Maintaining institutional harmony: key issues to consider in Ghanaian basic schools

Dominic Kwaku Danso Mensah
University of Education Winneba, Ghana

Key Words

Institutional harmony, basic education, conflict resolution

Abstract

The study examined conflict management strategies among head teachers and teachers in selected basic schools in Okai-Koi sub metro in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. In all, 270 participants were engaged in the study, comprising 237 teachers, 32 head teachers and one education officer all in charge of the Metropolis. The study employed descriptive survey design and used purposive and simple random sampling techniques to sample participants. Interview guides and questionnaires were the main instruments used for gathering the data. The study found out that, in managing and resolving conflicts, issues such as identifying and focusing on the problem, building of trust and cooperation, clarifying goals and objectives were seen to be effective means of managing conflict. It is recommended that school management should design and develop effective conflict management strategies to quickly resolve conflict in their institutions in order to promote institutional harmony.

Background

Historically, conflict permeates all human existence and endeavors. According to Owen (2001), the potential for conflict to permeate the relations of man is a force for health and growth as well as destruction. Conflict is inevitable in organizations and threatens the survival of institutions. Being intra-group or interpersonal, conflicts also occur in any human group and school organizations (Albert, 1998; Mullins, 2006; Owens, 2001) with paradox.

Conflict indeed is a paradox because of the amount of energy and resources expended by organizations to prevent and resolve conflicts (Okotoni & Okotoni, 2003). Organizations are made up of individual members or groups. Perhaps, the paradox of conflict stems from the perceptual nature of interests in conflict situations. For instance, Kinicki and Kreitner (2006) define conflict as the processes in which parties perceive that their interests are being opposed by others. Consequently, in an organization comprised of diverse people with varied interests, conflict management will be eminent. Organizations can be described as social systems with collective objectives to provide service for stakeholders. Educational institutions like other organizations also exist to foster co-operative so as to achieve goals that cannot be achieved individually (Owens, 2001).

The organizational ideas of a school normatively emphasize co-operation, harmony and collaboration among individuals. For the school to perform effectively, group dynamics must be observed (Wagner & Hollenburg, 2002). For example individuals or groups may depend on one another for information, assistance and co-ordinate action for the attainment of organizational goals. This interdependence may foster either co-operation or conflict.

Conflicts are natural part of life and therefore natural part of school life. Organizations with no conflict can serve as a probably static, apathetic and non-responsive to the need for change. Conflict can serve a useful function by stimulating creative solutions to problems. Conflicts call for management and time. Algert and Watson (2002) mentioned that managers spend over 20 per cent of their time on conflict management or resolution because failure to do so can lead to disastrous results.

Different authors have explained conflicts from interesting perspectives (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2006; Kinard, 1998; Robbins & Judge, 2011). While Kinard views conflict from individuals competing for resources, Kinicki and Kreitner and Robbins define it as perceptions of opposed interests from

others. Others (DeCenzo , 1997 & Bullin, 2001) also see conflict as a clash of expectations, values, ideas or personal interest. Similarly, Mullins (2006) states that, conflict is a behavior intended to obstruct the achievement of some other person's goals. Evidently, conflict is the process that begins when one party perceives a threat or something that will affect them negatively on what they care about. Consequently, teachers in a basic school system face similarly obstructive behaviors while working to achieve common goals such as improving pupils' achievement scores, social and moral education, and citizen education among others. Indeed, school conflict can be seen in between students-teachers, student-student, head teachers-teachers, and teachers-teachers (Crenet, 2000; Holton 1998).

Conflict resolution and management are therefore vital for organizational/institutional success because they help drive the organization forward in situations of rapid changes and prevent stagnation. The ability to handle conflict is a key factor in managerial success (Everard, Morris & Wilson, 2004). When conflicts in educational institutions are constructively and effectively managed, they yield positive outcomes for individuals concerned (Edelman, 1993) and the organization as a whole. Properly identified and handled conflicts can help minimize the destructive influence of the win-lose situation (Mullins, 2006). Further, efficient management of conflict may improve the decision making process with a variety of perspectives, which would engender positive debates, generate alternative solutions and ensure that a problem has been thoroughly studied.

There is nothing like conflict free organizations. But if there are conflict free organizations, social groups or societies, then the result will create synergetic effect such as cohesion, harmony and the spirit of we feeling among individuals. Conflict can be both positive and negative force. Hence, management should not strive to eliminate all conflicts. Some may prove beneficial if used as an instrument of change or innovation. For every organization, an optimal level of conflict exists that can be considered highly functional as it helps generate positive performance.

However, Robbins and Judge (2011) said that conflict can improve organizational effectiveness by stimulating change and improving the decision making process. Thus, it is an agent for evolution and for internal and external change (Mullins 2006). It also initiates the search for new and better ways of doing things and undermines complacency within organization. Most conflicts have not been managed properly resulting in negative impact. Pondy (1990), claims that conflict induces greater creativity, more worker enthusiasm or better decisions. Conflict can rip an organization apart by creating walls between co-workers leading to poor performance and even resignations. It can have disastrous consequences and situations which give rise to inefficiency, ineffectiveness among others for individuals and organizations such as basic schools. Cater (2008) states that conflict resolution is a process of attempting to resolve a dispute or a conflict. Successful conflict resolution occurs by listening to the parties involved providing opportunities to meet each side's needs, and adequately addressing their interests so that they are each satisfied with the outcome. On other hand, effectively conflict resolution can help identify previously undetected problems and attitudes as well as help clarify uncertainties and improve overall cooperation (Evarard, Morris & Wilson 2004).

However, which approaches parties adopt to solving conflict can be seen in three fold; a) mediation, b) arbitration, and c) reconciliation (Schaller-Demers, 2016). Similarly, the use of interpersonal styles, negotiating strategies and structural interventions in managing and avoiding unnecessary tension have been advocated (Mankoe, 2007). Which of the conflict resolution strategies are adopted by basic school head teachers in the Ghanaian context would be of immense benefit for school administration professionals?

The nature of conflict between basic schools' head teachers and teachers in an urban environment could be of interest to academics and school administrators. However, research about conflict in school administration appears to be missing on head teachers and teachers' conflict in a metropolitan community of Ghana, specifically, Okai-Koi. Consequently, this study sought to examine the nature

of conflict management and resolution strategies adopted by teachers and head teachers within the basic school system in Ghana. which conflict resolution mechanisms are used by head teachers for managing school-related conflicts? Significantly, the results of this study would be useful for basic schools administration. Even though, results generalization was not the original focus of data collection, this study would contribute to the existing literature on conflict resolution within Ghanaian metropolitan basic schools.

Methodology
Research Design
The study employed descriptive survey design to undertake this investigation. This design implored the researcher to answer research question regarding what pertained in the schools at the time. This is the intent of the design as proposed by researchers such as Gay, (1992) and Amedahe, (2002). Indeed, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed for the study.

Population
The study used simple random and purposive sampling techniques to select 237 from 430 teachers; 32 head teachers, and one education officer in charge.

Procedure
Since the instrument was developed by the researcher, both face validity and content validity were all established before the pretesting of the questionnaire.

Checking the reliability, a large correlation coefficient of 0.8 (The Pearson Product Movement) was obtained during test-retest stage of the questionnaire. The final questionnaires were administered to randomly selected teachers in the basic schools in a metropolitan area using a survey approach.

Data Analysis
Data collected was analyzed by the use of (SPSS) version 20.0 to generate descriptive statistics. However, the interview data were analyzed thematically and were embedded within the descriptive statistical findings. Indeed, the quantitative data were analyzed using simple percentages. In respect to the qualitative data, tapes were played on several occasions until such time that the full transcript of each participant was obtained. The data were subjected through the coding process and quotations were used as vignettes to support the quantitative data when necessary.

Table 1: Key issues in Managing disagreements in Ghanaian Basic Schools

Statements	SA N (%)	A N (%)	I N (%)	D N (%)	SD N (%)
1. Identify and focus on the problem	114(48.1)	106 (44.7)	3 (1.3)	9 (3.8)	5 (2.1)
2. Build trust and cooperation	109(46.0)	97 (40.9)	17 (7.2)	8 (3.4)	6 (2.5)
3. Expand resources for work	90 (38.0)	98 (41.4)	28 (11.8)	10 (4.2)	11 (4.7)
4. Clarify goals and objectives	88 (37.1)	109 (46.0)	26 (11.0)	6 (2.5)	8 (3.4)
5. Promote participatory leadership and management	117(49.4)	86 (36.3)	21 (8.9)	9 (3.8)	4 (1.7)
6. Establish open communication systems	124(52.3)	84 (35.4)	14 (5.9)	11 (4.6)	4 (1.7)
7. Provide internal motivation for teachers	99 (41.8)	115 (48.5)	6 (2.5)	9 (3.8)	8 (3.4)
8. Seek advice from PTA and SMC	88 (37.1)	82 (34.6)	26 (11.0)	28 (11.8)	13 (5.5)

Source: Field data (2014). (SD-strongly Disagree; D-Disagree; I-indifferent; A-agree; SA- strongly Agree)

Evidence from Table 1 above indicate that majority 220 (92%) of the participants agreed to the statement that identifying and focusing on the problem as one of the strategies of resolving conflict among Basic school teachers. In addition, interviews of some respondents (head teachers) were conducted to probe further on their opinions about how to resolve conflicts. The following were some of the responses. A head mistress from …. Shared her view:

> *If you are able to see where the problem is coming from you can quickly adjust and change things. Problem identification helps to clarify, redefine and shape issues. Suppressing problems and ignoring issues compound the problem. (Head teacher 1)*

In her opinion, strategies for managing conflict start from identifying the sources quickly. This is supported by research also, which states that understanding and identifying that conflict exists is the first stage of managing conflict (Afful-Broni, 2012; Mankoe, 2007; Robbins & Judge, 2011).

The issue was not much different when it was established that about 86% of the participants engaged in the study agreed to the statement that building trust and cooperation among teachers was another way of resolving the conflict that existed within schools in the area. This is consistent with the interview data collected because a head teacher commenting on this issue said:

> *We heads need to be very trustworthy when it comes to issues of conflict. As a head, you don't have to take sides but evaluate the problem very well. You should be fair and firm and not to take sides. If you exhibit these qualities as a head, your teachers will trust you because they know you have a sense of good judgment. (Head teacher2)*

This statement by the head teacher is supported by Cater (2008) who opines that conflict resolution occurs by listening to and taking opportunities to meet each side's needs.

Expanding resources for teacher to carry out their work in the school was also identified as one of the ways of resolving or managing conflict in the area. Indeed, about 79.4% of the participants shared this view. This corroborates the interview data collected as some teachers remarked:

> *" I believe, if we get the necessary resources to work with, I do not see why there should be conflicts. In fact, because we have to share this small office for our work, it sometimes degenerate into conflicts" (Teacher 3).*

> *"it is important for the Government to make provision for what we need in order to prevent conflict from ensuing because we have to work with limited resources, every teacher wants the best and in the process, we end up quarreling" (Teacher 8).* This finding supports the work of Brennen (n.d.) that expansion of resources could be considered as one of the techniques used in resolving conflict.

From table 1 above, one observes that clarifying goals and objectives were also important in resolving conflicts. Because, majority representing about 83% of the participants agreed to this assertion. This implies that when teachers know what they are expected to do in the day to day running of the school, they are more likely to work without infringing on others work. The interview data also supported this view as teachers commented:

> *" sometimes you come to school with the view of attending to an activity and all of a sudden another teacher retorts, this was given to me yesterday by the head" (Teacher 7).*

> *" in fact, sometimes you feel you are neglected by your head because all the important works are assigned to those he loves and you do not know what to do especially, during Cultural and Sport activities …how can there be harmony?" (Teacher 11).* This corroborates the work of O'leary, and Bingham (2003) where it was established that clarifying goals and objectives of workers tend to promote harmony in the workplace.

As appears in the table 1 above majority 203 (85.9%) of the participants were of the opinion that participatory leadership and management facilitated conflict resolution in schools. From the interviews, teachers commenting on this issue raised the following:

> *" if head teachers involve teachers in decision making regarding the SPIP, Capitation grant usage and others these conflicts will reduce, …..most teachers are always not happy when it comes to management of printing*

money, and this always result in exchanges" (Teacher 10).
" I think heads need some training on how to delegate some of their work and involving the staff in decisions so as bring an end to the poor relationships that exists between heads and teachers" (Teacher 6).

Robbins and Judge (2011) consider this action as 'accommodation' in conflict resolution. Participatory leadership was found to be another conflict management strategy that promotes institutional harmony. Participatory leadership seeks consensus, balance power and build a sense of fairness (Mcpheat, 2008). Table 1 agrees that participatory leadership, as a conflict management strategy helps to avoid conflict from emanating.

Further, it was clear from table 1 that about 90.1% of the participants felt that providing internal motivation to teachers was one of the ways conflicts in the school situation can be managed or resolved. The interview data did not differ much from this position as teachers commented:
"Motivating teachers in our part of the World is key to solving most of our problems which have their depths from financial management practices adopted by most heads,
I therefore, strongly believe that motivation is crucial ...." (Teacher 13)
"Sometimes a mere thank you from our heads could help reduce some of the conflicts. Indeed, you do a good job and you are not even recognized by your head. He goes to the District office to claim the honour without even acknowledging it at the staff meetings for other teachers to know about the good thing you have done. This definitely will not promote institutional harmony for heads to work" (Teacher 15).
On the issue of whether to involve Parent Teachers' Association and School Management Committees, there were contrasting views from heads. About 71.7% of the participants were in favour to adopt this practice but the interview results proved contrary. The is quite interesting because, it appears the teachers wanted the PTA and SMCs to get involved in conflict resolution but the head teachers felt otherwise as some of them commented:
 An administrator emphasized that discussions should be behind doors.

As a good head teacher or administrator, you should not wash your dirty linen outside. In fact head teachers are required to handle conflicts in such a way that if possible only involving parties will get to know. So going to the extent of involving PTA and SMC is out of place. (Head Teacher 7).

Again another head teacher has this view;

"….conflicts among staff members must be resolved as much as possible internally to avoid outsiders know what goes on in ones work place. The head teacher being the administrator must be able to resolve conflict amicably without a third party". (Head teacher 8).

This statement from one of the head teachers agrees with Everard, Morris and Wilson (2000) that the ability to handle conflict in confidence is a key factor in managerial success. Conflict management should target a level where many parties involved are made to understand themselves without getting others such as PTA and SMC unnecessarily involved. Conflict should be handled internally.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this paper, it could be inferred that conflict is an integral part of Basic schools in the study area. The study therefore concluded that identifying and focusing on the problem, establishing good communication systems, internal motivation, expanding resources for work, promoting participatory leadership, clarifying of goals and objectives as well as building trust and cooperation could assist in promoting institutional harmony in the area.

Recommendation

Management of basic schools should design and develop conflict management strategies to quickly resolve conflict in order not for conflict to escalate since conflict has been found to be inevitable in basic schools. Indeed, adopting such measures as instituting good communication system; identifying problems on early basis; expanding or providing resources and motivating teachers should be the hallmark of Basic School Heads.

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