Conflict Management in Ghanaian Schools: A Case Study of the Role of Leadership of Winneba Senior High School

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Abstract

The study examined the role of school heads in managing conflict. The research design was a descriptive case study in which the researcher administered questionnaires, conducted interviews and made observations to elicit respondents' views on the causes, effects and management of conflict in the Winneba Senior High School. A hundred and seventy three (173) respondents consisting of the headmistress and her two (2) assistants, five (5) housemasters and five (5) housemistresses, ten (10) heads of departments, thirty (30) teachers, thirty (30) parents and guardians, ninety (90) students including thirty (30) student leaders formed the sample. The findings indicated that conflict in the school originated from threat to students’ autonomy, disregard for teachers and students’ needs, and struggle over power and scarce resources. Even though conflict had caused retardation in developmental projects, as well as suspicion and tensions among staff and the community, some conflict had also created positive outcomes such as due recognition to staff and students. As ways of managing conflict, the school heads built consensus, avoided arguing and blaming staff and students when problems arose; they met with relevant parties when they noticed the emergence of conflict, and sought the assistance of the Ghana Education Service as well as counselors. Recommendations for dealing further with conflicts were made.

Introduction

Communities the world over look up to schools for the nurturing of those innovative ideas which transform the technological, economic and social dimensions of people’s lives towards development (UNESCO, 2005; Sampson, 2003; Ganzglass, Simon,
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Masseo, & Conlin, 2003). This is one reason why governments, whether in developed or developing nations, usually allocate huge sums of money in training appropriate manpower, developing suitable policies, and providing the needed infrastructure for the smooth running of schools. Schools are thus dear to many people, as they are believed to be the cradle of development and progress. Therefore one of the last phenomena that one would expect to find in schools is conflict. Yet conflict is found in any human environment. Loomis and Loomis (1965) believe that conflict is an ever-present reality in human relations, and that there is no known institution that is exempt from it.

Even the school community, which stands for education, growth and progress, has its fair share of a variety of conflicts, some of which end in violence. Indeed, incidents of violence, many of which come about as a result of unresolved conflicts, and which usually affect the youth, are said to be on the increase (Van Tongeren, 2000). It was to address this problem that the United Nations, for example declared the year 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace. It was hoped, among other things, that through the efforts of communities across the globe, peace would prevail.

For Johns (1988), conflict is natural and in many ways inevitable because of the natural tendency in almost every human person to presume that their way of thinking and doing things is not only the best, but also the only right way. In the school community, just as in almost any other setting, conflict may come from any quarters. Conflicts may be so complex that they may not be easy to handle, or safely eradicated, even from the start. Consequently, the need to manage conflicts becomes a necessity, rather than an option. Managing conflicts, therefore, can prevent them from escalating into greater problems (Parker, 1974) which could reverse the many gains of a given institution. Even though conflicts are often perceived as negative, and as such must be eradicated at all costs, there is evidence that conflict is not necessarily, or always negative (Afful-Broni, 2007; Fillipo and De Waals, 2000); conflict can be productive and in fact become a necessary part of positive interpersonal relationship, creating problem-solving and group cohesiveness to enhance leadership (Wilson, 2007).

Conflict resolution is the process aimed at resolving a dispute or conflict. A successful conflict resolution happens when those involved or in charge listen to and provide opportunities to meet the needs of all parties and to adequately address interests so that each party is satisfied with the outcome. (Sagimo, 2002)

This study examined the sources of conflict as well as its effects and management in the school. Such an exploration has the potential to helping to emphasize the positive sides of conflicts and how people are able to live and manage them; for, the significant and complex nature of schools makes it important that one knows how to handle those inevitable realities such as conflicts that arise there.

Literature and Theory
Conflict is inevitable in any organization. It occurs because individuals have different perceptions (Sagimo, 2002; Rue & Byarrs, 1992). It appears in a variety of forms and
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grows from simple to complex, from non-violent to violent depending on the gravity. (Ageng’a & Simatwa, 2011). Conflict may be described as a disagreement or incompatibility in wants, values and aspirations of two or more persons or groups. It may also entail differences in people’s opinions, beliefs and priorities. Owens (1987) believes that a conflict is a contest of opposing forces or powers; a struggle to resist or overcome; it is present whenever incompatible activities occur.

Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman (1992) are in agreement with Owens (1987) when they state that conflict refers to the situation in which there are incompatible goals, thoughts or emotions within or between individuals or groups which lead to bitterness and opposition. Conflict connotes a stressful, unhappy, distressing, depressing, annoying and frustrating state of affairs (Sagimo, 2002).

In spite of the many negative connotations of conflict, some scholars are of the conviction that conflict is necessary for authentic involvement, empowerment and democracy (Afful-Broni, 2007; Tjosvold, 1997). Putnam (1977) also believes that conflict can be used to balance power, to improve communication, and to develop a foundation to manage differences. What makes conflict potentially dangerous is the fact that since a large number of people are unaware of how to identify it or deal with it when it initially occurs, it tends to be more recognizable mostly when its effects have escalated into destructive, sometimes irreparable levels.

Several factors account for the root of conflict in any given community, the school being no exception. While the choice of the leadership of a community can be the source of conflict, religious, tribal or ethnic differences are also some major causes of conflict in almost any heterogeneous community in Ghana and elsewhere. In some cases, generation or age differences, either in birth or membership of the institution can be a source of conflict. It has also been discovered that the struggle for power and the competition for the available scarce resources could serve as grounds for conflict (Botchwey, 2006; Afful-Broni, 2007).

Even though they may be variously classified, some scholars put conflicts under four major types; conflicts about goals, conflicts about facts or opinions, interpersonal conflicts, and procedural conflicts (Johns, 1988; Hellriegel et al, 1992). The manners in which conflicts emerge are varied, but on the whole, it is known that most conflicts pass through the emergence stage, escalation stage, and the cessation stage. A good number of outcomes of conflicts pose challenges to the peace, progress and the very survival of the organization. Organizational leaders can be so incapacitated by some of the effects of conflicts that they would naturally do all they could to resist their emergence.

The following are known to be some of the classic outcomes of conflicts: break in healthy communication, suspicion and mistrust, weakening of family spirit, hatred and the desire to cause harm even to hitherto loved ones, loss of valuables, divisiveness and bitterness, needless tension, apathy and development paralysis (Di Paola & Hoy, 2001; De Drue, 1997; Thomas, 1977).

Some of the known positive effects of conflicts are that they help to gain recognition for a group, be it large or small; conflicts are sometimes responsible for group restructuring, the definition and sharpening of community agenda, improvement in decision-making, and the strengthening of group cohesion. It could
be deduced that conflicts, no matter what they do, and how they come about, need to be well handled, so that their effects do not overwhelm a community, including and especially the leadership. It is also critical to state that not all conflicts can be resolved completely, and not all of them can be handled without a lot of tact (Sagimo, 2002; Parker, 1974; Steuart, 1974).

Indeed, leaders are most important in overcoming the emotions that conflicts usually bring; but these leaders must themselves be conversant with certain strategies known to work well in managing conflict (Bochwey, 2006; Jablin & Putnam, 2001). The following have been agreed upon across institutions, especially among those engaged in conflict resolution: Conflicts should not be denied but rather identified and admitted as being in existence (Thomas, 1977). Conflict situations need to be objectively studied; effective communication ought to be developed; dialogue and deliberation must be encouraged; and members of any community need to be helped to recognize conflict as part and parcel of life (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

**Study Method**

This study sought to investigate conflict management in Ghanaian senior high schools; and was guided by three research questions:

- What are the causes of conflicts in the school community?
- What are the effects of conflicts on the school community?
- In what ways does the school leadership help to manage conflicts?

The research design was a descriptive case study; and this was used in order to elicit as much as possible information on the nature, origin, and management of conflict in the school. As the study sought to provide narrative accounts of the case being studied (Merriam, 1988) the descriptive case study design was chosen. Also, this design was considered appropriate for the study as it allowed the researcher to use questionnaire, interview schedule and observation to obtain responses from participants and provide insight (Yin, 1994) into causes, effects and the management of conflicts by the administrators.

The instruments used in eliciting responses for the study were questionnaire, interviews and observations. The interviews and observations were adopted to supplement the questionnaires. The questionnaires comprised both open-ended and close-ended items. The open-ended ones allowed the respondents to put across their views without restrictions, while the close-ended questions offered options from which the participants in the study selected the responses they deemed appropriate.

Questions were asked in such a way as to obtain responses which were recorded accurately and completely. The use of interviews helped to elicit certain responses which the questionnaires may not have adequately addressed. According to Robson (1999), interviews offer the possibility of modifying one’s line of enquiry, following up interesting responses and investigating underlying motives in a way that questionnaires cannot; and it is for these reasons that the interviews were carried out among the administrators of the school. To further assist the researcher in eliciting more detailed responses, or to clarify some responses which may have been vague to
him, he made some observations at the school that further enhanced his ability to better appreciate the responses given, which were based on the respondents’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2007).

The questionnaire and interview schedules were administered personally by the researcher. The universal nature of conflict makes it imperative that its study be as extensive as possible. For this reason, the ideal or target population for the study consisted of all schools. However, to allow for more in depth appreciation of the experiences of the respondents, the study sampled 173 respondents namely the headmistress and her two assistants, 5 house masters and 5 housemistresses, 10 heads of departments, 30 teachers, 30 parents and guardians, and 90 students including 30 student leaders at the Winneba Senior High School in the Central region of Ghana. Whereas the questionnaires were administered to all the respondents in the study, the interviews were conducted among the administrators namely the head mistress, her assistants, the housemistresses and the heads of the various departments. Ten of the student leaders were also included among the interviewees.

### Study Findings

Out of a total of one hundred and seventy three (173) questionnaires distributed to the respondents, one hundred and fifty three (153) representing eighty eight percent (88%) of the total number of questionnaires distributed was returned. Out of these, seven (7) representing five percent (5%) were found to be improperly completed and were therefore discarded.

Regarding the bio-data of the respondents, which covered the first four items in the questionnaire, the study found that the ages of administrators, including house masters/mistresses, heads of departments and other teachers ranged from 30 to 55, with 45.5% of them having served five years or more in the profession. This could suggest that this category of respondents was quite matured and experienced. A similar statement could be made of the parents or guardians whose ages ranged from forty (40) to seventy five (75). Also, about half (49.4%) of the parents/guardian respondents were married.

The educational levels of the teacher respondents in the study were considered quite impressive, as they ranged from first degree to second degree in various educational disciplines. The study further revealed that almost 99.2% of all the students were living on campus. One could thus infer that the observations of the students were likely to be representative of the realities, at least as perceived by the students living on campus. Responses given by those resident and familiar with their environment are more likely to be reflective of the prevailing realities than a casual observer or visitor.

In response to an aspect of the questionnaire for the headmistress, house masters/mistresses, as well as heads and teachers from the various departments (staff), regarding where they believed conflict in the school emanated from, nearly sixty percent (59.5%) of them indicated that, choice of administration, threat to autonomy, economic circumstances, power struggle and student versus student leaders were the most common causes of conflicts in their school. Almost eighty eight percent
(87.8%) of students and student leaders were of the view that infringement on their freedom, threats from school authorities, competition for scarce resources such as accommodation, teaching and learning facilities as well as food provision were major causes of conflict among them.

It was also revealed that fifty five percent (55%) of the respondents who were females pointed out that harassment from male students and teachers as well as religious and ethnic differences were also common causes of conflict. These concerns of students meant so much to them that they must have complained to their parents/guardians; no doubt twenty (20) respondents representing about sixty seven percent (66.6%) of the parents who responded to the questionnaire confirmed the above causes given by the students. Both from their questionnaire responses and interview sessions, the administrators generally admitted to these as the causes of conflicts, but explained that even though the poor quality of food provided seemed in their opinion to be the strongest cause of conflict among students, there was little they could do since the central Government, through the Ministry of Education, had instructed that no extra fees could be charged.

From further observations, it became clear that such a situation, which did not apply only to students’ feeding, but to the provision of other school supplies, was quite troubling, and the school administrators could only try to be innovative in ensuring that students were well fed and provided for, in spite of their fees and government subventions not being sufficient.

According to the teachers, a major cause of conflict was partiality shown by some of the administrators in dealing with them. About eighty percent of the teachers indicated that partiality due to tribalism, political affiliation, or religious differences caused them to feel unjustly treated. Sometimes, such issues created tensions and conflicts. On the part of the administrators, however, it was indicated by about ninety two percent (92%) of them that some of the teachers did not like the fact that certain people were their administrators (either as assistant heads or heads of departments); the researcher’s interview and further observations indicated that some of the teachers felt more competent than some of their administrators and as such did not always cooperate with them. An important personality in leadership at the school remarked in an interview:

Some of the teachers do not have regard for our rank in the Ghana Education Service. These young ones think that if they have a Master’s Degree and we have only a Bachelor’s they should be made the heads and not us

In response to items 6 and 7 of the questionnaire for head, assistants and teachers from the various departments, which asked the respondents about the effects that conflict created in their school, seventy eight percent (78%) indicated that conflicts in their school had broken the healthy relationship among staff, students and the community and this had had a negative effect on attendance at Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and their contributions which had traditionally been critical to the survival and progress of the school. The above mentioned effects of conflict in the school were said to have contributed to the slow pace or retardation in various developmental projects, suspicion and mistrust as well as avoidable tensions among staff and the community; as a result of these problems, it was reported that
some staff members had, on a number of occasions, sided with groups within the PTA against others. As a reaction to this, one tutor wrote:

“… all these are due to the selfish desire and greed among us teachers as each wants to be favored by those in power”.

In many places, and on many occasions, conflict is often perceived as negative and unproductive; however this research revealed, in confirmation of Putnam’s (1977) finding that conflicts have the potential to be productive. In spite of the negative comments regarding the effects of conflict in the school, all the respondents (heads, teachers, parents and students) indicated that through conflicts there had been improvements in decision making. Improvement in communication and rules and regulations had also been restructured with the inclusion of all parties concerned. The sentiments of seventy five percent (75%) of the student leaders were reflected in what one of them had written as a response to a questionnaire item:

“We now feel recognized and important as we are now involved in most decisions taken by the school”.

On conflict management, Wilson (2007) & Thomas (1977) are of the view that the difference in whether a conflict has a productive or destructive outcome is the management of the conflict. How leaders respond to and deal with conflict depend on their individual conflict styles which they adopted at a particular time. In managing conflict, the two assistant heads indicated that reaching consensus through collaboration had been one of the techniques they had been adopting. One of them wrote as a questionnaire response:

“…we often collaborate closely in order to reach consensus or agreement. We give recognition of and respect for everyone’s ideas, opinions and suggestions. Our consensus requires that each member/participant must agree on the point being discussed before it becomes a part of the decision”.

In achieving consensus through collaboration, the research revealed that heads had often avoided arguing over individual ranking or position; they had avoided win-lose statements and the perception of “someone should always be found guilty”.

Another significant observation that came out of the questionnaire and the interviews with the administrators was that they often endeavored to identify conflict at the emergence stage before they got to the escalation stage. A head from one of the various academic departments affirmed this by writing:

“Conflicts come in various shapes and forms and show themselves in various ways in our school environment; some students serve us with information for possible prompt action to be taken. I listen actively for further information and parties involved whiles trying to hear and concentrate on body language as well before inviting parties involved for further action to be taken. In doing so, I need to overcome my personal emotions, be conversant and competent with strategies that will work well for me and for the school”.

Furthermore, it was noted from the study that at this senior high school, strategies such as cooperative learning, multicultural teaching methods, positive discipline, and social and emotional learning through films, dramatization and presentations had been put in place by the leadership of the school and here, topics and issues on conflicts had been integrated in most disciplines. These additional support systems came in handy mostly through the intervention of the Ghana Education Service which runs seminars and workshops from time to time. These sessions have, according to the respondents who commented on this aspect in the questionnaire and further elaborated in the interviews, helped to give students the opportunity to talk and share their views on topics related to conflict.

About eighty three percent (83.3%) of the teachers suggested that when managing conflict, leaders should not take sides or be partial, but should be fair and firm, either between staff, students and staff or the school and the community. Sixty-six (66) respondents representing about seventy three percent (73.3%) of the students and student leaders indicated that negotiations, tolerance and dialogue were key to effective conflict management. Twenty three (23) parents representing 76.6% said while negotiations and dialogue can never be ignored, Guidance and Counselling should be one of the major tools in managing conflict in schools as a good number of people, especially students, get involved in conflict simply out of mischief or what they consider fun.

In an attempt to explore this issue further, the researcher asked for the administrators’ opinion in the interviews, and about eighty seven percent of them indicated that they had often adopted negotiation; and they had often invited Guidance and Counseling coordinators to help them address some of the issues that they believed would have exacerbated into negative conflict or violence in the school.

A good number of the respondents expressed the need for more education for leaders on how to manage conflict and how to include and integrate those involved in conflict, and who may have been sent out of school to be brought back. Such an action, they believed, would lessen the inherent tensions that may have been created; in this case, conflict may be avoided or at least lessened.

When asked what lessons were learnt from the occasions of conflicts in the school, majority of the respondents were quite clear in their statement. A tutor wrote:

“Recent cases of conflict among students emanate from occultism as students fight over girls and boys”.

Majority of the parents and tutors were of the view that heads should never ignore conflicts, even at the emergence stage just as the experts recommend in the literature – that this is the best stage to deal with conflict effectively (De Drue, 1997).

Eighty three percent (83%) of the respondents representing the head teachers, heads of departments and teachers indicated that they had come to realize that conflict is inevitable in any human society, and yet can be minimized, diverted or resolved rather than being eradicated. Students and student leaders were also of the view that conflict is not necessarily destructive but disagreement which can be resolved amicably by agreeing to disagree through mutual understanding and the creation of healthy environment.
Discussion
This paper has indicated, among other things, that educational administrators have an enormous amount of work to do in the school community; especially at the senior high school level where the students are adolescents, school heads are to handle conflict as the complex realities that they are. Whether the school is rural or urban, public or private, well endowed or poor, the school head would have a number of complex issues to deal with, sometimes on a regular basis; and conflict, is one example of the realities that any school head has to face.

It is being asserted that conflict would be ever present in human relations; and there is no human society that can report of the non-existence of conflict. It is worthy to note that how one deals with conflict is critical; the manner of handling conflict could bring about positive or negative consequences that will affect the lives of the members of the school community and beyond. School heads and teachers in Winneba Senior High School, like many other heads and teachers in the Effutu/Awutu Municipality and elsewhere, since their authorities usually come with such influence, ought to be careful not to become agents of conflict escalation by contributing to the occurrence of conflict. Neither should they be ignorant of the reality of conflict. Unfortunately, it appears that some heads, teachers, parents, student leaders and students try to ignore or eradicate conflict be they negative or positive.

Since conflict is a human reality, and has the potential to utterly destroy the good potentials of any institution, this study can enlighten those interested in the continued growth and progress of their communities in identifying the causes, effects and the management of conflict. This study has the potential to assist in alerting school administrators to better appreciate the needs and concerns of members of the institution and to endeavor to put in place measures which will help bring to the minimum incidents of conflict. It would also afford educational administrators, as well as teachers and other supporting staff certain important strategies in effectively handling conflicts in the school and beyond.

The findings from the study can serve as a guide for in-service training workshops or seminars for school leaders and other members and stakeholders in conflict identification and management. The study would also be of benefit to parents/guardians to avoid situations that create negative conflicts and undermine stability in schools. Furthermore, this study could help to educate school leaders and students on a more comprehensive knowledge on conflicts, mainly the fact that it can be found in any community, and that it can have benefits for the community as well.

Conclusion
In this final section, the study offers some recommendations on the basis of the findings. In recognition of the importance of healthy school-community relationships, it is being recommended that the District Assemblies, in conjunction with the officers of the Ghana Education Service fund the organization of practical in-service training for school administrators in senior high schools in the Effutu/Ewutu district and
beyond on conflict identification and management to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills in dealing positively with conflicts in their schools and the immediate community.

It is being recommended that the Guidance and Counselling offices of the various senior high schools should be encouraged by school heads to enable them better to team up with experts to offer seminars and training workshops on identification and management of conflicts to enable schools become or remain healthy learning communities.

School heads should develop or improve upon their collaborative skills such that they would empower their staff to assist them in ensuring that they are not needlessly overburdened; they would do well to have others assist them in identifying conflict, especially at the emergence stage. A number of studies carried out by Guidance and Counselling students at the University of Education, Winneba have commented on the lack of recognition, support and empowerment of these counselors from school heads and colleague teachers of senior high schools. In light of this, it is the recommendation of the researcher that teambuilding and working in close links with these counselors would help tremendously.

Since the study indicated that teachers had attributed conflict in schools to heads taking sides because of ethnic, religious or political persuasions, school heads in this school as well as others elsewhere whose situations may be similar, need to be more sensitive to those occasions which, if overlooked could turn an otherwise healthy institution of learning into a chaotic camp filled with disgruntled teachers, insecure departmental heads, angry parents and students who are constantly on the edge. Indeed, there is a lot that the school head and his/ her team can do to ensure that schools become or remain the conducive environments that they ought to be, so that more effective teaching and learning can take place.

In order that schools may become and / remain the true cradles for creating productive knowledge and strategies for development, those in leadership ought to take charge, working in transparency and genuine collaboration with all other stakeholders; not only should they continue to help carry out the good plans of the Ghana Education Service and the Ministry of Education in general. School heads and their team members should take full advantage of the expertise and inputs of the Boards of Governors, Parent Teacher Associations, student leadership, as well as local, district and municipal Assemblies.

Since conflicts come in a variety of forms, and they have the potential to disturb the peace that schools require for their healthy running, educational administrators ought to be humble and willing to pay attention to the realities that prevail in schools. As much as possible, the climate should be created where students do not regularly feel that their freedom is being infringed upon. Also, school heads should endeavor to minimize, if not remove those situations that would cause parents, guardians and even teachers to sit on the fence. There ought to be as much of listening and observing as possible, but there must also be clear decisions and actions so that as many players as possible would feel confident to contribute to help make schools serve their right mandate as agents of positive social change and national development.
References


