

THE NATURE AND EFFECT OF CONFLICT IN A SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL

ABSTRACT FOR AERA 2002

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1. INTRODUCTION

Continuous media reports in the South African press suggest that conflict is a reality in South African educational environments. Most recently, in the Gauteng province of South Africa, the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Education, Mr Ignatius Jacobs, reported that one of the biggest challenges facing South African education is the turning around of secondary schools "to ensure that we have effective teaching and learning and that curriculum programmes are learner-centred" (Gauteng News, 2001:4). There is great concern about the fact that learners are "caught up in the chaos" that exists in secondary schools. Mr Jacobs is of the opinion that the Gauteng province first has to stabilise schools and get them running, before the focus can be placed on quality education. His plea is for schools to achieve what he refers to as "delivery at chalkface".

The pilot study being reported on in this paper focused on ascertaining whether learners at an ex-Model C secondary school (previously a culturally homogeneous school which since 1994 has evolved towards being culturally diverse) do in fact experience conflict, and what the nature and effects of such conflict are. The researchers asked a number of questions:

- Is conflict a reality at ex-Model C secondary schools?
- Does it engender chaos?
- Do learners experience it as psychologically chaotic?
- Does conflict impact on "delivery at the chalkface" or educational activity?

2. OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of this study was to verify whether conflict is a reality in culturally diverse secondary schools, and if such a reality were to be verified, what the specific nature and effects of such conflict would be on learners. This objective was operationalized as follows:

- The researchers wished to determine whether the source of conflict at culturally diverse secondary schools could be ascribed to a specific source, or whether its genesis is more complex.
- The researchers wished to determine what the nature of conflict is at culturally diverse secondary schools.
- The researchers wished to determine whether the effects of conflict at culturally diverse secondary schools were psychologically harmful, or whether as suggested by Cloke and Goldsmith (2000: xi) conflict has the potential to be utilized positively.

The above listed objectives were envisaged in order that information gleaned could be used diagnostically in order to make relevant recommendations concerning the management of conflict at culturally diverse secondary schools, whilst facilitating holistic learner development.

3. PERSPECTIVES

The study was approached from an inter-disciplinary perspective, namely that of educational management and educational psychology. In order to manage conflict effectively in a culturally diverse school, it is necessary to obtain an educational-psychological perspective of both the nature and effect of conflict within such a culturally diverse arena. In order to recommend possible organizational changes, an education management approach is also necessary.

4. METHODOLOGY

The method of research was primarily qualitative. A culturally diverse secondary school within the university's feeder area agreed to participate in the study. The management team of the school randomly assigned five classes from grades 8 to 12 (i.e. a class per grade in the school) to participate in the study, totaling 167 learners. The sample was representative of the school's racially and ethnically diverse population. The medium of instruction at the school is English, and its socio-economic feeder area is predominantly lower middle class.

Based on a literature study on the nature and effect of conflict, a questionnaire was designed by the researchers. An incomplete / open-ended sentences design technique was employed, consisting of nine questions. The questions were posed in English as the school's official medium of instruction is English.

The questionnaire was administered to the group as a whole in one session. Learners co-operated favorably, having been informed that they formed the pilot group of a study which would seek to understand and document South African learners' experience of conflict at ex-Model C schools, in order to facilitate healthy management of conflict in future. An honors student from the University of Potchefstroom, who is not involved in the study, observed the process in order to ensure fair and unbiased procedures. Learners took approximately 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

5. DATA OBTAINED

Responses to the nine questions were analyzed qualitatively and inter-subjectively for the test sample as a whole, and for grade samples individually. Responses were also analyzed in terms of gender and race.

The data obtained provided information on the following:

- Learner understanding of conflict
- Learner experience of conflict
- Causes of conflict
- General examples of conflict
- Consequences of conflict for school life
- Emotion associated with the experience of conflict
- Personal learner response to conflict
- The incidence of verbal conflict versus physical conflict
- General ad hoc learner opinions about conflict

6. CONCLUSIONS REACHED

The results obtained were conclusive:

- Conflict was defined as toxic, especially by junior pupils. The most frequently cited definition for conflict from junior learners was "*a small war*". Senior pupils defined conflict in terms of more emotionally mature constructs. Typically conflict was described as "*a lack of forgiveness*". Developmental processes appear to impact on learner understanding of conflict then.

- 76% of respondents indicated that conflict is a reality at the culturally diverse school in question. Only 21% stated that conflict was not part of their school reality, and 3% abstained from responding.
- The genesis of conflict is complex and no single factor (e.g. racism, language, drugs) can be scapegoated. The majority of responses suggest that conflict results from a variety of negative interpersonal relations (including learner-learner relations and educator-learner relations), but responses also suggest that organizational factors (rigid rules, poor control measures) are at the root of conflict.
- The consequences of conflict are considered to be overwhelmingly dire: 91,4% of respondents indicated that conflict has the potential to destroy the teaching-learning environment, and the potential to sabotage a culturally diverse school from succeeding as a unit. Of the 9.6% who suggested that conflict has the potential to be positive, half of the responses were from senior learners. Of the 16 positive responses, 13 were from white learners.
- The emotional response to conflict is overwhelmingly negative. The words of one learner provide an apt summation for the general response: conflict causes “ a sad, sour feeling”.
- Reactions to conflict were varied. Typically, female learners reported a passive or verbal response. Male learners recorded either physical or avoidant responses. Both sexes indicated voyeuristic responses.
- 68% of responses suggest that conflict is primarily verbal. Boys were thought to be more physical in their display of conflict. Verbal conflict was reported as being modeled on educator behavior and other societal sources, such as the media and rap music.
- In their general responses learners projected a need for conflict resolution skills and organizational change.

The conclusion can be drawn that conflict is a reality at the school where the pilot study was conducted. Of significance is the complexity of the conflict and its apparent ability to penetrate all stratas of the school community: conflict cannot be limited to only learner interaction. It is noted in inter-learner relationships, educator-learner relationships and organisation-learner relationship. It can be concluded that conflict has systemic ramifications, and must therefore be addressed accordingly.

A recommendation is therefore made that in this particular school, conflict be addressed systemically. This would entail:

- conflict resolution workshops and peer mediation skills at learner level, specifically tailored to address the lack of respect and understanding which was evident from learner responses for cultural diversity. A distinct sense of interpersonal disrespect emanates from the responses of the learners. Personal comments, racism, bad language and insults all testify to a culture of disrespect. Diversity appears to engender conflict, rather than enrich the melting-pot of learner life. Learners appear to feel that diversity is divisive and leads to feelings of non-acceptance. Learners need to learn that tolerance does not necessarily imply acceptance of diversity – acceptance often entails active engagement in order to understand differences. In this sense, conflict would be positive.
- empowerment at educator level in terms of conflict resolution skills as well as stress management skills. Educators play a key role in modeling conflict resolution skills. If respect and emotional intelligence are to be modeled, then educators need to facilitate both adequate opportunities and role models (Van der Bank, 2000: 47). The MEC for Education in Gauteng does make mention of a human resource development program for teachers (Gauteng News, 2001:4). The recommendation is made that such a program include conflict resolution skills and successful modeling.
- organisational restructuring in order to avoid pitfalls such as biased or unfair school rules, which ignite conflict. Curriculum adjustments which tacitly reinforce values conducive to conflict resolution and diverse cultural appreciation should be made. The latter fits into the paradigm of health promoting schools. Health promoting schools promote healthy lifestyles, and can be seen as a caring community that is concerned with the health (including the psychological health) of all its members (Marais, Muthien, Jansen van Rensburg, Maaga, de Wet & Coetzee, 2001: 228).

7. EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

This study being reported on has definite educational importance:

- It addresses a crucial, current problem facing South African secondary schools that are presently evolving from culturally homogeneous schools to culturally diverse systems.
- It addresses a relevant issue on a local level, but one which nevertheless has international relevance and potential impact. It can, therefore, give rise to a comparative study, both on provincial level and international level.
- It indicates that in a country grappling with racial issues, racial tension is not the only contributing factor to conflict. It is one of the many factors that must be addressed if conflict is to be channelled and exploited.
- The study is further important because it suggests that conflict results from organizational factors too. Thus, traditional means (such as peer mediation, for example) of conflict resolution strategies must be augmented by organizational change.
- Finally, this pilot study has given rise to a general study targeting ten culturally diverse secondary schools within the university's feeder area.