Conflict Management and Resolution in Nigerian Primary Schools: The Role of the Headteacher

[1]**G. O. Edu, Ph.D**
drgraceedu65@gmail.com

[1]**M. U. Chukwurah, Ph.D**
[1]*Department of Curriculum and Teaching*
University of Calabar, Calabar

Abstract
The school is a complex organization and its environment made up of a heterogeneous population. Different groups in the population have conflicting needs seeking for attention. If not well managed and resolved, properties, lives and academic hours of unimaginable magnitude may be lost. The Headteacher is the primary conflict manager. His/her knowledge on the strategies for management of conflicts is a necessity for a conducive work environment towards the effective attainment of educational objectives at the primary level of education. This paper x-rays the current state of conflict management, the consequent effects and proffers strategies for effective resolution of conflicts by Headteachers at the primary school for attainment of educational goals.
Keywords: effective, management, resolution, conflicts, headteacher

Introduction
Organizations, by virtue of their complex nature, experience certain basic internal conflicts. The primary school is one of such complex organizations. The primary school environment is heterogeneous in nature. That is, it is made up of a population with different family backgrounds, interests, attitudes, goals, age levels, and even natural potentials. Also, every individual and group in a school has the desire for recognition, identity, dignity, security, equity and participation in the affairs of the school. When these needs are not met, frustration sets in leading to conflicts with an eventual consequence on a breakdown of the school system.

Conflict is a natural part of human relationships and therefore a natural factor in a school system. As different groups interact with contrasting behaviours, goals, interests, values, and limited resources within the school system, there is a need for synergy towards the attainment of the goals and objectives of the primary school. The

absence of this synergy would result in an expression of hostility, resentment, and misunderstanding between the various groups in the school system. Therefore, for a school organization to run effectively, conflict situations must be rationally and effectively managed and resolved.

Conflict management, according to Moran (2001), refers to a philosophy or a set of skills that enable a person or a group to better understand conflicts and deal with them as they emerge. In the school system, the school administrators devote a significant part of their time to dealing with conflicts. The Headteacher is the primary conflict manager in the primary school. He/she is to bring about changes and positive results in the conflict episode. Thus, his/her knowledge of the strategies for the management of conflicts is a necessity for a conducive work environment towards the achievement of educational objectives at the primary level of education. This paper sets out to address basically, school-based conflicts and strategies for effective management of conflicts in Nigerian primary schools, with focus on the role of the headteacher.

Primary school-based conflicts
Conflicts in organizations are likely to emanate from different sources. These sources may include insufficient information, variety of goals, inadequate resources as well as facilities, inadequate information, role conflict/collision and differences in goals, values and competition for limited resources and inaccessibility of superiors.

Similarly, Thapa (2015) identified the following as sources of conflict:
    i.   Politicization in school is one of the major sources that create educational conflicts in schools. According to Thapa (2015), politicization enhances teachers' absenteeism.
    ii. The feeling of indigenous staff versus outsiders: Generally, local teachers try to dominate the outsiders, because they had the feeling that community members recognize them, they can interact with them at any time. This feeling of importance could derail them from positive attitude as they may become arrogant and unresponsive to their teaching work.
    iii. Hierarchical position: The structural hierarchy of the school also creates educational debates and dilemmas among the teachers.
    iv. Differences in social status lead to conflicts in school, as those of higher social status may be discriminatory towards those with lower social status. This becomes another important source, which has a significant role in educational conflicts in school.

The school system has several sources prone to conflicts that have direct bearing with both teachers and students. These sources, according to Kinard (1988) include:

a) **Student-teacher conflicts**: Teachers impact on the classroom setting where the students learn. A display of partiality, derision, segregation and intentional mean behaviour toward students, might lead to conflict. Also, students may have dislikes for a teacher probably because of the type of homework they are asked to handle, persistent classroom projects or manner of asking questions that they are unable to answer. This dislike might lead to conflicts that may be very difficult to resolve.

b) **Bullying**: Bullying is another source of conflict in a school environment. This is because some students are in the habit of bullying fellow students. This act ranges from verbal bantering to physical assaults. When it becomes widespread, the victims become discouraged and are dampened in spirit. Consequently, the conflict begins to affect every aspect of their lives. The effect is felt in their work, development, personality and ability to communicate effectively. The victim is often threatened and scared. He/she is unable to mention the incident to teachers and caregivers. This creates continuous conflicts between the pupils and if unresolved, can lead to fear of schooling, intimidation and low morale.

c) **Teachers' teaching style**: This has to do with the way a pupil interprets information and interacts with the teacher's style. A child who is an introvert may not be able to cope with a teaching style that exposes them to extroverted activities. A mismatch between the students' learning styles and teaching styles of the teacher may lead to conflicts where a student feels that he is not capable of learning the subject and discontinues trying to take part in any activity in the class. The child might end up performing poorly on tests, seem uninterested or absent-minded and becomes dispirited about the class. The teachers, on the other hand, may become miserable if their teaching styles do not lead to academic growth in the child. This also creates conflict, especially where the teacher fails to understand the child's problem and to seek for a solution.

d) **Revolts against administration**: Most administrators enjoy the support of a small group of ardent backers, face consistent opposition from another small group, and are regarded with acceptance or at least indifference. These groups of revolts, indifferences and acceptance may lead to minor or major conflicts in the school system.

e) **Relationships**: Conflicts can occur over a relationship or an administrative style. Educational rapport can frequently be enhanced by clearly identifying the needs, developing clear expectations, and writing down directives for the parties to follow. Most times people are unaware of what is required of them. People cannot change if they are not aware of what is expected of them.

f) **Values**: Conflicts can also occur over values; where the rivals have seeming disparities in their belief systems. One's value system enhances his/her ability to know wrong at any time, and provides an ethical scope for successful living. People find it difficult to live together in harmony with different value systems. Thus, disparity may be a cause of conflict in an organization.

g) **Funds**: Conflicts frequently occur over lack of or scarcity of resources, especially financial. Sometimes, there is serious competition by various sectors for a certain limited amount of resources. The inability to adequately share available resources to meet the needs of the various groups may lead to conflict among competing parties.

h) **Emotional**: Most people have the desire for the satisfaction of some psychological needs such as the quest for power, recognition, love, and control. If these needs are not met in the cause of their relationship with members of the community, conflicts can set in. They occur because various individuals have different perceptions even though they are all together in the same school community (Sagimo, 2002).

Conflict in itself may not be a problem but the discomfort that comes along with it. Whenever there are conflicts involving parties to the same interests, there are always far-reaching effects. If not well managed, these distresses could lead to low productivity, lower self-confidence, more and continuous conflicts and inappropriate behaviours. Delay in conflict resolution in schools could result in disruption of academic calendars leading to economic as well as psychological exhaustion (Biutha, Zachariah, Beth & Nyabisi, 2013). Conflicts could also lead to break in healthy communication, suspicion and mistrust, the desire to cause harm, loss of valuables, indecisiveness, bitterness, apathy and developmental paralysis (Afful-Broni, 2012).

However, even though conflicts are always seen as negative, if well managed, they could, as well, be productive and could become a necessary part of positive interpersonal relationship, creating problem-solving skills. Conflicts can also help upturn and tackle problems, energize effort to be on the most appropriate tasks and assist people in identifying conflicts and also benefit from their differences. Thus, according to Afful-Broni (2007), conflict is necessary for authentic involvement, empowerment and democracy. Although, conflict is a normal part of the life of a school, there is the tendency to view it as a negative experience as a result of abnormally difficult circumstances that may be encountered by the parties to the conflict. This causes people to respond differently to conflict situations. Webne-Behrman (1998) opined different ways individuals can respond to conflicts as: emotional, which refers to feelings individuals experience in conflict such as anger, fear, confusion and threatening; cognitive, referring to ideas and thoughts emanating from a conflict present as inner expressions in a situation; physical, which have to do with ability to meet physical needs in the conflict including intensified hassle, bodily tension, increased appropriate strategy option, perspiration, channel vision, accelerated breathing, repulsion, and fast heartbeat; emotional and academic stress which occur in children.

The consequence of conflicts can be enormous. Conflicts in primary schools could result in poor performance in examinations. Also, findings from the study by Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) pointed out that school management conflicts, most of the time, resulted into disruption of academic programmes. Inadequate staffing due to unplanned transfers of teachers and withdrawal from active participation in school activities were also effects that resulted from conflicts. The researchers further found that other effects of conflicts were: inequality in the distribution of teachers alongside financial losses suffered by government and that, the pupils and their parents suffered immense losses.

When conflicts are rationally and effectively resolved in the school system, the atmosphere becomes more pleasant for effective teaching and learning. The Teachers have ample time to teach the students whereas the students also have enough time to put into their studies. Therefore, creating problem solving strategies, especially in the primary school system, is essential for positive approaches to conflict management and resolution. For effective management and resolution of conflicts in the primary school, the headteacher must identify the sources of these conflicts, conflict management styles and their implications for him. The Headteacher is an administrator of a primary school. At this level, the headteacher is there to cushion the effect that conflicts usually bring. To do this, he/she must be conversant with the strategies necessary for managing and resolving conflicts.

Conflict resolution styles and current trends in the Nigerian primary schools
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 pacified. However, conflicts may be so complex that they may not be easy to handle or safely eradicated. Consequently, there is need for conflict management, to prevent them from escalating into greater problems. The way one deals with a conflict is critical. The manner of handling a conflict could bring positive or negative consequences that might affect the lives of members of the school community and beyond. Each of the styles adopted has its own consequences. The following are five main styles of dealing with conflicts as identified by Kampbell, Corbally and Nystrand (1983) and Johnson (2003). The possible impact of each of these measures, as far as the resolution of educational conflicts in Nigeria are concerned, are also enunciated.

1. Competing/dominating: This is a conflict resolution style in which one's own needs are advocated over the needs of others. It is, "a win, lose" orientation - where one party shows high concern for self and low concern for others. This style is outspoken in communication, does not consider what would happen to relationships in future, and a lot of intimidation. They are afraid that may lose out of the conflict.

Consequently, they like to take control of all dialogue concerning the conflict. This style may not be desirable to all parties involved in the conflict.

As undesirable as this style may seem, from experience, this is often the orientation to conflicts found in most Nigerian primary schools. The Commissioner for Education and the Ministry of Education officials pass instructions and orders, with threats, to headteachers without any recourse to their dispositions. On their part, the headteachers also pass instructions on to both teachers and pupils, with threat, giving no regard to their feelings and responses, no matter the situation. Of course, it does not matter whether the instruction goes well with members of the school community or not. The subordinates are simply expected to do as directed. Thus, teachers and members of the school community tend to be on the losing side always. This might be contributory to the deteriorating conditions in Nigerian primary schools, where teachers are seen in constant conflicts with headteachers, the headteachers are grumbling against the Ministry of Education's officials, and even the pupils are unhappy with the teachers. The effects are often destructive because the conflict is never resolved and sometimes, may even escalate to industrial actions (Johnson, 2013).

This method of conflict resolution involves the use of power and hostile behaviour in achieving personal misgivings. Such behaviour shows lack of respect for the rights and feelings of others, often exhibits hostility and cynicism, forces one's feeling, opinions, thoughts and choices on others.

2. Accommodating/obliging/appeasement:

The ccommodating/obliging/appeasement is a style in which persons yield their needs to those of others. Diplomacy is the watchword for this conflict resolution style. It is a "lose-win" conflict resolution orientation. The style pushes an individual to be willing to meet the needs of others at the expense of the individual's own needs. In this style, a party is ready to appease the other party when they feel relatively powerless in the situation or when they consider it more important to retain a good relationship with the other party than to prevail on a particular issue. The effect is that this party becomes a pushover for anyone initiating a conflict. Teachers in schools and their employers often resolve conflicts this way. The staff yields to the school authority or the employers rather than jeopardize a possible promotion.

This style of conflict resolution tends to apply to the situation in Nigerian primary schools. In every conflict with the administration, the subordinates exercise accommodation, as a conflict resolution orientation, just to be able to earn their promotions and retain their jobs. The staff give up their rights without objections. However, when one party continues to appease the other, the relationship between the two may become so imbalanced that it sparks dramatic changes. For instance, teachers

who are always submitting to the administration on matters they consider important may eventually resign or attempt to organize a union. This results in incessant industrial actions and brain drain from the school system. Despite the fact that often, there is need for more teachers in the system, the ones that are available are so dissatisfied that they keep quitting to other more respectful jobs. Appeasement should always be balanced for effective conflict management in schools.

3. Avoiding: Avoiding is a common response to the negative perception of conflict. In this style, the parties involved simply ignore or refuse to deal with the situation. Consequently, unexpressed feelings and views, the conflict tends to aggravate until it becomes too big to be ignored. This situation often leads to confusion and people wondering what went wrong in a relationship. On the other hand, orientation of neglect may stem from honest feeling of unimportance to a problem, dislike for the methods one sees as the means of getting the conflict resolved, or a feeling of helplessness. Such attitude impedes the consideration of alternatives in the school and restricts the development of cooperative relationships.

Often times, this kind of conflict situation is seen where it has to do with the condition of service of primary school teachers in Nigeria. Though unsatisfied with the condition of service, primary school teachers tend to ignore the matter even when they are really pent up. The government also behaves like it is unimportant to attend to the issue. With continuous avoidance, the matter keeps boiling up leading to quitting of teachers from the job to other jobs with better conditions of service. The end point is continuous lack and shortage of teachers in the school system.

4. Compromising: This is an approach to conflict in which people gain and give in a series of tradeoffs. This style is based on the belief that disputes can be settled by giving each person a part of what they want. This is a "we both win some and lose some" orientation. Compromise is apparent at all organizational levels in schools – from the playground to the board meeting. This style looks for a solution that will, at least, partially satisfy everyone. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and when there is a deadline looming. Lack of compromise in such situations will always lead to stalemates in conflicts.

A typical example of the challenge in the utilization of this strategy for conflict resolution is the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike of 2013 in Nigeria. ASUU refused to shift grounds and the Federal Government insisted on her own stance. The university education in Nigeria remained at a standstill for more than one hundred days, further deteriorating the system. It was not until there was compromise that the industrial action was called off and academic activities returned on campuses.

5. Collaborating: This is the pooling of individual needs and goals toward a common goal, often called win-win problem solving orientation. Collaboration works on the premise of   dialogue and cooperation towards the resolution of the conflict. The style focuses on the belief that everybody is important. Hence, it gives opportunity for all parties involved in the conflict to agree on a common solution. This style collates all ideas and inputs from all parties for effective and meaningful resolution of the conflict.

Conclusion
Conflicts are bound to occur in primary schools since there are diversities of opinions, needs, interests, aptitudes, age and goals among members of the school system. However, meaningful and effective management and resolution of such conflicts can possibly usher in an atmosphere of peace and orderliness condusive for effective teaching and learning to take place.

Suggestions towards effective resolution of conflicts
The following are suggestions proffered towards effective conflicts resolution in primary schools:
1. The headteacher has the option to use staff meetings as a tool for effective problem-solving in a range of situations, including anticipated conflicts. If such channels are perceived by staff as closed, unsafe, and non-productive, they will be replaced by gossips, end runs and back-biting, thus, disrupting the school system.
2. Dialogue: Engaging staff in dialogue when a conflict is anticipated or needs resolution, would give opportunity for collaboration thus, giving everybody a sense of belonging.
3. Guidance and counselling: Every school needs a guidance and counselling unit which could be responsible for one-on-one, as well as group interactions for effective conflict management and resolution.
4. In-school workshops and seminars: In-school workshops and seminars could be organized on the identification of conflicts and conflict management for healthy primary schools' climate in Nigeria. With this awareness, all stakeholders within the school system would be cautious enough to either avoid conflicts or get involved in managing and resolving them.
5. School heads should develop on their collaborative skills, such that they will empower others like the teachers, parents and students, to help them identify conflicts especially at the emergence stages.
6. Government should endeavour to take care of situations which if overlooked could turn the schools into chaotic camps with disgruntled and insecure teachers, and angry students who are constantly on edge.

7. Resolving conflicts between pupils and teachers should involve a parent-teacher conference in the presence of a school administration figure who helps mediate and communicates the ideas of both parties.

8. Headteachers should be trained on conflict resolution and management techniques to avoid conflicts going on for a long time without being resolved. It would also assist in making them have the techniques to turn negative effects of conflict into having positive attributes. This training could be done through seminars, conferences and workshops organized by the government and manned by experts.

9. A parent-teacher conference may lead to a new teaching style or changing the student to a new teacher. In some cases, moving the child to a different teacher could also be a solution for student/teacher conflict.

References

Afful-Broni, A. (2007). *The school as a social unit: The Ghanaian perspective*. Accra: Yamens Press.

Afful-Broni, A. (2012). Conflict management in Ghanaian schools: A case study of the role of leadership of Winnerba senior high school. *International Journal of Educational Planning and Administration,* 2(2), 65-76.

Biutha, M., Zachariah W., Beth, M., & Nyabisi, E. (2013). Effects of Conflicts on School Management in the Third World: The Case of Kenya. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Economics and Management Sciences (JETEMS),* 4(5), 501-507.

Campbell, R. F., Corbally J. E., & Nystrand R. O. (1983). *Introduction to educational administration.* USA: Allyn and Bacon ,Inc

Johnson, P. E. (2003). Conflict and the school leader expert or novice. Available at http://www2.education.uiowa.edu/archives/jrel/spring03/johnson024.html

Kinard, J. (1988). *Management*. Toronto: D.C. Health and company.

Moran, M. (2001). The effects of a state-wide conflict management initiative in schools. *American Secondary Education,* 29, p.3.

Okotoni, O. & Okotoni, A. (2003). Conflict management in Secondary Schools in Osun State, Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 12(1), 23 – 28.

Sagimo, P. O. (2002). *Management dynamics towards efficiency, effectiveness, competence and productivity*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publication.

Thapa, T. B. (2015). Impact of conflict on teaching learning process in schools. *Academic Voices A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 5(1), 73-88.

Webne-Behrman (1998). *The practice of facilitation: Managing group process and solving problem*s. Quorum Books, Greenwood publishing.