CONFLICT IN SCHOOL CLIMATE: A SYNOPSIS OF ITS NATURE, CAUSES, EFFECTS AND MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

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Abstract

School climate is a functional variable that determines the nature of social activities that will take place in a school. Its functionality is based on how emerging conflicts are constructively managed to make positive impacts on people and the system. Based on this, the study examined the nature, causes, effects and management approaches of conflict in the secondary school climate in Adamawa State. The study adopted a descriptive research design, using a questionnaire entitled "Conflict and School Climate Questionnaire (CSCQ)" to gather the required data. Seven hundred and sixty teachers (760) were selected through a random sampling technique from Yola and Numan educational zones in the state. Percentage, chart and graph were used to analyse the data collected. The result shows that teacher-student conflict (TSC) was the main form of conflict confronting teachers in secondary school climates. The study also discovered that collaborating conflict handling style was the major approach that teachers employ to resolve conflict, followed by accommodation approach. The causes and effects of conflict in secondary school climate were discovered. Implications for peaceable classroom and policy options were highlighted.

Introduction

The capability and limitation of a school is highly imbued in its climate. The nature of a school's climate determines the interactive behaviour of staff, developmental trends of students, administrators' capability to perform and public perceptions of the school. Haynes, Emmons and Comer (1994) asserted that school climate constitutes the quality and

consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community that influence children's cognitive, social and psychological development. School climate is the quality and character of school life. It is the patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structure (National School Climate Center, 2007). In essence, school climate is made up of physical and social structures, which characterize the totality of what goes on in a school. The values, norms, attitudes, goals and the behaviours of those in the system are the component parts of school climate. The outlook of a school climate serves as a defining factor in the determination of teachers' productivity, students learning outcomes, and the effectiveness of school administrators. The outlook of a school climate can either be positive or negative in nature. Conflict is a major factor that can influence school climate positively or negatively. Dipaola and Hoy (2001) observed that conflict is indeed on the daily menu of school administration. Spring (1993) averred that educational settings are even more conducive to repeated conflict situations based on their inherent political, economic and social characteristics. The heterogeneous composition of the school climate makes conflict an inherent part of the system. Even teaching and learning which are the core activities of the school climate are not free from the experience of conflict.

Barsky (2003) opined that the process of teaching and learning is fraught with conflict. The high incidence of conflict in school climate will make school administrators and teachers to spend greater proportion of their time and energies handling conflicts at the expense of other tasks. Studies have shown that 20% (Thomas and Schmidt, 1976), 30 to 40% (Whitaker, 1996), and 24 to 60% (Fior, 2006) of the time and energies of school personnel/managers are spent dealing with conflict. Lippitt (1982) categorically stated that conflict management in schools commanded nearly 49% of the attention of school officials as compared to 24% in other management positions. Although, conflict may not be bad contrary to the view of the classical school of thought that posited that conflict is bad and should not, in all its ramifications, be allowed in organizations. Conflict was viewed as negative because it was seen to be synonymous with such terms as violence, destruction and irrationality to reinforce its negative connotation (Robbins, 2001).

However, the emergence of human relations and interactionist schools of thought brought to fore the insightful argument that conflict is not bad, that it is inevitable and a given dosage of it is required for interpersonal and organizational development. This idea, perhaps, led Albert (2001) to posit that there are productive and destructive conflicts. A conflict is said to be positive when it is constructively discussed by the parties and amicable terms for the settlement reached. And "a destructive conflict is usually characterized by violence whether in its physical, psychological or structural connotation" (Albert, 2001).

The possibility of a conflict metamorphosing into a constructive or destructive outcome is a function of the conflict management styles adopted by the parties concerned. Whitfied (1994) averred that conflict can cause a great deal of injury and/or a great deal of good, depending on the management style of an organization. School climates around the world are suffering greatly from the deficiencies of poorly managed conflicts. These conflicts manifest in diverse ways affecting the productivity of school personnel, learning outcome of students and the society at large. In Nigeria, for instance, Onanuga (2003) observed that secondary schools have been bedeviled by overt conflict, which often resulted in crisis situations like protests, demonstrations, riots and strikes, which are inimical to effective academic performance.

In Adamawa State, conflict features prominently among staff in secondary schools. Secondary school teachers in the state experience various forms of conflicts, which often impede their efficiency and effectiveness. The log books of secondary schools in the state revealed the existence of a variety of conflicts between principal and teacher, between teachers, teachers and students, the P.T.A and the school, and even the host communities. However, conflicts within the system are rarely allowed to take a volatile shape, that will attract the attention of the public. This is because the conflict handling style that is usually employed is based on transferring the conflicting parties to different schools by the appropriate authorities, when such cases are reported. In a short run, this method can assume to be effective but it will be disastrous on the long–run because it is based largely on avoidance approach to conflict management. Truter (2003) argued that avoidance is not a successful method for achieving a long-term solution since the

original cause of the conflict remains. This study, therefore, intends to examine the nature, causes, effects and management approaches of conflict in secondary school climate in North-eastern, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The manifestations of conflict in the school climate can either be constructive or destructive in nature. When it is constructive, it creates a positive climate that will promote effective teaching and learning process. It is destructive in nature, when school climate is hostile to social activities in the school. This is the point where activities are characterized by "lot of dissension, anger, hostility, mistrust, conflict and suspensions" (Sue, 1996).Whatever a conflict outcome may be, it depends on the perceptions and conflict management behaviours of the parties concerned in a conflict. The symptoms of poor academic performance of students and poor quality of education, evident in secondary schools in Adamawa state (Bashir and Mubi, 1999 and Awodoyin, 2010) are partly a product of various forms of conflicts that are internally or externally induced, which are often mismanaged making the school climate to be highly unconducive for meaningful teaching and learning process. Therefore, the display of various kinds of anti-social behaviours in the system can be attributed to the existence of unhealthy school climate. The overall effect of this development is that the scarce resources devoted to education will not be adequately utilized, thwarting the core and specific goals of education in the country.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide the study.

- What are the natures of conflicts that teachers often experienced in the secondary school climate?
- How do teachers consider conflicts occurring in their school climates?
- What are the views of teachers about the frequency at which conflicts occur in their school climates?
- What are the causes of conflicts in secondary schools?
- What are the effects of conflict in the system?
- What are the conflict management styles often employed by teachers in managing conflicts in their schools?

Literature Review

The word 'school climate' has been used variously to denote the state of activities in a school. These activities vary from one school to another. Climate is the human environment within which the teachers of a school do their work (John and Taylor, 1999). School climate has been defined as the 'feel' of a school (Halpin and Croft, 1963). It is the physical and psychological aspects of the school that are more susceptible to change and that provide the preconditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place (Best Practice Briefs, 2004). Marshall (2004) referred to school climate as characteristics of schools, such as the physical structure of a school building and the interactions between students and teachers. The Philadelpha Citizens for Children and Youth and the Alliance Organizing Project in 2001 considered school climate as an orderly environment in which the school family feels valued and able to pursue the school's mission free from concerns about disruptions and safety. These definitions show that school climate has four aspects, which are: the physical environment, social environment, affective environment and academic environment (Best Practice Briefs, 2004). Halpin and Croft (1963) posited that a school climate can either be open or closed. An open climate is characterized by low hindrance, low disengagement, average intimacy and high esprit of teachers; and low aloofness, low production emphasis, and high trust and consideration of the principal and by contrast, a closed climate is characterized by high disengagement, high hindrance, low esprit, and average intimacy of teachers; and high aloofness, high production emphasis, and high trust of the principal (John and Taylor, 1999).

In essence, the degree of openness of a school climate is the result of the quality of human interactions in the school (John and Taylor, 1999). School climate is a function of a variety of school-related elements which include: leadership qualities of principals, teacher-colleague relations, parent-teacher relations, student-teacher interpersonal relations, student-teacher instruction-related interaction, school buildings and facilities, and student-peer relations (Freiberg, 1983). School climates that demonstrate these elements are positively oriented in nature. The American School Counselor Association (2003) reported that schools with a positive climate encourage and welcome the participation of faculty, students, and parents, which in turn make the school successful. Hoffman, Hutchinson and Reiss (2009) posited

that a positive, supportive school climate has been deemed appropriate in improving educational quality and creating safer schools. A positive school climate is considered as a healthy system which radiates "respect, trust, opportunity for input, cohesiveness, caring, high morale, and school renewal (Howard, Howell and Brainard, 1987) and a constructive conflict management posture. A negative school climate is characterized by underachievement, high absenteeism, low morale, frustration, negative attitudes, significant number of indiscipline problems, lack of supplies and equipment,…(Howard, el ta 1987) and poor conflict management behaviour.

In essence, negative school climates demonstrate a high degree of dissension, anger, hostility, mistrust, conflict and suspension (American School Counselor Association, 2003). The point is that conflict exists in both positive and negative school climates, but in positive climate it is so managed to contribute positively to the development and constructiveness of the system, while in a negative climate, it produces negative outcomes. Conflict is an inevitable element in every social organization, most especially, the school.

Coser (1967) states that conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rivals. This definition reveals that the causes of conflict are struggle over values, status, power and resources. It equally indicates that conflict is a competition or opposition. Hellriegel and Slocum (1996) consider conflict as opposition arising from disagreement about goals, thoughts or emotions with or among individuals, teams, departments or organizations. Donohue and Kolt (1992) postulated that conflict is a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals. A major factor that can throw parties into a state of incompatibility is their perception of the issue at hand. Albert (2001) posited that conflict is rooted in people's beliefs and perceptions about goals, as opposed to objective facts. In the same vein, Alessandra and Hunsaker (1993) postulated that conflict arises from the clash of perceptions, goals or values in an arena where people care about the outcome. Conflict is a fate of life which occurs where we have human interaction marked with differences in goals, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, values, needs or

interests. The various forms of conflict existing in the school climate are well captured in the literature.

For instance, Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) identified various forms of conflicts existing in secondary schools as conflicts between management and staff, between staff and students, between the communities and schools, and interpersonal conflicts. Secondary schools are fraught with various forms of conflict which can be identified as "conflict can occur between the student and the teacher, between a student and another student, or between the teacher and the parent" (Harper, 2004).

Adeola (2003) observed that conflicts are observed between students and teachers, teachers to heads of department, or teachers and principals. The possible conflicts that can occur in secondary schools are principal-teacher conflict, conflict between teachers and students, conflict between the community and the school, student-student conflict, teacher-parent conflict, and conflict between teachers. These forms of conflicts can be categorized as interpersonal conflict, intragroup conflict and intergroup conflict and they are caused by numerous factors within or from outside the system. Van de Vliert (1998) posited that conflicts appears to be associated with organizational characteristics, such as goals, values, norms and structural aspects such as decentralization, heterogeneity or ambiguity of tasks. Jonkman (2006) identified communication barriers, role ambiguity, unclear expectations or rules, unresolved prior conflicts, conflicting interests, disagreement on task and content issues as some of the factors that lead to conflict in school climates. Achoka (1990) considered structural factors such as the size of the school, school bureaucratic characteristics like the degree of specialization, dissatisfied educators and principals' authoritarian outlook as school related factors that can cause conflict.

Stader (2000) contended that conflicts can result in fear, alienation, withdrawal, attendance problems and academic difficulty. It leads to poor academic performance (Ejiogu and Ajeyalami, 1987) and decreased teacher productivity (Onye, 2006). Tonsing (2005) posits that conflict can help to raise and address problems; energizes work to be on the most appropriate issues; motivates people to participate; and helps people to learn how to recognize and benefit from their differences. It has also been argued that conflict has beneficial effects

on group identity, development and function (Jones,1993; De Dreu, 1997). Henry (2009) indicates that the positive effects of conflict are: improving the quality of decisions, stimulating involvement in the discussion and building group cohesion.

For conflict to be functional depends on the nature of the conflict, the parties concerned and their orientations concerning conflict management strategies. Conflict management style is a behavioural orientation of how to approach and handle conflict, with individuals choosing a pattern of principles to guide them through the conflict process (Copley, 2008). It involves designing effective macro-level strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and enhancing the constructive functions of conflict in order to enhance learning and effectiveness in an organization (Rahim, 2002). Blake and Mouton (1964) conceptualized five conflict styles for managing interpersonal conflict, namely: forcing, withdrawal, smoothing, compromising and problem-solving. Thomas (1976) relabeled the styles as avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising and collaborating based on two concerns for individual: cooperativeness and assertiveness. In cooperativeness, a party attempts to satisfy the other party's concerns, while in assertiveness, the party attempts to satisfy its own concern. The productivity of the school climate is a function of how conflicts are constructively handled to promote positive interaction among the school personnel. Constructively managed conflict induces a positive school climate while poorly managed conflict heats up the school climate to bring about "dislocation of the entire group and polarization; reduced productivity and job performance; psychologically and/or physical injury; emotional distress and inability to sleep; interference with problem activities; escalation of difference into antagonistic position and malice and increased hostility" (Akanji 2005).

Methodology
The study adopted the survey research using a questionnaire tagged "Conflict and School Climate Questionnaire (CSCQ)" to gather the needed data for analysis. Out of the five zones, two zones (i.e Yola and Numan) were selected using purposive sampling technique. The zones house two hundred and twenty two (222) secondary schools and two thousand seven hundred and thirty (2,730) teachers. Out of which seven hundred and sixty (760) teachers were selected by simple

random sampling for the study. Data gathered were analyzed through the use of percentage, frequency, chart and graph.

Results
The results of the study are presented as follows:

Research Question 1
What are the natures of conflicts that teachers often encounter in the secondary school climates?

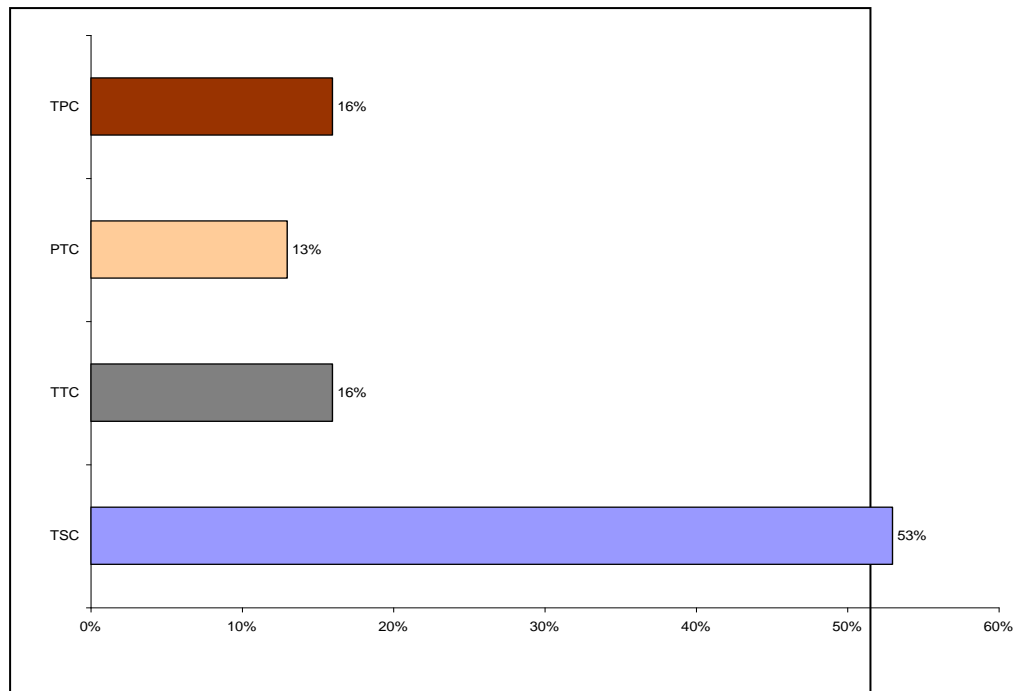**Table 1: Nature of conflicts in secondary schools**

Table 1 shows the nature of conflicts that teachers face in secondary school climate. 53% of the teachers sampled indicated that teacher-student conflict (TSC) is the major conflict that teachers face in secondary schools. 16% reported that the nature of conflict they encounter in secondary schools is teacher-teacher conflict (TTC).13% of the respondents revealed that principal-teacher conflict (PTC) is the

conflict they experience in the system.16% indicated that teacher-parent conflict (TPC) is the conflict that teachers face in secondary schools.

Research Question 2
How do teachers consider conflicts occurring in their school climates?
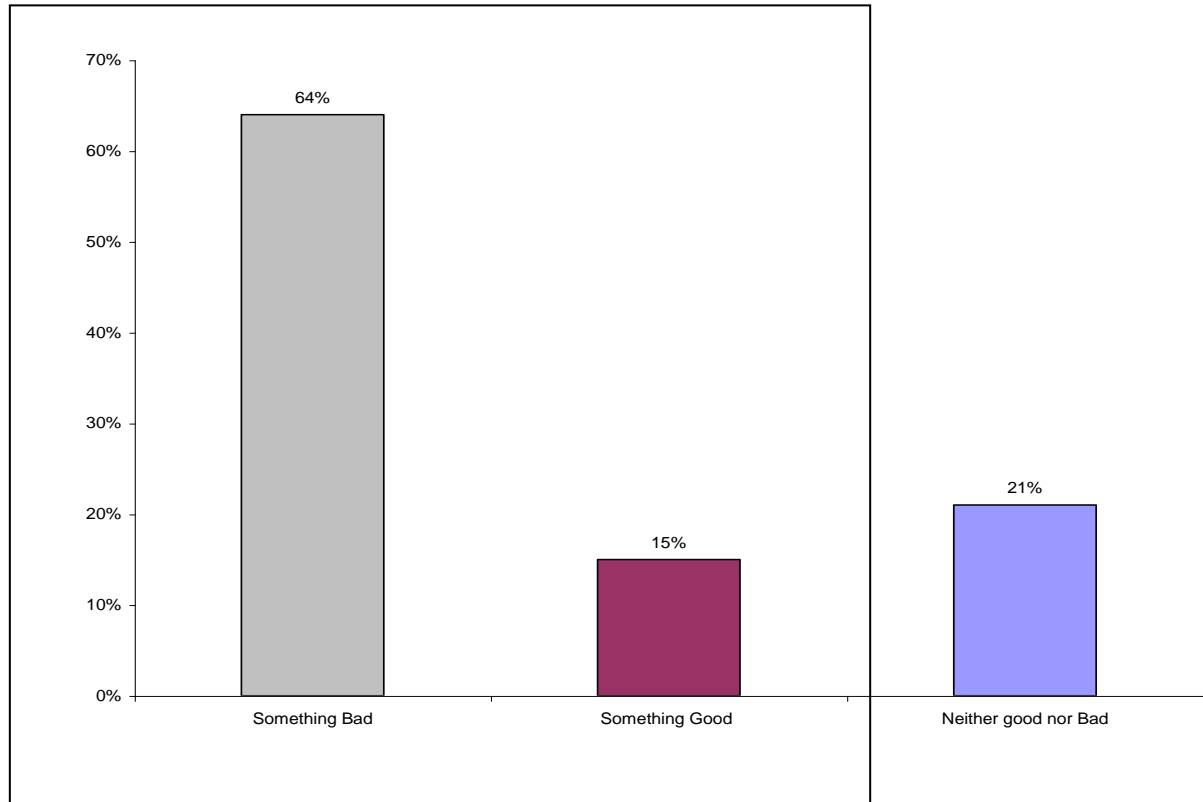**Table 2: Teachers' consideration of conflicts in their schools**

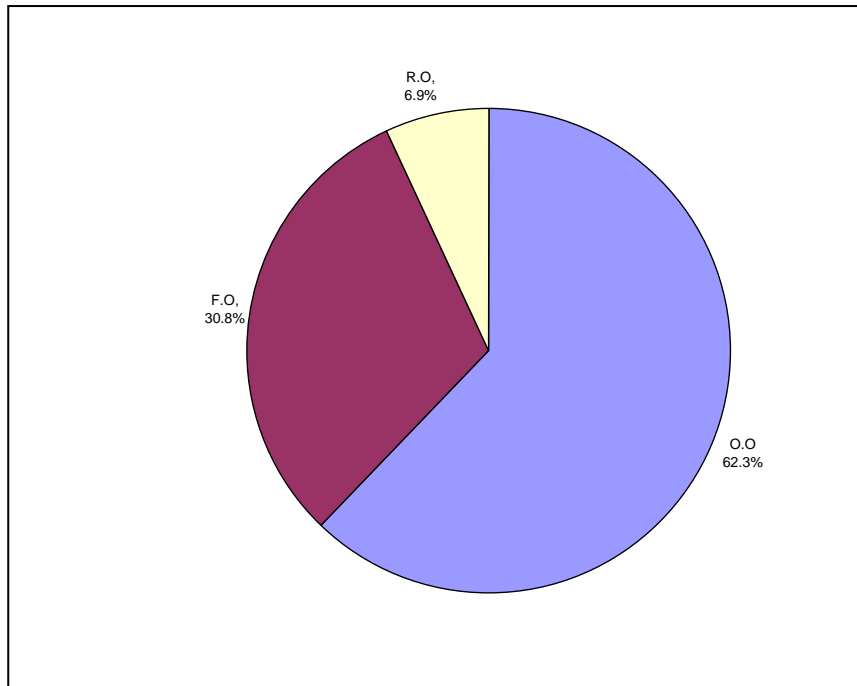**Table 3: Teachers' view of the frequent occurrence of conflicts in schools**

Table 3 illustrates the frequency at which conflict occurs in secondary schools in the state. 30.8% of the respondents indicated that conflict frequently occurs (F.O) in the system. 62.3% of the teachers revealed that conflict often occurs (O.O) in secondary schools, while 6.9% reported that conflict rarely occurs (R.O) in the system.
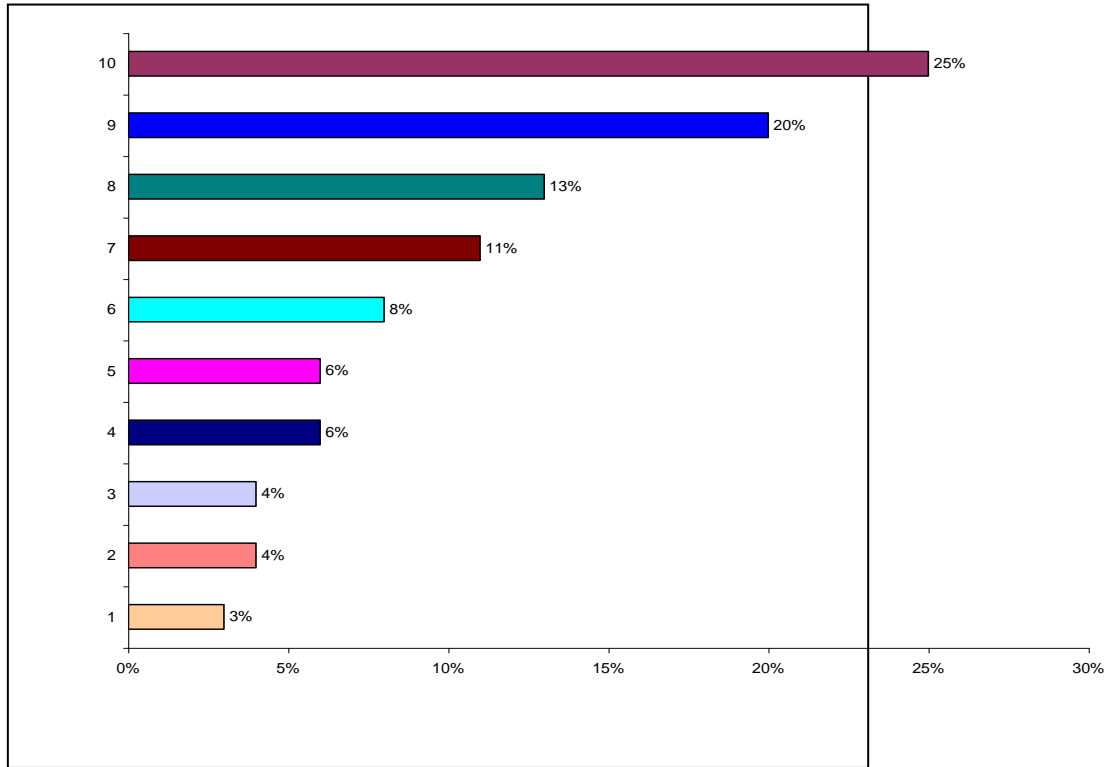
Research Question 4
What are the causes of conflicts in secondary schools?

Table 4: Causes of conflicts in secondary school

Table 4 indicates the causes of conflict in secondary schools in the state. 25% of the teachers revealed that poor management behaviour of principals is the major cause of conflict in secondary schools. 20% indicated religious fanaticism, 13% reported act of indiscipline, 11% stated misunderstanding, 8% indicated communication breakdown, 6% stated lateness to school, 6% reported violation of school rules and regulations, 4% indicated unclear definition of responsibilities, 4% stated shortage of school facilities, and 3% reported gossiping problem as the causes of conflict in secondary school climates in Adamawa State.
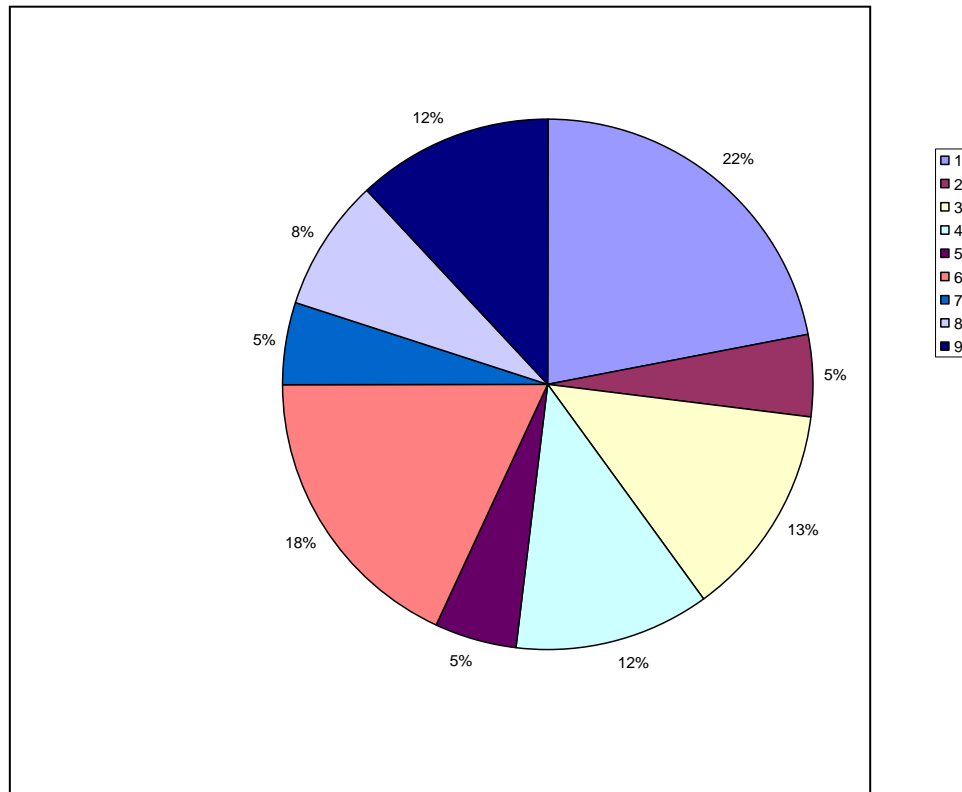
Research Question 5
What are the effects of conflicts in the system?

Table 5: The effects of Conflicts in the system

Table 5 indicates the effects of conflict in secondary school climates. 22% of the respondents revealed that conflict leads to poor academic performance. 18% revealed that conflict discourages effective teaching behavior. 13% stated that it results in the destruction of school facilities. 12% indicated that it can leads to violent fighting and factions among the teachers. 8% stated that conflict leads to stress among teachers. 5% reported that it results in suspension of teachers, hatred among teachers, and poor quality of education.

Research Question 6
What are the conflict management styles often employed by teachers in conflict situations in their schools?

Table 6: The conflict management styles of teachers
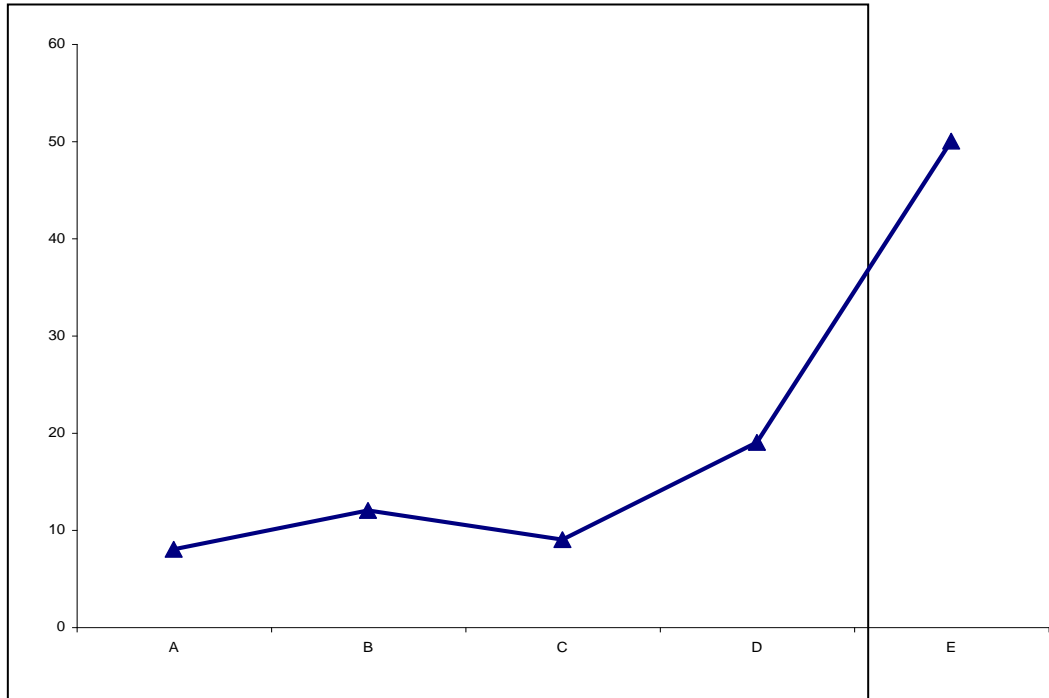
   A=avoiding, B=compromising, C=accommodating, D=competing and E=collaborating

Table 6 reveals the conflict management approaches that teachers often adopt in handling conflict in their respective schools. 8% of the teachers reported using avoiding method. 11% of the respondents indicated that they use compromising method in resolving conflicts in their schools. 8% stated competing method. 20% reported using accommodating method and 53% indicated using collaborating style.

Discussion of Findings

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in the secondary school climate. The system is beclouded with various forms of conflicts. The study revealed that teachers experience teacher-student conflict (TSC), teacher-teacher conflict (TTC), principal-teacher conflict (PTC) and teacher-parent conflict (TPC). The study discovered that the major conflict that teachers experience in secondary school is teacher-student conflict (TSC). 53% of the teachers sampled indicated so. This is understandable because teachers interact more with students on daily basis than any other person in the school. The positions of Okotoni and Okotoni (2003), Turay (n.d) and Meyers, Bender, Hill and Thomas (2006) are in line with the findings of the study. They maintained that teacher-student conflict is the most common phenomenon that teachers face in schools. This idea, perhaps, motivated Boice (2000) to describe conflict as the product of an escalating interplay between instructors' and students' misbehaviours. The study also discovered that teachers consider conflict occurring in their schools as something good, something bad, and neither good nor bad. This finding tallies with the findings of Suping and Jing (2006). They reported that there are three views about conflict, which are positive, negative and balance. Majority of the teachers (i.e 64%) claimed that conflict is something bad. This finding is supported by the work of Turay (n.d). Turay (n.d) postulated that teachers, most especially males, felt that conflict is bad because it nurtures ill feelings, leads to frustrations and anger.

The point is that the outcome of a conflict situation is determined by the perception and the conflict management styles of the parties to a conflict. The study also revealed that conflict frequently occurs, often occurs and rarely occurs in schools. 62.3% of the teachers, which constituted the majority, indicated that conflict often occurs (O.O) in secondary schools. This indicates that teachers experience conflict on daily basis in the school. The study equally found out the causes of conflict in secondary school climates. Majority of the teachers (i.e 25%) reported that poor management behaviour of principals is the main cause of conflict in secondary schools. Other conflict causative factors, as discovered by the study, are religious fanaticism, act of indiscipline, misunderstanding, communication breakdown, lateness to school, violation of school rules and regulations, unclear definition of responsibilities, shortage of school facilities, and gossiping. The work of

Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) is in consonance with these findings. They identified the attitudes of school administrators, misunderstanding, indiscipline and negligence of duty as the causes of conflict in secondary schools. In same vein, Adeyemi (2009) reported that communication gap and inadequate facilities for students and staff and Turay (n.d) identified misunderstanding and breaking of school rules and regulations as causes of conflicts in school climates. The main effect of conflict as revealed by majority of the teachers (i.e 22%) is poor academic performance.

Other effects that the study found out are: discouragement of effective teaching behaviour; destruction of school facilities; resulting in violent fight; encouragement of factions among teachers; inducement of stress among teachers; resulting in suspension of teacher; hatred among teachers; and poor quality of education. Turay (n.d) indicated that teachers feel that conflict leads to violence and Adeyemi (2009) stated that conflict results in possible loss of lives and properties and suspension or dismissal. These ideas support the findings of this study.

Collaborating style of handling conflict was discovered as the major conflict management approach that teachers often adopt to resolve conflict in the school climate. Accommodation was found out to be the next most commonly used approach by teachers. The least used approaches by teachers are avoiding and competing. Ikoya and Akinseide (2009) submitted that in secondary schools, bargaining (i.e collaborating) is the highest used style by teachers while avoiding is the least, followed by forcing (i.e competing). Balay (2006) found out that administrators and teachers at private schools tend to use compromising, avoiding and competing behaviours than their colleagues at public schools. These findings suggest that teachers in public schools are favourably disposed to collaborating and accommodating approaches than any other approach. These research findings are in cognizance with the findings of this study.

Implications for Peaceable Classroom and Policy Options
The findings of this study have serious implications for peaceable classroom and policy options.

Peaceable Classroom

Peaceable classroom is a classroom where meaningful interactions exist between students on one hand and teachers and students on other hand, to promote effective teaching and learning process. In such a classroom, conflicts are constructively managed to create a peaceful atmosphere that will promote the attainment of set goals. To achieve a classroom of this nature depends on how teachers and students perceive conflicts and the approaches they often adopt to handle them. Considering the facts that teacher-student conflict was discovered as the main form of conflict that teachers face in secondary schools and that teachers consider conflict as something bad gives a wrong signal in achieving a peaceable classroom. This is based on the idea that the way conflict is perceive will influence the manner in which it will be handled, most especially, where the interaction is classified as superordinate and subordinate relationships. The fact that the main effect of conflict, as discovered in the study, is poor academic performance suggests that classroom interactions are highly unhealthy for effective teaching and learning process in secondary schools in the state.

Policy Options

The findings of this study have implications for policy. As a matter of necessity the national, state, and local educational authorities in the country should make sure that:

- Conflict resolution education training programme should be mounted for teachers to
- expose them to the intricacies of conflict and conflict management.
- Qualified guidance and counsellors are employed in secondary schools where they are
- not available and training should be provided for them on conflict and conflict
- management, so that they can intervene earlier in any emerging conflict situation to
- prevent it from escalating into violent fight in secondary schools.
- Peace education programme should be introduced as a course in colleges of

- education to prepare future teachers on the behaviour of conflicts and how they can
- be handled to create a positive climate in schools.
- Capacity building programmes on conflict resolution education should be mounted
- for school administrators to make them understand the dynamics of conflict and its
- management approaches to enhance school climates.

Conclusion

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in school climates. The conception of conflict as good, bad or balance is associated with perception and the social outlook of the climate of a school. Where the school climate is positive, emerging conflicts will be constructively managed to produce positive outcomes. It will become a destructive tool where the school climate is negatively oriented in nature. In this regard, to achieve the goals of secondary school education and educational system generally demands the construction of a positive school climate that will reorientate teachers and students towards perceiving conflict as something that can be transformed positively to improve the interpersonal relationships of teachers and students to achieve set goals.

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