

REFOCUSING SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT OPTION

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Abstract

The school as an organization cannot escape crises situations, which are bound to occur from time to time. The policies of government, role-played by individuals and the limited resources are possible crises-prone areas in the secondary schools. The paper focuses on the meaning of conflict, sources of conflict in schools and consequences of conflict in the schools. Strategies for resolving and managing conflicts were highlighted for a sustainable educational sector. Conclusions were drawn on the bases of exposed strategies' with recommendations made to move the secondary education in Nigeria forward.

Introduction

The educational system in Nigeria is fraught with problems of dimensions. The lack of funds, space, facilities and equipment has made conflicts inevitable in the educational sector. There is a widely held view that conflict which is defined, as a natural part of the class struggle is inevitable in any social organization.

Schmidt and Kochan (1972) view conflict as an overt behaviour arising out of a process in which one party seeks advantage of its own interests in its relationship with others. This is in line with Mcshane and GHnow (2002), who see conflict as a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. It crops up whenever some one believes that another person or group might obstruct his efforts. In the secondary school, there are numerous sources of conflict, conflict between school management and teachers or teachers versus teachers, teachers versus students and students versus students.

Conflict situation should be properly and maturely handled if an organization desires to benefit positively from the experience. Conflict may usher in a new lease of life in a school or an organization. The secondary school is a complex organization. Individuals in the system have different goals, needs, skills, talent, interest, values and patterns of behaviour. The interaction of these differences induces conflicts. The radical schools of thoughts conclude that it is the responsibility of a good manager to device means of creating the best out of a conflict situation.

The educational system in general and the secondary schools in particular will be better if the conflicts are adequately and properly managed. The paper however, intends to focus on the following;

- Sources of conflict in schools
- Consequences of conflicts in schools
- Conflict management strategies.

Sources of Conflicts

Conflicts in schools and indeed in any organization, could be as a result of the following

- **Task Related Conflicts**

These are induced by the task rather than the individuals or groups in the school system. Task-related conflict situations may occur in the secondary school system as a result of unresolved clashes in the timetable. Apart from this, some teachers especially those teaching the core subjects sometimes feel their subjects are more important than others. They therefore, encroach into the time allocated to other subjects.

The situation could induce conflict especially as no teacher would want to be rendered indolent or useless in the system. Every subject is important for the overall achievement of the educational goals of a system. The student who takes mathematics, which is a core subject, would also need physics and chemistry in order to get the requisite qualification for entry into the universities and other tertiary educational institutions. This conflict if not well managed, could result in clashes that could hinder the attainment of educational goals.

- **Limited Resources**

One of the prevalent issues in organizations is that of limited resources. Most of the time individual and groups have to contest to have the lion share of resources, available for organizational use and since this is always in short supply, conflicts keep occurring. The issue of limited resource and its attendant conflict situations is predominant between school administrators (Principals) and members of teaching staff. In many government secondary schools, infrastructural facilities are in state of decay, necessary equipment and materials are constantly in short supply. (Fagbamiye, 2004) The principals always claim there is no subvention while the staff alleges that funds are being mismanaged. This situation brings about conflicts. The educational sector being dependent on the government in Nigeria makes it difficult for monies to be enough for provision of equipment facilities, etc. In some secondary schools across Nigeria, we hardly get chairs for teachers to sit not to talk of having enough tables for writing. Teachers who come early to school are therefore tempted to colonize the existing facilities and equipment for their use while those who arrive much later may not have the needed materials to effectively carry out their duties.

- **The Nature of Work Activities**

This is another common source of conflict. Conflict arises where an individual task is dependent upon the work of others. In most cases rewards and punishment come along with the level of performance. If an individual or a group feels the other party is not measuring up to standard, there is a problem. For example, during the preparation for the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) Science practical, the laboratory attendants have to play their parts very well before the science teachers are able to conduct a hitch free examination. Conflict arises when this order is not followed especially when the laboratory attendant either does not have the requisite knowledge or fails to stay back for the practical.

Practicals are better conducted when all hands are on deck. The students would need materials from time to time. Those who have problems with their apparatus will need the attention of the attendant and teachers for a successful practical exercise. But a situation where one of the parties fails to cooperate or is incapable of his or her duties it makes the work difficult for one of the parties and this could cause conflict. (Nwagwu, 2002).

- **Changes in Existing Policies and Situation**

Changes are part of organizational life. Individual may resist the introduction of a new government policy, technology and social values. Students in secondary schools have reacted violently to increases in fees and change in principals. Recent attempts by state governments to handover schools to missions and private individuals and groups have met with resistance from the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) and other bodies (Ekwevugbe, 2005). The resistances and protest have come in terms of strike actions, work to rule and other conducts that are inimical to the well being of the secondary education in Nigeria.

The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and review of petroleum prices have resulted to the closure of secondary schools and other Educational Institutions across the country. Attempts by principals in schools to curb excesses of teachers in schools have resulted in conflict between the principals and teachers. Principals are usually forced to introduce stern measures to address the problem of absenteeism, lateness, and truancy in the schools.

Communication Problems

Lack of effective communication is a major source of conflict. There must always be an enabling atmosphere to communicate. The absence of such atmosphere may bring conflicts. Some people lack the necessary communication skills. They are always blunt and confrontational. Of course, the other side will want to give them back in their own coins. This situation creates conflict or heightens an existing one.

A new teacher may form a bad opinion about his principal because of the initial ineffective communication. The communication gap between them broadens as time goes on. It is important that a good administrator identifies these sources of conflict so as to minimize the negative consequences.

Consequences of Conflicts in Schools

Conflict can be seen in positive or negative dimension. On the bright side, is that conflict brings about desired changes. It helps administrators to sit up, have a retrospective look at their styles of management and approaches to decision making. They naturally desire to improve on this to avoid future conflicts. According to Mchane and Glinow (2002), conflicts between groups or organization potentially improve team dynamics within those units. When faced with external threats, a group becomes closer. This in turn leads to increased productivity.

On the other hand, if not properly managed, conflict may result in frustration, stress and job dissatisfaction. Achievement of organizational goal is hampered in chaotic situations. Peretomode (1995), views conflict situations as temporary but the consequences of such situations depends on the handling. As far as he was concerned if the conflict has been genuinely resolved, it can lead to an improved relationship as well as effective cooperation between organizational members. However, unresolved or partially resolved conflicts may lead to a new and more severe conflict than the first. What one finds in most secondary schools is that the end of the one conflict leads to the beginning of another round of more severe conflict, which has the tendency to pull the schools and the entire educational system backwards.

Conflict Management Strategies

In conflict management, an administrator is expected to be able to apply the right strategy for the right situation. Though, there are various ways of managing conflicts, there is no right or wrong style or management. Gombieski and Blumberg (1967), classify the various strategies of conflict management into three areas: avoidance, diffusion and confrontation. Reitz (1977), classified conflict management approaches into two broad categories; non-intervention and intervention approaches. McShane and Glinow (2002), opine that culture and gender differences should guide ones choice of management approaches to crises. Cultural values affect peoples' perceptions of situations. It has been identified that people from collectivist cultures - (where everybody has a common goal) tend to move progressively in team activities within the group. They thus, avoid conflicts with other individuals hi the group. The situation is not the same with people from individualistic culture; they tend to compete aggressively with other people in the group. This may lead to conflict situations. Cultural and value system have great influence on the choice of the conflict-management strategies.

Partners who view themselves to be of the same cultural background tend to use collaborative style to conflict management. Issues are settled amicably through open discussions. The collaborative approach results in positive team performance.

Mullins (1999), identifies 10 ways of managing conflict - clarification of goals and objectives, resources distribution, personnel policies and procedures, non-monetary reward, development of interpersonal/group process, skill group activities, leadership and management, organizational process, and social technical approach. However, only 4 will be discussed here due to space constraints.

- **Clarification of Goals and Objectives:** Organizational goals and objectives should be stated lucidly to avoid conflict. A school administrator should ensure that the goals of establishing the school are paramount in the minds of all stakeholders. The behavioural change desired in students should be pursued by all. In all aspects, the students' are expected to exhibit the required change, until the school passes through them.
- **Resources Distribution:** Even though organizations operate on limited resources, principals ought to bring in their ingenuity to manage the limited resources at their disposal. Principals should look inwards to other sources of generating funds.
- **Personnel Polices arid Procedures:** An important aspect of managing conflicts is the ability of school heads to pay attention to policies affecting individuals. To minimize crisis, the school principal should be concerned about staff professional and social welfare. A carefree attitude on the principals' side may give birth to a crises ridden school. Teachers should be adequately rewarded in terms of promotion and recognition while offenders should be punished accordingly.
- **Leadership and Management:** For effective management of conflict situations, the leadership of the organization should adopt a participative and supportive style. He should create a work environment in which staff can work cooperatively and encourage fellow staff to have interest in

personal self-development. Principals should create an enabling environment for staff to after: workshop, seminars and conferences so as to interact with staff of other schools and othf

communities. It seems there is a problem of lack of self-development amongst staff in the educational setting particularly at the secondary school level.

Recommendations

To be able to put the secondary schools back on the path of development, the following recommendations are made:

- Stakeholders should adopt positive attitude to conflict situations and ensure that areas of friction are resolved amicably for greater productivity.
- Administrators of schools should be trained and equipped with conflict-management strategies for the system not to completely grind to a halt.

Conclusion

The myriad of conflicts in the educational sector could greatly hamper the development of the sector. It is necessary therefore, that the principals, teachers, students and other stakeholders are made to understand the gains of unity in diversity. The collaborative effort of staff will ensure that educational goals are achieved with minimal friction.

The conflict that arises as a result of work schedule should not grind the school to a halt rather, it should propel it to greater heights since resolving conflicts will lead to greater understanding of the roles of individuals in the organization.

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