

Visible Order and Experienced Fairness: Procedural Justice and Conflict Governance in Ghanaian Boarding Senior High Schools

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Abstract

This qualitative multiple-case study examined how heads of two public boarding Senior High Schools in Ghana manage conflict and how school actors perceive the fairness and effectiveness of these practices. Conflict is a common feature of boarding schools, where shared living arrangements and limited separation after disputes often intensify tensions. Using purposive sampling, data were collected through eight semi-structured interviews with school heads, senior house staff, and guidance and counselling coordinators, together with two focus group discussions involving sixteen student leaders. Thematic analysis identified two interconnected dimensions of effective conflict management: visible order, reflected in restored calm, compliance, and routine, and experienced fairness, reflected in respectful, timely, consistent, and participatory procedures. Findings revealed a structured conflict-management process involving rule communication, fact-finding, cooling-off periods, mediation, counselling, disciplinary committee hearings, parental involvement, sanctions, and follow-up. The study contributes to school leadership scholarship by conceptualising conflict management as conflict governance, a structured leadership process that coordinates rules, relationships, evidence, communication, and follow-up to sustain organisational legitimacy. The findings underscore the importance of combining orderly school environments with fair procedures and provide practical insights for school leaders, guidance and counselling units, education authorities, and policymakers. The study recommends structured conflict-handling pathways, strengthened counselling support, capacity building for school actors, and proactive stakeholder communication to promote sustainable conflict governance in Ghanaian boarding Senior High Schools.

Key terms: Boarding schools, conflict governance, Ghana, procedural justice, school leadership.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an expected feature of school life because schools bring together adolescents and adults with different expectations, values, social backgrounds, responsibilities, and authority positions (Coleman et al., 2014; Rahim, 2017). In boarding schools, conflict management is particularly consequential because students live, learn, eat, socialise, and sleep within a single institutional setting. Disputes that begin in classrooms may continue in dormitories, dining halls, or peer groups, and the residential character of boarding schooling places greater responsibility on school heads to respond in ways that preserve order while maintaining trust, belonging, and emotional safety.

Empirical evidence from Ghanaian Senior High Schools indicates that this responsibility is far from straightforward in practice. In a multi-school study across the Volta Region, Amedome et al. (2024) found that interpersonal and academic-related disputes were the most widespread form of student conflict, that responses to conflict varied by gender and by the type of authority involved, and that resolution mechanisms such as peer mediation and disciplinary structures were applied unevenly across schools. These findings indicate that boarding Senior High Schools face a recurring and differentiated conflict burden that cannot be addressed through a single, uniform response, and that existing school-level structures do not consistently manage it. This prevalence-level evidence sets the empirical backdrop for the present study's leadership-focused inquiry: knowing that conflict is common, varied, and unevenly resolved raises the further question of how heads exercise leadership in response.

The Ghanaian Senior High School context makes this leadership responsibility more complex still. Heads are expected to maintain discipline while using non-violent, educative, and welfare-oriented approaches. The Ghana Education Service Code of Conduct frames the work of teachers and administrators as a responsibility to protect learners' rights and maintain conditions for effective teaching and learning (Ghana Education Service, 2008). Recent Ghanaian work shows that the shift from corporal punishment to positive discipline has not been straightforward; teachers may use alternative strategies while still doubting their effectiveness (Abonyi & Salifu, 2023). This gap between policy expectation and practitioner confidence is significant: it suggests that formal guidance alone is insufficient to change how conflict and discipline are handled in practice, and that leadership-level coordination — rather than isolated adherence to a code of conduct — may be required to translate positive-discipline principles into consistent everyday practice.

In boarding schools, school leaders must manage not only discrete incidents but also the continuing relationships and institutional expectations surrounding them — maintaining organisational legitimacy while balancing welfare, safety, fairness, accountability, and educational purpose. The two schools examined in this study were selected because they are large, well-established public boarding institutions with formally constituted disciplinary and guidance structures, sizeable student populations living together for extended residential periods, and heads willing to grant sustained research access; these characteristics make them information-rich sites for observing how conflict-management practice unfolds under realistic institutional conditions, as detailed further in the Methodology section.

Despite growing scholarly attention to school discipline and school climate in Ghana, existing research has tended to examine conflict management either as a set of discrete strategies exercised by individual actors, or as a compliance problem addressed through codes of conduct, with comparatively little attention to how heads coordinate the full sequence of rules, relationships, evidence, counselling, and follow-up as an

integrated leadership process, and to how school actors judge the fairness of that process. This article addresses that gap by asking: How do heads of two public boarding Senior High Schools in Ghana manage conflict, and how does procedural justice shape school actors' perceptions of the effectiveness of those practices? In response, the article develops — and examines empirically, rather than assumes — the proposition that conflict management is best understood as conflict governance: a process through which school leaders coordinate rules, relationships, evidence, communication, counselling, sanctions, and follow-up to maintain organisational legitimacy. This reframing is treated throughout as a working proposition to be tested against the accounts of heads, staff, and student leaders in the two case schools, rather than as an established conclusion.

The article's central contribution is to shift the unit of analysis in school conflict scholarship from discrete management styles to conflict governance as an integrated leadership capability, and to show how procedural justice operates as the mechanism linking that capability to organisational legitimacy in a boarding-school setting. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on boarding-school conflict, conflict governance, procedural justice, and educational leadership; Section 3 outlines the qualitative multiple-case study methodology; Section 4 presents and discusses the findings; and Section 5 concludes with theoretical propositions, limitations, and recommendations for practice and policy.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict in Boarding-School Contexts

School conflict can occur among students, between students and teachers, among staff, or at the boundary between the school and parents or community actors. In boarding schools, these conflict arenas overlap because formal learning, peer life, and residential supervision occur within the same institutional environment. The boarding-school setting intensifies everyday disagreements over property, teasing, bullying, senior-junior relations, rule enforcement, sanitation, dining arrangements, dormitory discipline, and perceived disrespect. A boarding school requires a conflict-management architecture that can distinguish minor misunderstandings from serious breaches, provide early intervention, prevent escalation, and support reintegration after resolution.

Ghanaian empirical research both reinforces and complicates this picture. Amedome et al.'s (2024) study of Senior High Schools across the Volta Region found that interpersonal and academic disputes were the dominant conflict type, while overtly violent incidents were comparatively rare — a pattern that contrasts with the stronger emphasis on physical bullying and hierarchical abuse found in much of the international boarding-school literature (cf. Coleman et al., 2014). Their study also found that responses to conflict varied by gender and by the type of authority involved, indicating that conflict-management effectiveness cannot be assessed as a single, undifferentiated outcome but must instead account for who is involved and what kind of dispute is at stake. This divergence between international and Ghanaian evidence suggests that boarding-school conflict architectures cannot simply import models designed for other contexts; they must instead account for the specific conflict types, actor relationships, and cultural expectations documented in Ghanaian secondary education.

From Conflict Management Styles to Conflict Governance

Classical conflict-management approaches focus on styles such as avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating (Rahim, 2017). These styles remain useful, but school conflict rarely

follows a single-style logic. Heads may begin with fact-finding, use temporary separation, invite dialogue, involve senior house staff, refer a matter to guidance and counselling, escalate to a disciplinary committee, impose sanctions, and later monitor reintegration. This is a significant limitation of style-based models: they assume that a single, identifiable approach can be isolated and evaluated, yet the pattern described above shows heads combining multiple strategies sequentially within a single case. Existing frameworks therefore lack the conceptual vocabulary to describe sequencing itself as a leadership competency, rather than as an aggregation of discrete style choices.

This article uses the term conflict governance to capture this wider process, drawing on governance theory's emphasis on structured, multi-actor, rule-mediated coordination (Rhodes, 1997). Conflict governance refers to the structured leadership of disputes through rules, relationships, roles, evidence, communication, accountability, and follow-up. It is broader than discipline, counselling, or restorative practice alone, and fits the boarding-school setting where heads must manage order, safety, fairness, and educational development simultaneously.

Conflict governance is conceptually distinct from, though related to, several neighbouring constructs. It differs from conflict management as classically defined because it foregrounds the coordination of an entire process rather than the selection of a single behavioural style. It differs from restorative practice because it does not presuppose a particular philosophy of repair or reconciliation; restorative elements may feature within a governance sequence, but so may disciplinary or punitive elements, depending on the severity and nature of the case. It also differs from distributed leadership: whereas distributed-leadership theory emphasises the spread of authority and initiative across formal and informal actors (Spillane, 2006), conflict governance is concerned with how that distributed authority is coordinated into a coherent, rule-mediated sequence, rather than simply with where authority resides. Finally, conflict governance extends beyond school discipline, which typically denotes the application of sanctions for rule violations; discipline is one component within a wider conflict-governance sequence that also includes fact-finding, counselling, mediation, parental engagement, and follow-up. This conceptual differentiation is developed further, and examined empirically, in Sections 4 and 4.6.

Procedural Justice as the Primary Lens

Procedural justice theory explains why people may accept decisions even when outcomes are unfavourable, provided the process is perceived as fair (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2006). In school conflict management, procedural justice is visible when parties are allowed to speak, treated respectfully, heard by a neutral authority, given reasons for decisions, and assured that rules are applied consistently. Colquitt et al. (2001) identify related dimensions: consistency, bias suppression, accuracy of information, correctability, representativeness, and ethicality — all highly relevant to school discipline.

Procedural justice also connects conflict management to school climate. A school may seem calm because students fear punishment, but that calm may be fragile if students experience authority as arbitrary or biased. Conversely, conflict responses combining firmness with voice, respect, explanation, and follow-up strengthen the legitimacy of school authority (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). The counselling literature in Ghana reinforces the need to consider welfare support alongside discipline: Panford-Quainoo et al. (2024) found that counselling access and service challenges in Ghanaian Senior High Schools remain significant, and this article extends that concern by showing how counselling becomes one component of a wider conflict-governance process.

Educational Leadership and Organisational Legitimacy

This leadership-oriented interpretation aligns with broader educational leadership scholarship, which views school leadership as the exercise of influence through relationships, organisational processes, and legitimacy rather than formal authority alone (Bush, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). Moral leadership foregrounds the ethical dimensions of authority, arguing that heads derive legitimate influence from shared values and consistent treatment (Sergiovanni, 1992). Distributed leadership recognises that influence and responsibility are spread across formal and informal leaders throughout the school (Spillane, 2006; Lumby, 2019). In boarding schools, senior house staff, guidance and counselling coordinators, and student prefects all exercise elements of leadership authority in conflict-management processes.

Bush et al. (2022) found that headteachers across sub-Saharan Africa commonly occupy a centralised authority role. This concentration amplifies the importance of procedural legitimacy: where one person's decisions carry disproportionate weight, the perceived fairness of those decisions shapes the entire institutional climate. The Ubuntu ethic prominent in sub-Saharan African educational thought — emphasising communal well-being and relational accountability — further reinforces the expectation that authority be exercised in ways that preserve relationships (Bush, 2020).

Synthesis and Conceptual Framing

Taken together, this literature indicates that conflict-management scholarship has established useful vocabularies for describing individual behavioural styles (Rahim, 2017), the conditions under which decisions are perceived as fair (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Colquitt et al., 2001), and the relational, distributed, and moral dimensions of school leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992; Spillane, 2006; Bush, 2020). What remains underdeveloped, particularly in the Ghanaian boarding-school context documented empirically by Amedome et al. (2024) and Panford-Quainoo et al. (2024), is an integrated account of how heads sequence rules, relationships, evidence, counselling, sanctions, and follow-up into a coherent leadership process, and how that sequencing is judged as fair or unfair by the actors who experience it. This article addresses that gap by treating conflict governance as the organising construct and procedural justice as the evaluative lens through which its effectiveness is assessed, situated within an educational-leadership frame that recognises legitimacy — rather than formal authority alone — as the basis of heads' influence. This conceptual framing directly informed the study's design: because the central interest is in situated leadership practice and actor perception rather than measurable outcomes, a qualitative multiple-case study, generating data through interviews and focus group discussions and analysed thematically against the procedural justice framework, was adopted, as detailed in the Methodology section that follows.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This article draws on a qualitative multiple-case study of two public boarding Senior High Schools in Ghana, reported as School A and School B to protect anonymity. A qualitative case-study design was appropriate because the study sought to understand conflict management as situated leadership practice rather than as a detached administrative procedure (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Both case schools are co-educational, government-assisted public boarding Senior High Schools located in the same municipality in Ghana, each enrolling a large student population housed across multiple residential houses under the supervision of housemasters and housemistresses, senior house staff, and a guidance and counselling unit. The two schools were purposively selected as information-rich cases

(Creswell & Poth, 2018) on the basis of four criteria: (a) status as long-established public boarding institutions with formally constituted disciplinary committees and guidance and counselling units, enabling examination of conflict governance as an institutionalised rather than an ad hoc process; (b) sufficient scale and residential density to generate the range of conflict types characteristic of Ghanaian boarding-school life; (c) willingness of the heads and school authorities to grant sustained research access to heads, staff, and student leaders; and (d) sufficient contrast in leadership emphasis — subsequently confirmed in the data as a rule-enforcement orientation in School A and an engagement orientation in School B — to support meaningful cross-case comparison. These criteria made the two schools information-rich for addressing the research question because they combined institutionalised conflict-management structures with day-to-day residential intensity, allowing the study to examine conflict governance as it is actually practised rather than as it is formally documented.

Participants were purposively selected within each school because of their direct involvement in, or observation of, school conflict management. The head and the guidance and counselling coordinator were included by virtue of institutional role, as the only individuals occupying those positions in each school. Senior house staff were selected in consultation with each head as those with the most sustained day-to-day responsibility for dormitory-level conflict. Student leaders (prefects) were selected by each school's guidance and counselling unit to represent a spread of prefectorial portfolios and year groups, on the basis that prefects occupy a frontline position between student peers and school authority in conflict situations. The sample comprised twenty-four participants: two heads, four senior house staff, two guidance and counselling coordinators, and sixteen student leaders. Eight adult participants took part in semi-structured interviews, while sixteen student leaders participated in two school-based focus group discussions of eight members each (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Profile and Data Corpus

Participant category	School A	School B	Total	Data source
Heads	1	1	2	Semi-structured interviews
Senior house staff	2	2	4	Semi-structured interviews
Guidance and counselling coordinators	1	1	2	Semi-structured interviews
Student leaders/prefects	8	8	16	Two focus group discussions
Total	12	12	24	8 interviews and 2 FGDs

Semi-structured interview and focus group discussion guides were developed from the study's two research questions and the procedural justice framework (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Colquitt et al., 2001). Interview questions for heads and guidance and counselling coordinators addressed the strategies used to manage conflict, the sequencing of those strategies, and perceptions of what makes a resolution process fair. Questions for senior house staff addressed day-to-day dormitory-level conflict and referral pathways, while the focus group guide for student leaders addressed experiences of conflict, perceptions of voice and consistency in how cases were handled, and suggestions for improvement. Each guide was reviewed by the research team for alignment with the research questions and with the procedural justice dimensions of consistency, bias suppression, accuracy, correctability, representativeness, and ethicality (Colquitt et al., 2001), and was piloted informally with a small number of non-participating school actors before use to check clarity and relevance.

Data were analysed thematically using a hybrid deductive-inductive process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining sensitivity to the research questions and the procedural justice framework with inductive attention to recurring patterns in participant accounts.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation of participant categories, cross-case comparison, use of illustrative quotations, and explicit attention to divergent views.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Committee on Human Research, Publications and Ethics (CHRPE), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), reference HuSSREC/AP/221/VOL. 4. Institutional ethical clearance and school-level permission were obtained before data collection. Adult participants provided written informed consent. For student-leader participants under 18 years of age, written parental or guardian consent was obtained in addition to school-level permission and participant assent.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Five integrated findings are presented, each illustrated with participant evidence and interpreted through the distinction between visible order and experienced fairness. The discussion of each finding is integrated with relevant theory and literature.

Conflict Was Multi-Level and Intensified by Boarding-School Life

Conflict in the two schools was not confined to student indiscipline. Participants described student-student conflict, student-teacher conflict, staff-staff tension, staff-management disagreement, and school-community boundary conflict. Student-student conflict was the most visible and frequent arena because boarding life creates repeated contact over personal property, peer status, teasing, gossip, dormitory expectations, and informal hierarchies.

"Student-to-student conflicts are common, often caused by gossip, extortion, or theft" (SHM1) "Students fight over petty issues — like who owns a bucket or accusations of theft" (SHM2) "Student-student conflicts like bullying and gossiping. It's more physical among boys and more verbal among girls" (FGD-A)

School B student leaders added a group dimension:

"Boys form groups or gangs. If one member of a gang fights another from a different group, the whole gang gets involved" (FGD-B).

These findings confirm that the head's conflict-management role extends beyond students to govern a whole ecology of relationships, consistent with Coleman et al.'s (2014) observation that conflict in schools spans multiple social levels.

Heads Used a Sequenced Conflict-Governance Repertoire

Heads used a repertoire of strategies rather than a single approach. The common sequence began with reporting, listening, or brief fact-finding. Where emotions were high, parties were temporarily separated. Less serious cases were handled through discussion, mediation, counselling, or senior house intervention.

More serious or recurrent cases were escalated to disciplinary committees, parental involvement, or formal sanctions.

School A presented a stronger rule-enforcement and disciplinary-committee orientation. Head A described a process in which student cases moved through committee structures where statements were taken, and house staff were involved:

"At the student level ... we have the Disciplinary Committee set up where their housemasters will be part of the sitting ... they sit and try to take statements from the students" (Head A).

School B showed a more visible engagement orientation:

"At the student level, minor issues are first handled by form masters or housemasters. When these persist, they are escalated to the Disciplinary Committee. For issues like repeated truancy or severe bullying, my unit gets involved to provide counselling" (GCCB).

Head B framed engagement as central:

"I mostly use engagement. That's very, very important ... the headmaster should not insist that he is right. Sometimes the Head can be at fault too" (Head B).

These findings both extend and challenge Rahim's (2017) style-based model. They confirm that heads draw on a recognisable repertoire of strategies, but they challenge the assumption that these strategies can be meaningfully classified as discrete, alternative styles. Instead, the data show heads combining and sequencing strategies within a single case — fact-finding followed by separation, dialogue, referral, and sanction — such that the sequence itself, rather than any single style, shapes the outcome. This positions conflict governance not merely as a relabelling of existing style categories but as a structurally different unit of analysis: it supports Rahim's broader observation that multiple strategies are used in practice while challenging the classical assumption that management style is the primary explanatory variable.

Effectiveness Depended on Fair Process, Not Only Case Closure

Management actors often interpreted effectiveness through order, compliance, and restoration of routine. Student leaders placed greater emphasis on fairness, listening, equal treatment, and explanation. Procedural justice was the main mechanism connecting strategy use to perceived effectiveness. Dissatisfaction emerged where punishment appeared rushed, promises were not kept, or status influenced outcomes. In School A, the Guidance and Counselling Coordinator noted:

"Decisions are made by management, and sometimes even I, as the Guidance and Counselling Coordinator, hear about them only after they're announced to students" (GCC).

Student leaders also connected fairness to knowledge of rules: "Every student should have a printed copy of the school rules" (FGD-B). These accounts affirm Tyler's (2006) argument that procedural legitimacy is a condition for the acceptance of authority. Without experienced fairness, compliance may be shallow and future conflicts may re-emerge through mistrust or covert resistance.

Counselling, Student Voice, and Follow-Up Strengthened Legitimacy

Counselling emerged as an important support mechanism, especially where conflicts involved emotional distress, repeated behaviour, or relational breakdown. However, counselling capacity was uneven, and its effectiveness depended on early referral, student trust, and post-sanction follow-up. School B provided a clearer example of engagement followed by relational checking. Head B described separating parties, listening individually, bringing them together, and checking afterwards whether they were communicating again. Prefects often observed conflicts early and helped transmit student concerns, but their position was delicate:

"I once stopped a friend from belting a junior. Others thought I was misusing my power" (FGD-A).

These findings are consistent with Panford-Quainoo et al.'s (2024) concern about counselling access gaps and extend it by showing that counselling integration into governance structures — not merely its availability — determines its effectiveness.

External Interference, Resource Constraints, and Documentation Gaps Weakened Practice

Heads did not manage conflict in ideal conditions. Their work was affected by large student populations, limited resources, workload pressure, uneven counselling capacity, and external interference. Parental or community pressure was significant because it could challenge school decisions and weaken the perceived authority of heads:

"Stakeholders — especially opinion leaders and parents — should be educated on the school's code of conduct" (SHM2B). Documentation was another constraint. Where decisions were not recorded clearly, it became difficult to demonstrate consistency or defend decisions against later pressure. Capacity building was a recurrent recommendation: "Conflict management should even be part of regular staff development" (SHM2B). Table 2 presents a cross-case analytic map of conflict governance and procedural justice across both schools.

Table 2: Cross-Case Analytic Map of Conflict Governance and Procedural Justice

Analytic issue	School A pattern	School B pattern	Procedural justice implication
Dominant tone	Rule clarity, committee handling, sanctions, and deterrence were more visible.	Engagement, separate listening, joint dialogue, counselling, and follow-up were more visible.	Firmness supports order, but legitimacy depends on voice, explanation, and consistency.
Handling sequence	Cases moved through rules, statements, the disciplinary committee, and sanctions where required.	Minor cases were handled by form/house staff; serious or persistent cases moved to the committee and counselling.	Escalation pathways improve fairness when parties understand how cases move from report to decision.
Counselling role	Counselling existed but was sometimes experienced as insufficiently integrated into decisions.	Counselling appeared more integrated in some repeated or welfare-related cases.	Early referral strengthens reintegration; late referral weakens experienced fairness.
Student voice	Student leaders valued rule clarity and wanted a stronger voice in grievance channels.	Student leaders emphasised knowledge of rules and predictable processes.	Voice and reason-giving affect acceptance even where sanctions are imposed.
External pressure	Parental pleas and reversals could weaken authority and consistency.	Opinion leaders and parents were identified as needing education on the code of conduct.	Boundary management protects consistency, credibility, and institutional legitimacy.

Theoretical Propositions

Four theoretical propositions emerge from the cross-case analysis. First, effective conflict leadership in schools is a sequencing capability, not a style choice. Second, in school conflict management, procedural justice functions as a mechanism linking leadership authority to organisational legitimacy. Third, in high-interdependence educational settings, conflict leadership effectiveness depends not only on the immediate resolution of disputes but on deliberate reintegration, follow-up, and relationship repair. Fourth, sustainable conflict leadership depends on the integration of procedural authority and relational engagement rather than the prioritisation of either dimension alone. These propositions position conflict governance as a leadership capability through which educational leaders regulate relationships, preserve institutional order, and sustain trust simultaneously.

These propositions extend and, in places, challenge the theories that inform them. They extend Rahim's (2017) style-based model by relocating the primary unit of analysis from style selection to sequencing. They extend procedural justice theory (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2006) — developed principally in legal and organisational settings — into the boarding-school context by showing that its dimensions of voice, consistency, and reasoned explanation operate cumulatively across an extended, multi-stage process rather than at a single decision point. At the same time, the findings challenge governance theory's

original emphasis on formal, multi-actor policy networks (Rhodes, 1997) by showing that, within a single school, conflict governance can be exercised through a comparatively centralised leadership structure while still meeting several of governance theory's coordination criteria — rules, roles, and accountability — suggesting that governance-style coordination does not require the multi-actor political structures assumed in the original governance literature.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the study was limited to two public boarding Senior High Schools in one municipality in Ghana; the findings are not statistically generalisable to all Ghanaian boarding schools. Their value lies in analytic transferability to comparable boarding-school contexts, and readers should exercise caution in applying the findings to settings with different institutional, cultural, or resource conditions. Second, data were generated through participant accounts rather than direct observation of live conflict-management events, which means that reported practices may not fully capture actual behaviour. Social desirability bias may have shaped responses, particularly among participants who hold leadership positions within the school hierarchy. Third, the researchers' positional proximity to the research context, while facilitating access and contextual familiarity, required deliberate analytic effort to manage the risk of familiarity bias. An audit trail and active attention to divergent participant views were the primary strategies for managing this risk.

Fourth, the observed differences between School A and School B are interpreted as reflecting institutional tone and leadership emphasis, but may also partly reflect the personal leadership styles of the individual heads; the study design does not permit these explanations to be fully disentangled. Future research could address these limitations through multi-school comparative designs, observational methods, documentary analysis of case records, and student surveys on perceived fairness.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This article has argued that conflict management in Ghanaian boarding Senior High Schools should be understood as conflict governance. Heads manage disputes by sequencing rules, evidence, dialogue, counselling, committees, sanctions, parental engagement, and follow-up. The effectiveness of this repertoire depends on whether it produces both visible order and experienced fairness. Visible order restores calm, but experienced fairness gives that order legitimacy. Where students and staff feel heard, respected, treated consistently, and given reasons, conflict-management decisions are more likely to be accepted. Where processes are rushed, uneven, poorly explained, or weakly followed up, order may return without trust. The central lesson is that boarding-school conflict management becomes sustainable only when the restoration of order is joined to procedures that students and staff recognise as fair, reasoned, and legitimate.

Recommendations: Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made: For heads and school management teams: develop a clear conflict-handling pathway that distinguishes minor interpersonal disputes, repeated misconduct, serious breaches, welfare-related cases, and cases requiring external referral. The pathway should specify who receives complaints, who conducts initial listening, when counselling is required, when committees are involved, when parents are invited, and how follow-up is documented.

For guidance and counselling units: counselling should be integrated into early assessment, emotional support, mediation, reintegration, and recurrence prevention — not reserved until after disciplinary decisions. The marginalisation of counselling from decision-making processes, as observed in School A, weakens both experienced fairness and institutional trust.

For teachers, house staff, and prefect bodies: regular training is required in reporting, de-escalation, confidentiality, proportionality, student safeguarding, and grievance channels. Prefects in particular need structured training, clear reporting channels, protection from retaliation, and adult follow-up to fulfil their frontline conflict-management role effectively.

For parents, community actors, and PTA structures: schools should proactively communicate codes of conduct and appeal pathways before conflicts occur, rather than reactively managing external pressure after decisions have been challenged.

For education authorities and policymakers: leadership development programmes should include practical training in conflict governance, procedural justice, restorative conversation, documentation practices, and boundary management to equip school heads with the full range of competencies required in boarding-school environments.

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