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Fair Process, Legitimate Discipline: Procedural Justice and the Perceived Effectiveness of Conflict Management in Ghanaian Boarding Senior High Schools

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ABSTRACT

School conflict management is often judged by whether it restores visible order. In boarding Senior High Schools, however, students and staff continue to live and work together after disputes have been formally resolved; therefore, effectiveness also depends on whether disciplinary processes are perceived as fair, respectful and legitimate. This article examines how heads, senior house staff, guidance and counselling coordinators and student leaders perceived the effectiveness of conflict-management strategies in two public boarding Senior High Schools in the Tarkwa-Nsuaem Municipality of Ghana. Drawing on a qualitative multiple-case study involving 24 participants, the article argues that effectiveness was interpreted through two related but distinct lenses: compliance-based effectiveness and legitimacy-based effectiveness. School A associated effectiveness mainly with discipline, deterrence, improved attendance and behavioural compliance, while School B associated it more strongly with engagement, relational repair, calm and follow-up. Across both cases, strategies were judged more positively when they involved timely response, meaningful voice, consistency, reason-giving, counselling support and fair stakeholder involvement. Negative cases showed that perceived bias, failure to hear parties, external reversal of decisions and weak consultation could undermine confidence even where formal disciplinary structures existed. The article contributes to school leadership literature by showing that conflict-management effectiveness in boarding Senior High Schools should be assessed not only by reduced misconduct but also by the fairness of the process through which order is achieved.

Keywords: procedural justice; conflict management; school leadership; Senior High Schools; Ghana; boarding schools; school climate; discipline; fairness

INTRODUCTION

Conflict management is central to school leadership because schools are relational institutions. Students, teachers, heads, parents, counsellors and community actors interact within structures of authority, dependency, discipline and care. In boarding Senior High Schools, these relationships are intensified because students remain under school supervision beyond classroom hours. A dispute that begins in a classroom, dormitory, dining hall, house meeting or games setting may continue to shape peer relations, staff workload, parent-school communication and confidence in school authority long after the formal case has been closed.

The Ghanaian school-discipline context makes this issue especially significant. The movement away from corporal punishment and towards positive discipline has required school leaders to maintain order while using approaches that protect dignity, welfare and due process. Ghanaian studies on school conflict and discipline show that heads often rely on disciplinary committees, dialogue, sanctions, counselling and stakeholder involvement, but they also face challenges of delay, perceived bias, limited training, parental pressure and uneven consultation (Afful-Broni, 2012; Akyina & Manu, 2024; Sam, 2020). Recent Ghanaian work on Senior

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High School counselling similarly indicates that counsellors support academic, emotional, conduct and family-related concerns, but they work within constraints of workload, resources and role ambiguity (Panford-Quainoo et al., 2024).

Existing studies on school conflict management often ask which strategies are used, which strategies are effective, or whether discipline has improved. These questions are important, but they may hide a deeper issue: who decides that a strategy has worked, and on what basis is effectiveness judged? A sanction may reduce visible disorder while leaving students resentful. A dialogue may restore interaction while appearing too weak to some staff. A disciplinary committee may provide formal structure while still failing to hear an affected party. Thus, conflict-management effectiveness is not simply an outcome question; it is also a legitimacy question.

This article reports the component of a wider qualitative multiple-case study that examined perceived effectiveness. It focuses on how heads, senior house staff, guidance and counselling coordinators and student leaders interpreted the effectiveness of current conflict-management strategies in two public boarding Senior High Schools in the Tarkwa-Nsuaem Municipality of Ghana. The guiding research question is: How do heads, senior house staff, guidance and counselling coordinators and student leaders perceive the effectiveness of current conflict-management strategies in resolving disputes and fostering a positive school climate?

The central argument is that participants judged effectiveness through two related but distinct lenses. The first was compliance-based effectiveness: reduced misconduct, improved attendance, visible order and fear of consequences. The second was legitimacy-based effectiveness: voice, consistency, neutrality, reason-giving, counselling support, relational repair and acceptance of decisions. The findings suggest that, in the two boarding Senior High Schools studied, visible order was necessary but insufficient. Durable school climate depended not only on whether order was achieved, but also on whether the process through which order was achieved was experienced as fair.

LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

School conflict-management effectiveness

Conflict-management scholarship generally rejects the assumption that conflict is inherently destructive. Conflict may damage school climate when it is ignored, suppressed unfairly or handled through coercion, but it may also produce learning, clarification of expectations and stronger relationships when it is managed constructively (Coleman et al., 2014; Rahim, 2017). In schools, the meaning of effectiveness is therefore not straightforward. A strategy may be judged effective because it stops misconduct quickly, because it reduces recurrence, because it satisfies parties, because it protects vulnerable students, because it preserves authority, or because it repairs relationships.

Ghanaian research supports this more complex view. Afful-Broni (2012) showed that conflict management in a Ghanaian Senior High School involved consensus-building, meetings with relevant parties, assistance from the Ghana Education Service and counselling support. Sam (2020) found that disciplinary committees and sanctions were widely used in Ghanaian Senior High Schools, but also reported that delay, bias and leakage of issues could undermine conflict resolution.

More recent work on disciplinary perceptions in public Senior High Schools in Kumasi shows that students, teachers and parents may not interpret the purpose and meaning of discipline in the same way (Kumah et al., 2025). These studies suggest that school conflict management must be assessed through both institutional order and stakeholder perception.

For the present article, effectiveness is treated as a multidimensional judgement. It includes visible order, reduced recurrence, improved behaviour, relational repair, acceptance of decisions, school calm and trust in authority. This framing makes it possible to ask whether a strategy merely controls behaviour or also strengthens the legitimacy of school authority.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

Procedural justice and legitimate authority

Procedural justice theory argues that people judge authority not only by outcomes but by the fairness of the procedures through which those outcomes are reached. Voice, neutrality, consistency, respect, reason-giving and correctability are central to whether decisions are accepted as legitimate (Colquitt et al., 2001; Leventhal, 1980; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2006). In disciplinary settings, this means that students and staff may accept unfavourable decisions more readily when they believe they were heard, treated respectfully and judged according to clear evidence and consistent rules.

Procedural justice is especially relevant in boarding Senior High Schools. A student who feels unfairly treated returns to the same dormitory, classroom, dining hall, prep session, house system and peer networks. A teacher who feels ignored by management returns to the same staff room and institutional duties. A disciplinary committee member whose recommendation is overturned without explanation may lose confidence in the process. Thus, unresolved perceptions of unfairness remain inside the school community even after formal case closure.

The article therefore uses procedural justice as both a theoretical lens and an empirical sensitising concept. It directs attention to how participants interpreted hearing, evidence, consistency, communication and review. The article does not assume that every participant used the language of procedural justice; rather, it identifies procedural-justice cues in how participants described fairness, bias, consultation, committee voice, counselling, appeal and stakeholder involvement.

Positive discipline, counselling and school climate

The policy shift towards positive discipline in Ghana provides a relevant practical background. Positive discipline emphasises preventive rule clarity, non-violent correction, counselling, family involvement, monitoring and reintegration rather than reliance on physical punishment (Ghana Education Service, 2016). Akyina and Manu (2024) argue that alternative disciplinary strategies in Ghana require stakeholder education, collaboration, parental involvement, strengthened counselling and commitment by teachers. Their findings are important for this article because they show that non-corporal discipline is not merely a change in punishment; it is a change in the procedures and relationships through which discipline is administered.

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life, including relationships, safety, norms, teaching and learning, and institutional structures (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). Conflict-management practice shapes school climate because it signals whether authority is predictable, whether students and staff can speak, whether rules apply across status differences, whether vulnerable students are protected and whether the school is concerned with reintegration as well as sanctioning.

Counselling is central to this climate dimension. Conflicts may be linked to peer pressure, bullying, family problems, adjustment difficulty, emotional distress, status tensions or repeated behavioural patterns. A sanction may stop conduct temporarily; counselling may help explain why the conduct emerged and how reintegration can occur. Ghanaian evidence indicates that counselling in Senior High Schools is important but constrained by resources, workload, role conflict and negative perceptions of counselling (Panford-Quainoo et al., 2024). These constraints make it necessary to examine whether counselling is embedded in conflict management or used only after disciplinary decisions have already been made.

Conceptual distinction: compliance-based and legitimacy-based effectiveness

This article distinguishes between compliance-based effectiveness and legitimacy-based effectiveness. Compliance-based effectiveness is visible when misconduct declines because students or staff fear consequences, understand sanctions or comply with rules. Legitimacy-based effectiveness is visible when students and staff accept decisions because the process is perceived as fair, respectful, evidence-based and well communicated. These are analytical categories rather than mutually exclusive types. In practice, schools may show elements of both. A school may produce compliance without legitimacy, and a dialogic process may produce legitimacy only if it is supported by evidence, consistency and clear boundaries.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

Table 1. Conceptualising conflict-management effectiveness

Dimension	Compliance-based effectiveness	Legitimacy-based effectiveness
Core question	Did the strategy reduce misconduct or restore order?	Was the decision accepted as fair, respectful and credible?
Main indicators	Reduced cases, attendance improvement, rule compliance, deterrence and behavioural control.	Voice, neutrality, consistency, reason-giving, counselling support, relational repair and decision acceptance.
Strength	Protects order and communicates that rules matter.	Builds trust, reduces resentment and sustains school climate.
Risk	May produce silence through fear without trust.	May appear weak if not supported by evidence, boundaries and proportional consequences.
Leadership implication	Heads need clear rules, escalation pathways and credible consequences.	Heads need fair procedure, audibility, explanation, counselling and transparent review.

METHODOLOGY

Design and setting

The article draws on a qualitative multiple-case study of two public boarding Senior High Schools in the Tarkwa-Nsuaem Municipality of Ghana. A multiple-case design was appropriate because the study sought to understand conflict management as situated leadership practice and to compare how different school communities interpreted effectiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). The two schools are reported as School A and School B to protect institutional anonymity.

The study adopted an interpretivist qualitative orientation. It treated effectiveness as a meaning-based judgement constructed by school actors through their experiences of authority, discipline, counselling, committee processes, student leadership and boarding-school life.

This orientation was appropriate because the study did not seek to measure effectiveness statistically; it examined how participants made sense of whether conflict-management strategies were working and why they accepted or questioned those strategies.

Participants and sampling

Participants were purposively selected because they occupied roles directly connected to conflict reporting, investigation, discipline, counselling, house supervision or student leadership. The sample comprised 24 participants: two heads of school, four senior house staff, two guidance and counselling coordinators and sixteen student leaders.

Student leaders were included because prefects often serve as first-line observers, reporters and informal mediators in boarding schools, and because their perspectives illuminate how disciplinary processes are experienced at the student level.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

Table 2. Participant composition by case and role

Participant category	School A	School B	Total
Head of school	1	1	2
Senior house staff	2	2	4
Guidance and counselling coordinator	1	1	2
Student leaders/prefects	8	8	16
Total	12	12	24

Data generation

Data were generated through eight individual semi-structured interviews with the two heads, four senior house staff and two guidance and counselling coordinators, and through two focus group discussions with student leaders, one in each school. The instruments were mapped to the wider study's six research questions and covered conflict sources, strategies used, perceived effectiveness, factors shaping strategy choice, challenges and recommendations. This article reports the strand of data relating to perceived effectiveness and its implications for school climate.

Individual interviews were held in private offices or quiet spaces on school premises and generally lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, depending on participant availability and the depth of examples provided. The interview protocol used open questions and critical-incident probes to invite participants to describe recent conflict cases, the steps taken, the actors involved, the reasons for particular decisions, perceived outcomes and suggestions for improvement (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Two focus group discussions were conducted with eight prefects in each school. Sessions generally lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were held in neutral, quiet rooms without staff presence to reduce power pressure and encourage candid discussion. The moderator opened with a confidentiality reminder and used prompts on student leadership roles, conflict triggers, perceived fairness, disciplinary committee involvement, student voice, risks faced by prefects and suggestions for improvement. Turn-taking strategies were used to prevent dominant voices from controlling the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The article uses anonymised role-based labels: Head A and Head B for the two heads; SHM1-A, SHM2-A, SHM1-B and SHM2-B for senior house staff; GCC-A and GCC-B for guidance and counselling coordinators; and FGD-A and FGD-B for the student-leader focus groups. Direct quotations are used to support the findings, with minor bracketed clarification only where necessary to preserve meaning.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed thematic analysis, involving familiarisation, open coding, category development, within-case interpretation and cross-case synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Audio-recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed, de-identified and repeatedly read. Initial coding was carried out manually and focused on participants' own descriptions of what counted as effective conflict management. Codes were then grouped around outcome indicators such as visible order, improved attendance, reduced misconduct, school calm, acceptance of decisions, voice, fairness, counselling, consistency and external pressure.

Procedural justice was used as a sensitising lens rather than as a rigid coding template. After initial coding, the analysis examined how participants described voice, neutrality, consistency, reason-giving, respect,

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

correctability and reintegration. Analytic memos supported comparison across role groups and school cases. Within-case analysis identified the dominant effectiveness logic in each school. Cross-case synthesis then compared how order, legitimacy and school climate were understood across the two schools (Miles et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017).

Trustworthiness, ethics and reflexivity

Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across heads, senior house staff, counsellors and student leaders; cross-case comparison; attention to negative cases; and a transparent chain of evidence linking claims to participant accounts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Negative cases were retained because they revealed where formal procedures did not automatically produce legitimacy, especially where participants reported weak voice, perceived bias or unexplained reversal of decisions.

Ethical safeguards included institutional approval, school-level permission, informed consent for adult participants, assent for student participants, anonymisation of schools and participants, secure handling of audio recordings and transcripts, and careful reporting of sensitive disciplinary experiences. For student leaders under 18, assent was paired with in loco parentis permission in line with institutional practice. Student focus groups were conducted without staff presence, and participants were reminded that they could decline questions, pause or withdraw without penalty. Sensitive incidents were reported without identifying individual offenders or schools. Raw audio files were not shared, and de-identified extracts only are used in this article.

Reflexivity was necessary because conflict management is a sensitive field in which participants may defend institutional authority, criticise authority or present themselves as fair actors. Participant accounts were therefore treated as situated interpretations rather than neutral recordings of events. The analysis examined how role position shaped perception: heads tended to emphasise order and responsibility; house staff often emphasised boarding supervision and committee work; counsellors emphasised pastoral support; and student leaders emphasised voice, peer enforcement and fairness.

FINDINGS

Effectiveness as visible order, discipline and compliance

Across both schools, participants associated effective conflict management with visible improvement in behaviour. In School A, the strongest expression of this view came from Head A, who interpreted effectiveness through reduced teacher absenteeism and fewer student disciplinary cases. For the head, conflict-management strategies were working when they produced observable behavioural change.

"hardly will you go around to find even two classes without a teacher" (Head A).

Head A also linked effectiveness to a decline in student cases, suggesting that the school inferred effectiveness from the reduction of visible conflict and indiscipline. This shows a compliance-based interpretation of effectiveness: order is restored when staff attend classes, students obey rules and cases decline.

"the number of cases has gone down, which is showing them how we are handling the indiscipline at that level is also working" (Head A).

Student leaders in School A reinforced this deterrence-based view. They associated effective conflict management with students avoiding prohibited conduct because consequences were known and feared.

"students avoid gossiping, bullying, or sneaking out because of the fear of disciplinary actions" (FGD-A).

A similar view appeared in School B, where student leaders linked discipline to improved behaviour and academic seriousness.

"students know that if they cheat or break rules, they'll be punished. So they behave better and take their studies seriously" (FGD-B).

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

These accounts show that sanctions, rules and credible consequences can support order. In boarding schools, where misconduct can spread quickly through dormitories, classrooms and peer groups, deterrence may be necessary. However, deterrence-based effectiveness has limits. If students comply mainly because they fear punishment, the school may achieve visible order without building trust. The analytical issue is therefore not simply whether punishment works, but what kind of order punishment produces. This is the core difference between fear-based silence and legitimate settlement.

Effectiveness as relational repair and school calm

School B participants more frequently described effectiveness in relational terms. Head B interpreted success through the acceptance of settlements and the resumption of interaction after conflict. This indicates that effectiveness was not limited to announcing a decision; it included whether parties could live and work together afterwards.

"after the main engagement with them, they accepted that I settled the matter between the two of them well" (Head B).

Student leaders in School B similarly linked effective conflict management to calm in the school environment.

"when conflicts are managed well, it brings calm" (FGD-B).

This relational understanding is particularly important in boarding schools because conflicts do not disappear from the social environment once a meeting ends. The same students may meet again at prep, dining, worship, games or in dormitories. A conflict is therefore more fully resolved when parties accept the process, relationships stabilise and the school atmosphere calms.

Guidance and counselling also supported this preventive and relational view. In School B, the guidance coordinator associated effectiveness with early parental involvement that prevented escalation.

"involving parents early in certain cases has prevented situations from worsening" (GCC-B).

School A also showed evidence of improved calm and order, but the dominant emphasis differed. School A's effectiveness was more often associated with order, deterrence and compliance, while School B's effectiveness was more often associated with engagement, acceptance, calm and follow-up. This contrast does not mean that School A lacked relational concerns or that School B lacked discipline; rather, it shows different leadership logics through which effectiveness was interpreted.

Voice and fair hearing as conditions of legitimacy

Voice emerged as one of the most important procedural-justice conditions. Participants were more likely to regard conflict management as fair when affected parties had an opportunity to explain their account before decisions were made. Head A described disciplinary procedures as involving multiple stakeholders, including students, parents, house staff and prefects.

"once we gather all of them, they all have a say in the procedure" (Head A).

This account presents the disciplinary process as inclusive. It suggests that formal hearing can strengthen legitimacy when relevant actors are not merely present but able to contribute. However, student accounts also revealed that the presence of structures does not always guarantee experienced voice. In School B, a negative case concerned a prefect who was demoted after a fight, but student leaders believed his account was not sufficiently heard.

"there was also a case where a prefect defended himself in a fight, and he was demoted. It wasn't handled fairly. The Committee didn't hear his side" (FGD-B).

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

This case is analytically important because School B generally displayed an engagement-oriented approach. It shows that a school may be dialogic in orientation yet still fail procedurally in a particular case. For procedural justice, formal committee presence is not enough. Parties must experience audibility: the belief that their explanation was not only heard, but considered before the decision was reached.

Student leaders in School A also called for more meaningful participation in disciplinary decision-making.

"the student reps on the DC should be allowed to voice their opinions before decisions are made" (FGD-A).

The finding distinguishes nominal representation from meaningful voice. A student representative may sit on a committee, but if the representative cannot speak before decisions are finalised, the process may appear participatory without being substantively participatory.

Consistency, neutrality and status-blindness

Participants also judged effectiveness through consistency and status-blindness. Rules were considered legitimate when they applied regardless of position, relationships or influence. In School A, some student leaders stated that rules were supposed to apply across status differences.

"The school's rules and regulations. They apply regardless of status. Everyone is treated equally" (FGD-A).

However, negative cases showed that perceptions of favouritism could weaken confidence in the disciplinary system. One student account suggested that a prefect was perceived as being protected because of ties to teachers.

"there was a prefect who kept misbehaving but was protected because of their ties to certain teachers" (FGD-A).

Whether or not this account reflected the full facts, its significance lies in what it reveals about legitimacy. If students believe relationships affect outcomes, the disciplinary system loses moral authority. Procedural justice therefore requires not only actual fairness but also visible fairness that can be understood by students and staff.

In School B, consistency concerns appeared in another form: a committee decision was reportedly reversed without communication to those involved in the original decision.

"a male student who disrespected teachers was [removed from boarding status], only to be reinstated later without informing the committee" (SHM2-B).

This case reveals how legitimacy can be damaged by unexplained reversals. Flexibility may sometimes be necessary, especially where new information emerges or where reintegration is judged appropriate. However, flexibility without explanation can look like bias, external pressure or disrespect for committee work. Consistency therefore includes transparent appeal and review, not merely identical sanctions for similar offences.

Reason-giving and communication

Reason-giving was closely connected to voice and consistency. Participants valued decisions when they understood why particular actions were taken. In School A, Head A's account suggested that decisions were communicated to parents after committee recommendations were made, especially where sanctions or bonds were involved.

"whatever recommendations that were made by the committee will be made known to the parents" (Head A).

This form of communication gave parents a basis for understanding why the school acted as it did. It also reduced the likelihood that disciplinary action would be interpreted as arbitrary or personal. However, the negative cases in the previous section show that reason-giving must extend beyond initial decisions to reviews, reversals and exceptions. A student who is sanctioned without hearing, or a committee whose decision is reversed without explanation, may experience the process as opaque even if formal structures exist.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

Reason-giving matters because schools are authority structures. Students and staff may not always agree with decisions, but they are more likely to accept them when the rationale is clear. In the absence of explanation, rumours fill the gap. A sanction may be interpreted as personal dislike, favouritism, revenge or external pressure. Boarding-school communication failure can travel quickly through dormitory talk, staff-room conversations, parent networks and peer groups. Reason-giving is therefore not only an administrative courtesy; it is a conflict-prevention mechanism.

The reinstatement case illustrates the link between correctability and reason-giving. Decisions may be reviewed, but review should follow transparent channels and communicate its rationale to relevant actors. Without such communication, correctability may be mistaken for inconsistency.

Counselling support and human consideration

Counselling support emerged as a crucial but uneven dimension of perceived effectiveness. Participants recognised that some conflicts are not simply rule breaches but symptoms of deeper difficulties such as peer pressure, emotional distress, family problems, bullying, adjustment difficulties or repeated behavioural patterns. A sanction may stop behaviour temporarily; counselling can help address why the behaviour occurred and how reintegration should occur.

In School A, the guidance and counselling coordinator expressed concern that counselling was not always integrated early enough into conflict-management processes.

"ideally, I should be involved in resolving issues, but here, I'm often left out" (GCC-A).

"only recently was I called about a disciplinary issue" (GCC-A).

These comments show that the existence of a counselling unit does not necessarily mean counselling is institutionally embedded in conflict management. Counselling can become an afterthought when it is used only after a disciplinary decision has been made. In such cases, the school may close the case administratively without sufficiently addressing behavioural understanding, emotional support or reintegration.

In School B, counselling appeared more visibly as part of the response repertoire. Head B reported referring some cases to guidance and counselling.

"sometimes I refer the cases to them" (Head B).

The cross-case implication is not that counselling should replace discipline, but that it should be integrated earlier and more systematically. Effective conflict management in boarding schools requires a clear referral system: which cases require counselling, when counselling should occur, how confidentiality will be protected and how reintegration will be monitored.

External pressure and the fragility of effectiveness

External pressure was a recurring threat to perceived effectiveness. Parents and community actors may strengthen conflict management when they support fair procedure, clarify facts and reinforce behaviour agreements. In School B, parental presence was viewed positively when it helped clarify matters.

"parents are sometimes allowed to sit in, which helps" (SHM2-B).

At the same time, external involvement could become problematic when it bypassed school procedure. Staff accounts suggested that some local leaders and parents did not understand the disciplinary code, while student leaders in School A reported parental interference after punishment.

"local leaders and parents don't even understand the code" (SHM2-B).

"Parents sometimes interfere when their children are punished" (FGD-A).

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

This finding is particularly relevant to Ghanaian boarding-school contexts, where parents, old students, traditional leaders, religious leaders and community figures may have informal influence on school decisions. Such influence is not automatically negative; it can support reintegration when it respects school procedures. It becomes damaging when it creates the perception that discipline can be softened through status or external pressure.

External pressure weakens effectiveness because it can damage both order and legitimacy. Students may conclude that sanctions can be negotiated through influence. Staff may conclude that committee work is meaningless. Heads may become cautious in applying rules. Parents may learn that informal pressure works better than formal appeal. The solution is not to exclude parents or communities, since boarding schools need external stakeholders. The issue is procedural control. Schools need transparent appeal channels, clear communication with parents and agreed limits on external intervention.

Prefect risk and the hidden cost of frontline enforcement

The student-leader data revealed an additional dimension of effectiveness: prefects helped enforce discipline but carried relational and safety risks. Because prefects remain students, their authority is fragile. They are expected to support school rules while living among the same peers whose behaviour they report.

"friendships get strained after enforcing rules fairly" (FGD-A).

"prefects are often threatened by students for enforcing rules" (FGD-A).

This finding complicates the idea that conflict management is carried out only by adult authorities. In boarding schools, student leaders form part of the disciplinary infrastructure: they observe incidents early, report breaches, mediate minor tensions and carry school authority into dormitories, dining halls and peer spaces. Effectiveness therefore depends partly on whether prefects are trained, protected and given clear referral boundaries. If prefects are exposed to retaliation or peer hostility without institutional support, the school may rely on student leadership while failing to safeguard those students.

CROSS-CASE DISCUSSION

The two schools demonstrated different but overlapping models of effectiveness. School A's model emphasised visible order, deterrence, teacher attendance, student discipline and rule compliance. School B's model emphasised engagement, acceptance, relational repair, calm and follow-up. These differences are best understood as dominant emphases rather than fixed identities. School A also used counselling, parental involvement and stakeholder hearing; School B also used rules, consequences and disciplinary structures.

Table 3. Cross-case comparison of perceived effectiveness

Dimension	School A emphasis	School B emphasis	Cross-case interpretation
Visible order	Reduced cases, attendance and discipline.	Present, but less dominant than engagement.	Order was valued in both schools but was insufficient on its own.
Deterrence	Fear of sanctions was visible.	Punishment shaped behaviour, including cheating and rule-breaking.	Deterrence supports compliance but may not build legitimacy.
Voice	Formal inclusion was reported, but students wanted stronger voice.	Engagement was stronger, but negative cases showed voice gaps.	Legitimacy depends on experienced audibility, not only formal procedure.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

Counselling	Available but perceived as insufficiently integrated.	More visibly acknowledged through referrals.	Counselling supports reintegration when embedded early.
External pressure	Parents sometimes interfered after punishment.	Parents could help, but local actors and reversals complicated process.	Stakeholder involvement requires transparent boundaries.
School climate	Linked mainly to discipline and reduced disorder.	Linked mainly to calm, restored interaction and follow-up.	Positive climate requires both order and fair process.

The first cross-case insight is that visible order is an important but incomplete indicator of effectiveness. Participants valued reduced misconduct, improved attendance and deterrence. Yet order achieved through fear may remain fragile if students and staff doubt the fairness of the process. The article therefore distinguishes between silence and settlement: a school may become quiet after sanctions, but quietness does not necessarily mean that parties accept the process as legitimate.

The second insight is that legitimacy-based effectiveness depends on procedural justice. Voice, consistency, neutrality and reason-giving were not abstract principles imposed from theory; they appeared in participants' accounts of what made decisions acceptable or questionable. The negative cases are especially important. A prefect who felt unheard, a perceived favouritism case and an unexplained reinstatement all show that confidence in disciplinary systems can weaken even when formal structures exist.

The third insight is that counselling and stakeholder involvement strengthen effectiveness only when they are procedurally embedded. Counselling must not be an afterthought, and parental involvement must not become informal pressure. Both counselling and parent participation can support reintegration, but they need clear referral points, confidentiality boundaries, appeal procedures and communication protocols.

Table 4. Procedural-justice indicators in the two cases

Indicator	**How it appeared in the data**	**Leadership implication**
Voice	Stakeholder hearing, committee participation and complaints about not being heard.	Parties and representatives should speak before conclusions are reached.
Neutrality	Concerns about favouritism, ties to teachers and evidence before severe decisions.	Decisions should be based on evidence rather than status or relationships.
Consistency	Rules were said to apply to all, but perceived exceptions weakened confidence.	Similar cases need similar treatment, and exceptions need explanation.
Reason-giving	Recommendations were communicated to parents, but reversals were not always explained.	Decisions, reviews and reversals should be documented and explained.
Correctability	Reinstatement showed that decisions could change, but communication was weak.	Appeals should follow transparent channels with clear reasons.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue V, May 2026

Reintegration	Counselling, parental involvement and restored interaction supported re-entry.	Case closure should include behavioural and relational follow-up.

Implications for School Leadership

The findings suggest that school heads should evaluate conflict-management effectiveness beyond reduced misconduct. Heads should ask whether parties were heard, whether decisions were explained, whether rules were applied consistently, whether counselling was considered early and whether relationships stabilised afterwards. This kind of reflective evaluation would help schools move from case closure to learning-oriented conflict management.

Disciplinary committees should strengthen meaningful voice. Student representatives, house staff and counsellors should not merely be present; they should have defined opportunities to contribute before decisions are finalised. Where decisions are reviewed or reversed, committee members should receive a clear explanation through appropriate channels.

Schools should document reasons for decisions, reversals and exceptions. Documentation protects institutional memory, reduces rumours and helps heads defend decisions where parents or external actors apply pressure. Such documentation should not be merely punitive; it should also record counselling referrals, reintegration plans and follow-up actions.

Guidance and counselling should be integrated into conflict-management systems rather than treated as a post-sanction intervention. Schools should specify when counselling is mandatory, when it is optional, how referrals are made and how confidentiality is protected. This is especially important for cases linked to bullying, emotional distress, repeated misconduct, family issues or adjustment problems.

Prefects require training and protection. Since prefects are frontline actors in boarding schools, they should be trained in de-escalation, safe reporting, role boundaries, documentation and referral. They should not be expected to manage serious or risky cases without adult support.

Schools should develop clear parent and community involvement protocols. Parents should understand school rules, appeal pathways and the limits of informal pressure. External stakeholders can support effective discipline when they reinforce fair procedure; they weaken it when they bypass the process.

Contribution to Knowledge

This article contributes to school leadership and conflict-management literature in three ways. First, it clarifies perceived effectiveness as a composite judgement rather than a single outcome. Participants did not assess effectiveness only through reduced conflict. They also considered acceptance, calm, fairness, counselling, relational repair and trust in authority.

Second, the article contributes the distinction between compliance-based effectiveness and legitimacy-based effectiveness in Ghanaian boarding-school conflict management. Compliance-based effectiveness explains how order is restored through deterrence, rule enforcement and behavioural control. Legitimacy-based effectiveness explains how outcomes are accepted because parties perceive the process as fair, evidence-based and respectful.

Third, the article extends procedural justice into the specific ecology of Ghanaian boarding Senior High Schools. It shows that procedural fairness matters not only in formal legal or organisational settings but also in school communities where students, staff and leaders continue to live and work together after disputes. In such settings, fair process is not simply a moral ideal; it is a condition for durable school climate.

Limitations and Future Research

The study was limited to two public boarding Senior High Schools in one municipality. The findings therefore do not claim statistical generalisation to all Ghanaian Senior High Schools. Their value is analytical: they

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illuminate how school actors in two cases interpreted the effectiveness of conflict-management strategies. As a result, the transferability of structural or behavioural findings to wider regional or private educational institutions in Ghana requires appropriate caution.

The study relied on self-reported participant data generated through interviews and focus group discussions. Without direct observation of disciplinary committee sittings, counselling sessions, or parent meetings, the actual procedural behaviours described by participants cannot be independently verified. Future studies would be substantially strengthened by adding ethnographic observation of disciplinary sittings and counselling sessions, or by tracking anonymised conflict cases over time to examine how processes unfold beyond participants' retrospective accounts.

The participant sample included heads, senior house staff, guidance and counselling coordinators and student leaders. While the inclusion of student leaders—particularly prefects—added multi-stakeholder depth, the perspectives of ordinary, non-leadership students who are most frequently the subjects of disciplinary actions were not captured. Future research should actively recruit non-prefect students to explore whether their perceptions of procedural fairness align with or diverge from those of school management. The sample also did not include parents, non-teaching staff, old students or district education officials. Expanding the stakeholder field in subsequent studies would help determine whether perceptions of fair process are consistently distributed across these groups or systematically shaped by role and power position.

Further quantitative or mixed-method studies could test whether procedural-justice indicators—such as voice, consistency, reason-giving and counselling follow-up—statistically predict decision acceptance, reduced conflict recurrence or improved school climate across a larger national sample of schools. Developing a survey instrument grounded in the procedural-justice indicators in Table 4 would enable researchers to examine whether voice and consistency predict positive school climate outcomes at scale, moving beyond the analytical insights generated by this qualitative study.

CONCLUSION

This article examined how heads, senior house staff, guidance and counselling coordinators and student leaders perceived the effectiveness of conflict-management strategies in two public boarding Senior High Schools in Tarkwa-Nsuaem Municipality. The findings show that effectiveness was judged through both visible order and procedural legitimacy. Participants valued reduced misconduct, improved attendance, discipline and deterrence, but they also valued voice, consistency, reason-giving, counselling support, relational repair and fair stakeholder involvement.

School A more strongly reflected compliance-based effectiveness, where order, discipline and deterrence were prominent indicators of success. School B more strongly reflected legitimacy-based and relational effectiveness, where engagement, acceptance, calm and follow-up were more visible. Both approaches had strengths and risks. Order without fairness may produce fear-based silence; dialogue without evidence, consistency and boundaries may appear weak or uneven.

The findings suggest that, in the two boarding Senior High Schools studied, conflict-management effectiveness depended not only on achieving order but also on the fairness of the process through which order was achieved. Sanctions, committees, counselling, parental involvement and follow-up were more likely to be accepted when parties were heard, treated consistently, given reasons and protected from biased or externally manipulated processes. A school may achieve silence through fear, but a durable school climate requires fairness. Conflict management is therefore not only about ending disputes; it is about building legitimate authority.

Declarations

Ethics statement. The wider study received institutional approval and school-level permission. Adult participants provided informed consent and student participants assented to participate. For student leaders under 18, assent was paired with in loco parentis permission in line with institutional practice. Schools and participants are anonymised.

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Data availability. Because the study involves identifiable school communities and sensitive disciplinary experiences, raw qualitative data are not publicly available. Anonymised extracts are reported in the article.

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