Results

As shown in Table 3, the mean of compromise conflict style achieved the highest mean score (M = 3.61, SD = 0.786), followed by collaboration (M = 3.45, SD = 0.907), avoidance (M = 3.20, SD = 0.784) and accommodation (M = 3.13, SD = 0.793). The least used style of managing conflict was competition (M = 2.37, SD = 1.097). The values of the standard deviation of CMS ranged from 0.784 to 1.097 which are at the acceptable level (See Table 3).

Table 3. Constructs of CMSs of principal as perceived by teachers

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Compromise	327	3.61	0.786
Collaboration	327	3.45	0.907
Avoidance	327	3.20	0.784
Accommodation	327	3.13	0.793
Competition	327	2.37	1.097
CMS	327	15.76	1.96

Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = almost agree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

The findings drawn from the interviews were in line with the feedback of the survey data. Based on feedback from the respondents, more than a third of principals (36.8%) at the intermediate public schools in Bahrain were perceived to follow the compromise and collaboration styles when dealing with conflicts. These styles involved the use of procedures such as investigating the matter by meeting different parties and listening to them, then through dialogue and discussion with the school board, senior teachers and senior assistants to find solutions to resolve the conflicts in the best way which reflects the concept of involving teachers in a compromise and collaboration process. As an example, respondent R1 said: 'The principal deals with conflict in patient and rational way. He speaks with

different parties to know their points of view and then resolves the conflict'. Another respondent (R2) added that: 'The principal investigates the reasons of the conflict and then asks for advice from senior teachers and administrative advisor to obtain suggestions and resolutions'.

Respondent R3 shared previous opinion as he said that: 'The principal analyses the problem, identifies its roots and then deals with it scientifically to know the causes and effects and then tries to benefit from previous experience in solving it'. Respondent R4 supported both statements when he said that: 'The principal is sensible and tries to understand the main reason behind the conflict, listens to different parties and makes a decision that is accepted by everyone'.

In the interview session, Respondent R5 said that: 'The school principal usually summons all the parties involved and listens to their points of view to identify the reasons first, and then he tries to finds solution'. Respondent R4 mentioned an example of a conflict between a teacher and students as she said that: 'The principal embraces the problem and tries to reduce the negative effects. She tries to understand students and collaborates with teachers in managing the conflict'. In fact, the procedures adopted by the school principals were very similar to compromise and collaboration CMSs which are based on the procedures of discussing ideas with others, exchanging information to resolve conflict, and finally, looking for a solution that would satisfy different parties.

Table 4. Comparison perception means of conflict management of principals based on gender

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Avoidance	Male	131	3.22	0.767	0.067
	Female	196	3.19	0.796	0.057
Competition	Male	131	2.53	1.037	0.091
	Female	196	2.26	1.125	0.080
Compromise	Male	131	3.65	0.828	0.072
	Female	196	3.57	0.758	0.054
Accommodation	Male	131	3.14	0.712	0.062
	Female	196	3.13	0.844	0.060
Collaboration	Male	131	3.52	0.826	0.072
	Female	196	3.40	0.956	0.068
CMS	Male	131	16.06	1.89	0.165
	Female	196	15.55	1.99	0.142

Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = almost agree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Table 4 shows the comparison of means of CMSs of school principals according to the viewpoint of teachers based on gender. Males indicated higher perception mean scores in compromise style (M = 3.65, SD = 0.828), followed by collaboration (M = 3.52, SD = 0.826), avoidance (M = 3.22, SD = 0.767) and accommodation (M = 3.14, SD = 0.712). The least used style of managing conflict of principals as perceived by male teachers was competition (M = 2.53, SD = 1.037). On the other hand, the data from the female respondents also indicated a similar perception started with the highest perception mean scores in compromise (M = 3.57, SD = 0.758), followed by collaboration (M = 3.40, SD = 0.956), Avoidance (M = 3.19, SD = 0.796) and Accommodation (M = 3.13, SD = 0.844). The least used CMS of principals according to female teachers was also competition style (M = 2.26, SD = 1.125).

The CMS mean scores for school principals from the view point of teachers based on gender were compared using t-test. As depicted in Table 5, the t-test showed that there was only a significant difference between scores of males (M = 2.53, SD = 1.037) and females [M = 2.26, SD = 1.125; t (2.120), p < 05] in terms of competition.

However, other CMSs such as avoidance, compromise, accommodation and collaboration were not indicated any significant differences between the male and female teachers. The t-test results showed that there was no significant difference in the mean of scores for males (M = 3.22, SD = 0.767) and females [M = 3.19, SD = 0.796; t (0.282), p > 0.05] in avoidance style. Similarly, there was no significant

difference in mean scores for males (*M* = 3.65, SD = 0.828) and females [*M* = 3.57, SD = 0.758; *t* (0.918), *p* > 0.05] in compromise style. Mean scores for males (*M* = 3.14, SD = 0.712) and females [*M* = 3.13, SD = 0.844; *t* (0.110), *p* > 05] also indicated no significant difference in the accommodation style. Finally, there was no significant difference in the mean scores of males (*M* = 3.52, SD = 0.826) and females [*M* = 3.40, SD = 0.956; *t* (−1.209), *p* > 0.05] in collaboration style. Overall, the *t*-test result indicated that there were no significant differences between male and female teachers in the perception on the CMSs of their school head except in the competition style.

Table 5. Independent samples *t*-test of conflict management of principals based on gender

Variable		Levene's test for equality of variances		*t*-test for equality of means						
		F	Sig.	*T*	Df	Sig. (two-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Avoidance	Equal variances assumed	0.023	0.881	0.282	325	0.778	0.025	0.089	−0.149-	0.199
	Equal variances not assumed			0.284	285.847	0.777	0.025	0.088	−0.148-	0.198
Competition	Equal variances assumed	0.220	0.640	2.120	325	0.035	0.261	0.123	0.019	0.503
	Equal variances not assumed			2.154	293.793	0.032	0.261	0.121	0.023	0.499
Compromise	Equal variances assumed	1.014	0.315	0.918	325	0.359	0.081	0.089	−0.093-	0.256
	Equal variances not assumed			0.902	261.691	0.368	0.081	0.090	−0.096-	0.259
Accommodation	Equal variances assumed	2.369	0.125	0.110	325	0.913	0.010	0.090	−0.166-	0.186
	Equal variances not assumed			0.114	307.752	0.910	0.010	0.087	−0.161-	0.180
Collaboration	Equal variances assumed	3.590	0.059	1.209	325	0.227	0.124	0.102	−0.078-	0.325
	Equal variances not assumed			1.245	304.339	0.214	0.124	0.099	−0.072-	0.319
CMS	Equal variances assumed	0.500	0.480	2.269	325	0.024	0.50087	0.22075	0.06658	0.93515
	Equal variances not assumed			2.294	289.072	0.023	0.50087	0.21835	0.07111	0.93062

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that compromise and collaboration styles have been identified as the most preferred CMS among the school principals, followed by other CMSs. This preference of CMS was probably due to compromise and collaboration CMSs help to resolve conflicts in a better way. It is also possible that applying the compromise and collaborative styles keep the relationship among teachers in a good shape as individuals have intermediate concern for themselves and for others. In fact, Schmittou (2012) who conducted her study to investigate the CMSs in educational colleges found that integrating and compromising CMS were more popular. The findings of this study are also similar to a study conducted by Khakimova (2008) who examined CMSs among young Arab males studying in the United States and American college students. It was reported that both Arabs and Americans also preferred the integrating (collaboration) style the most. Furthermore, a study by Su'udy (2009) which explored the CMSs among Indonesians and Americans has found that Indonesians preferred the compromising and integrating styles the most. Besides that, the collaboration (integrating) CMS as identified in this study was also consistent with the findings of many earlier studies such as Alzawahreh and Khasawneh (2011); Bartlett (2009); Boucher (2013); El-Namlah (2007); Johari, Morni, Ahmed and Bohary (2009); Montes, Rodriguez and Serrano (2012) and Salleh and Safarali (2013). Furthermore, based on the interview data, it was found that many school principals in the intermediate public schools in Bahrain have followed the collaboration CMSs when dealing with conflicts. They focused on discussing ideas with others and exchanging information to resolve conflict. The least popular CMS identified in this study was similar to the earlier study by Khanaki and Hassanzadeh (2010) who found that the least frequent used conflict handling style was also competing style when compared the Iranian general preference of conflict management to the Swedish.

However, the preference of CMS of the school principals is different from one study to another. For instance, preference for CMS has been identified as compromising style in Kim, Wang, Kondo and Kim (2007) and Marzooq (2011), integrating and dominating style in Croucher et al. (2011), compromising and avoiding style in Dyson (2002), cooperation style in Al-Khalidi (2008), compromising and collaborating style in Harif and Noor (2011), and finally, integrating, compromising and dominating style in Suppiah (2007).

However, the findings in this study were not consistent with earlier studies which have found a significant difference of CMS based on gender such as Altmae et al. (2013); Croucher et al. (2011); Goel (2012); Harper (2004); Havenga (2008); Issa (2009); Marzooq (2011); Monn (2012); Ozkalp et al. (2009) and Wang (2010). However, the findings of no significant difference in the perception of CMS between gender have been supported by some earlier studies such as Alzawahreh and Khasawneh (2011); Bartlett (2009), Khanaki and Hassaanzadeh (2010); Salleh and Safarali (2013) and Vestal (2011). However, the finding in this study showed that gender does predict the competition style of conflict. One explanation for males being more competitive in CMS than females was that males tend to have more experience in their lives, which enables them to overcome challenges that they face. Besides, success in competition at work could mean promotion that leads to monetary reward. Hence, the bread winner will tend to be more aggressive in their management style. The factor will also influence the perception of the male teachers on the CMS of their school principal. Indeed, the finding of gender predicting the Competition style of conflict is in line with the findings of Goel (2012); Marzooq (2011) and Wang (2010). Such findings could be related to the manhood nature of male Bahraini school principals who tend to dominate over the group which could reflect the attitude of some male principals in schools.

6. Conclusion

Conflict is a common issue in schools. If the conflict has not been managed wisely, it will affect teachers' job satisfaction and the organisational effectiveness. Overall, the study has indicated that compromise and collaboration Styles are the most acceptable styles in Bahrain based on the reason

that good interpersonal relationship will enhance the cooperation and work relationship among the teachers and administrator. If the principal uses a compromise and collaboration style, then he/she will be both assertive and cooperative in management. If the principal is willing to trade some of his/her needs to win concessions from the other side of the teachers, it will make the teachers more satisfied. This style can be effective when both teachers and administrators are equally powerful and willing to be cooperate, and they want to preserve the relationship for the future cooperation. Besides that, the findings also indicated that the competition style of conflict management was more preferred by males. Overall, the findings showed that the use of different CMSs has no relationship with the gender except for the competition style. The findings in this study indicated that the reform of the organisation procedures in schools is much needed in order to maintain a healthier working environment through developing system and regulations followed in the MOE to achieve a high level of performance and to motivate teachers. Since most senior teachers at intermediate level have proved to be highly professional and respectful, it would be a good idea to involve them in decision making and to empower them to help resolve conflicts and support the administrators in school management.

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