

Mediating Conflicts: Challenges of School Grievance Committee

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Abstract: This phenomenological research delved into the real-life experiences of twelve purposively chosen teachers who serve as members of school grievance committees in the Matina District. Through in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, and environmental triangulation, the study uncovered two main strategies that helped facilitate effective conflict resolution: guiding structured yet compassionate conversations and conducting restorative conferences that focus on collaboration and rebuilding relationships. However, several challenges also emerged, including limited training in mediation skills and the constant pressure of balancing mediation duties with other teaching responsibilities. These issues point to deeper institutional shortcomings in how schools support grievance committee members. Based on what participants shared, the study recommends practical steps such as requiring formal training in conflict management and setting aside time and resources specifically for mediation work. The results stress the need for system-wide improvements, embedding conflict resolution in teacher development programs, clearly defining the function of grievance committees, and ensuring they have dedicated time to carry out their roles. By tackling these issues, schools can turn conflicts into meaningful learning experiences that nurture empathy, fairness, and personal responsibility, ultimately creating a more supportive and respectful school environment for everyone.

Keywords: *Mediating Conflicts, Insights, Role of School Grievance Committee.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts within schools can greatly affect the overall learning environment, influencing both student performance and teacher morale. Grievance committees serve an essential function in addressing disputes and encouraging a positive and collaborative school atmosphere. This study aims to delve into the lived experiences of grievance committee members, with particular attention to their responsibilities, approaches, and the obstacles they face in effectively resolving conflicts. Gaining insight into their perspectives will shed light on the critical role they play in maintaining a supportive school culture and advancing conflict resolution practices.

At a broader level, differences in perspectives, priorities, and personal experiences often lead to conflict, making it a natural part of human interaction. As Varma and Gupta (2023) explain, conflict is an unavoidable aspect of social and professional life, including educational institutions. In today's diverse work settings, including schools, individuals bring varied backgrounds and values, which can result in

disagreements as they carry out their duties and interact with one another.

In China, Zheng (2021) noted that mediation is the most widely used method for resolving disputes among secondary school teachers. The approach has been effective, with teachers typically returning to their roles with renewed efficiency after mediation. In Ghana, Lasarati and Raharja (2020), citing Broni (2012), school leaders handle conflict by fostering consensus, avoiding blame, and holding discussions with concerned parties. They also collaborate with the Ghana Education Service and counselors to manage emerging issues.

In South Africa, Gxhaweni and Plaatjies (2023) observed that the lack of unity and effective teamwork in some schools stems from internal power struggles and disagreements about the school's direction. These issues are often left unaddressed by both school leaders and teachers, leading to unresolved tensions that hinder effective school management.

Here in the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) acknowledges the importance of resolving disputes through alternative methods, particularly mediation. This is outlined in DepEd Order No. 15, series of 2012, which introduced the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) System. The policy defines mediation as a process that promotes open communication and negotiation, helping parties reach voluntary and mutually acceptable agreements.

Abordo and Banayo (2023) also reference DepEd Order No. 35, series of 2004, which defines a grievance as work-related dissatisfaction expressed either verbally or in writing. The policy emphasizes the need for school administrators to address these issues promptly. It also promotes the Grievance Machinery, a mechanism designed to foster healthy working relationships and prevent employee dissatisfaction.

In Central Luzon, Mangulabnan, et. al (2021) examined how school principals manage conflict. They found that principals often use a mix of strategies, including obliging, avoiding, integrating, compromising, and, less frequently, dominating. These strategies reflect how principals interact with their staff. When conflicts are not handled thoughtfully, it can lead to feelings of distrust and dissatisfaction, ultimately weakening collaboration and team morale.

In Marinduque, Marquez (2023) confirmed that conflict is common in schools, prompting school leaders to adopt various approaches such as compromise, collaboration, and avoidance. Meanwhile, in San Pablo City, Abordo and Banayo (2023) pointed out that ineffective grievance management has led to several negative outcomes, including lower productivity, increased absenteeism, defiance, disciplinary issues, and a decline in work quality.

Unresolved school conflicts can escalate quickly and cause more serious problems. As Danday (2022) highlighted, in the Philippines, numerous administrative, civil, and even criminal cases involving teachers have been brought before the courts. Many of these issues could have been avoided if school leaders were more familiar with education-related laws and if teachers had a stronger understanding of their legal responsibilities.

In our district, conflicts involving teachers, school heads, parents, and students remain a persistent issue. While School Grievance Committees are in place to help mediate and prevent disputes from escalating, some conflicts continue to intensify and eventually require intervention at the division or regional level. This study seeks to examine the methods used by these committees, as well as the difficulties they face, in managing school-based conflicts. By exploring their contributions, the research aims to provide meaningful insights into how grievance committees help build a peaceful and productive learning environment. The findings also hope to assist school leaders and policymakers in identifying effective practices and

areas that may need improvement in addressing conflicts at the school level.

II. METHOD

Focusing on the lived experiences of grievance committee members in resolving conflicts within a school setting, this study aligned with the principles of qualitative research methodology. In particular, the study's research design is qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenology was specifically chosen to explore the lived experiences of grievance committee members in resolving conflicts within their school environment. This design focused on uncovering and understanding how committee members experienced and perceived the conflict mediation process.

In exploring the phenomenon, twelve (12) members of the school grievance committees from different schools in Matina District served as informants. These participants had at least three (3) years' experience as members of the grievance committee in their schools. To obtain data from different school environments, the participants were sampled from three different schools in Matina District in Davao City Division. The participants were selected equally from schools categorized as small, medium, and large school environments.

Moreover, the study acknowledged the importance of upholding ethical standards by seeking approval from the RMC Review Ethics Committee (REC), ensuring that the rights, dignity, and welfare of the participants, including grievance committee members, were respected throughout the research process. As the researcher, I played a crucial role in maintaining the quality and dependability of the research process and its results. I took on the responsibility of developing thoughtful research questions and crafting probing statements that guided the interviews with members of the school grievance committee. I also transcribed and coded the data from recordings, systematically identifying key themes and performing a thorough analysis of the data.

Further, in this study, the data analysis involved categorizing and coding the ideas presented in the transcriptions. At the core of data analysis is Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), which, as noted by King (2004) in Dawadi (2020), involves the identification of themes that can encapsulate the narratives present in the data sets. In data analysis for thematic content, this study used the method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). It involved the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the transcribed data. In addition, this study specifically utilized environmental triangulation. The insights gathered from various environments were compared and integrated to enhance the validity of my findings. According to Vivek (2023), environmental triangulation was a research strategy that required data collection from multiple contexts to strengthen the credibility and reliability of qualitative results.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the findings of the phenomenological study on the role of school grievance committees in mediating conflicts, as perceived by twelve (12) teacher-members. It provides a detailed analysis of the collected qualitative data, explaining the thematic content analysis and environmental triangulation procedures used to identify and categorize emergent themes from in-depth interviews. On the strategies of School Grievance Committee (SGC) in effectively mediate conflicts in schools, the following are the themes that emerged from the narrations of the participants:

➤ *Facilitating Structured Yet Empathetic Dialogue*

My study found that members of the School Grievance Committee intentionally integrate structure with empathy in their conflict resolution practices. Participants emphasized the importance of adhering to formal procedures, such as following DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2004 guidelines, as highlighted in Danday (2022), conducting hearings, and gathering witness statements to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability. However, these formal mechanisms are not applied rigidly. Instead, they are paired with emotionally intelligent practices like active listening (Mathai, 2024), creating safe spaces for open dialogue (Usmanova et al., 2021), and acknowledging the feelings and perspectives of all involved parties.

➤ *Employing Restorative Conferences*

The findings of the study revealed that restorative conferences serve as a highly effective mediation strategy in school settings, particularly in resolving conflicts among teachers. This approach embodies the principles of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) and mediation advocated in DepEd Order No. 15, s. 2012. Participants emphasized the importance of structured yet empathetic dialogue, where all parties are given the opportunity to express their frustrations and perspectives in a safe, facilitated environment (Usmanova et al., 2021). Key practices such as using a "talking piece", acknowledging shared challenges, and focusing on collaborative problem-solving, reflecting the collaborating style of conflict management were instrumental in transforming adversarial relationships into cooperative ones (Lasarati and Raharja, 2020).

Meanwhile, in mediating school conflicts effectively the grievance committees often face significant challenges in achieving fair and lasting resolutions. In this study the themes on the challenges of School Grievance Committee (SGC) members in mediating school conflicts include members' lack of training and time constraints.

➤ *Lack of Training*

The study revealed that lack of training is a pervasive challenge for school grievance committees, severely hindering their ability to mediate conflicts effectively, a critical deficiency noted by Abordo and Banayo (2023) who emphasized that organizations should ensure that those in charge of teacher's

grievance management are well trained. Participants consistently reported being assigned to committees without formal training in mediation, conflict resolution, or de-escalation techniques, leaving them unprepared to handle emotionally charged or complex disputes. This aligns with Dickson and Mramba's (2023) identification of inadequate skills and knowledge on solving conflicts as a key barrier.

➤ *Time Constraints*

Based on the information data, the study revealed that time constraints pose a critical challenge for school grievance committees, severely limiting their effectiveness in conflict resolution. Participants consistently reported that their committee responsibilities compete with heavy teaching workloads and administrative duties, forcing them to squeeze mediation efforts into inadequate time slots like 20-30-minute lunch breaks. This rushed approach leads to superficial case reviews and prevents the thorough investigations needed to ensure procedural fairness and neutrality; principles emphasized by Danday (2022).

Further, this study has developed insightful recommendations to address the barriers and essentially foster trust, ensure accountability, and create a harmonious school environment where conflicts are resolved constructively. The key insights include provide mandatory training in conflict resolution to SGC members and dedicate time and resources for mediation. Prioritizing these improvements, schools can transform conflicts into opportunities for growth, ensuring safer and more inclusive learning environments for all stakeholders.

Overall, the findings of this study aligned significantly with Mediation Theory by Moore (2004), which emphasizes structured dialogue and impartial third-party facilitation, as identified strategy of Facilitating Structured Yet Empathetic Dialogue reflects Moore's core principles of creating a safe, collaborative space for conflict resolution. Also, the study's findings aligned with the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model by Thomas and Kilmann (1974), particularly the collaborating and compromising styles, as your restorative approach prioritizes joint problem-solving over punitive measures, while acknowledging the need for balance amid practical constraints like time limitations.

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