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Conflict as a condition for the professional development of teachers and administrative staff

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Abstract

In educational organizations, numerous employees with diverse personalities, perceptions, and ideologies interact, often leading to disagreements that may escalate into conflicts. An effective leader should not shy away from conflicts but instead, adopt a communication system to manage them for the organization's benefit. Additionally, conflicts can be an opportunity for professional development for both the leader and the educators.

This study deciphers the concept of conflict, its forms, and its sources. It demonstrates that conflicts are not solely negative but can have positive impacts, functioning as a condition for the professional growth of teachers and administrative staff. It also shows how establishing a communication system can contribute to effective conflict management. Lastly, through a case study, the role of leadership in fostering communication for the betterment of educational institutions is highlighted.

Keywords: Teacher conflicts; Professional development; Effective leader; Communication system; Conflict management

1. Introduction

In educational organizations, a multitude of employees with distinct personalities, beliefs, and ideologies work together, inevitably leading to disagreements and, at times, conflicts.

If conflict is merely suppressed rather than resolved, it may have catastrophic consequences for the organization. On the other hand, resolving conflicts genuinely and ensuring participant satisfaction can benefit the organization and contribute to the professional development of both educators and leaders.

Educational leaders must be able to recognize conflicts and discern whether they will drive organizational progress or disrupt its operations. By establishing a communication system, they can appropriately manage and resolve conflicts.

This study aims to analyze the concept of conflict within educational organizations, its forms, and its sources. It examines conflict as a condition for the professional growth of educators and administrative staff. Furthermore, it explores the correlation between conflict management by educational leadership and the establishment of a communication system. Finally, it presents a case study of conflict in a school setting.

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2. Definition and Forms of Conflict

Conflicts are an inherent part of human existence, present in every aspect of social life, and naturally arise within educational organizations. In every organization, dynamic relationships among individuals shape behaviors, leading to differences, disagreements, and conflicts due to varying interests, values, and goals among group members or subgroups (Hatzipanagiotou, 2010).

Everard and Morris (1999) argue that conflict, as a genuine divergence of opinions arising from alternative courses of action, is both inevitable and valuable. They warn that the absence of conflict may indicate apathy or avoidance of responsibility. Similarly, Dipaola and Hoy (2001) assert that conflict begins when one feels negatively affected by another, while Bourantas (1992) defines it as the deliberate obstruction of another's goals.

Athanasoula-Reppa (2008) identifies three types of conflicts in educational organizations: interpersonal, intergroup, and intrapersonal (the latter involving internal struggles between incompatible goals). Dipaola and Hoy (2001) further distinguish conflicts into cognitive (related to task content, enhancing decision-making quality and performance) and emotional (arising from tension and distrust, negatively impacting performance and satisfaction).

Lastly, Everard and Morris (1999) point out that conflicts escalate when personal prestige is at stake, intensifying their severity and complicating resolution. The more the conflict escalates, the more 'glory' is at stake, resulting in the conflict becoming fiercer and, consequently, its resolution more difficult.

3. Sources of Conflict

The issue of conflict in educational organizations and its resolution is significant for the efficient functioning of these organizations. Therefore, it is essential for leadership personnel to be trained to recognize conflicts and their sources (Hatzipanagiotou, 2010). Several researchers who have studied the phenomenon of conflict have attempted to analyze its sources, which vary and may stem from the communication system of the educational organization (problematic communication and insufficient exchange of information among participants in the educational process), the organizational structure of the educational institution (bureaucratic characteristics, staff heterogeneity, organizational size, lack of material and technical infrastructure, etc.), the contrasts between groups (which may have differing interests), and human factors (different personalities, cultural value systems, ideologies, temperaments, interests, ages, etc.) (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Rentzi, 2013).

Furthermore, Crawford and Bodine (1996) identify limited resources, unmet basic needs, and differing values as sources of conflict. Papageorgiou (2002) also mentions that educators in a school may be divided into groups based on political orientation, religious beliefs, age, specialization, origin, kinship, friendship, etc. The principal should not ignore the existence of such subgroups within the larger group. On the contrary, they should consider this phenomenon as natural and often desirable. They must recognize and accept these differences and utilize them as means of cohesion rather than fragmentation of the group. Often, due to authoritarian management, poor communication, limited resources, and inadequate material and technical infrastructure, conflict incidents may arise between teachers and the administration (Mavrantza, 2011). The research of Karamouta & Karamouta (2020) shows that conflicts among teachers in Primary Education in the Kavala region are caused by a combination of professional factors (such as class allocation and timetables) and personal factors, while Papageorgaki (2021) cites lack of collaboration and communication, as well as differences in teachers' goals, as the main causes of conflicts. Tsekoura (2024) investigated the causes, management methods, and consequences of conflicts among teachers in Primary Education. Her research highlighted that individual differences are the primary cause of conflicts. Regarding management, teachers mainly prefer the collaboration method, while women tend to choose the avoidance method. As for the consequences of conflicts in the school unit, the majority of participants believe that the negative consequences outweigh the positive ones.

Mavrogeorgou (2021), in her study, demonstrates that conflicts between teachers and administration negatively affect collaboration and management, although in some cases, they improve relationships and problem-solving. Intra-school conflicts, therefore, if not addressed promptly, can cause problems within the unit and function in a divisive and destabilizing manner.

4. Conflict as a Condition for the Professional Development of Educators and Leadership Personnel

Many principals believe that conflicts only have negative consequences for educational organizations and seek their elimination (Dipaola and Hoy, 2001). Conflicts are seen as a waste of energy, reducing job satisfaction, deepening differences, and hindering collaboration, ultimately decreasing productivity (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008).

However, according to Everard and Morris (1999), conflict also has positive outcomes, as it ensures that various possibilities are thoroughly examined and new courses of action may arise from alternative solutions. It also reduces the risk of missing something important that might surface later.

Dipaola and Hoy (2001) state that conflict is the root of personal and social change and serves as the means through which problems are articulated and solutions achieved. The issue is not which perceptions are right or wrong but how to address the way people think and feel about conflict. Conflict is, in any case, an inevitable reality in organizational life. Therefore, the focus should not be on avoiding conflict but on preventing destructive conflict and fostering constructive conflict.

According to Athanasoula-Reppa (2008), conflicts can be a source of new ideas, stimulate creativity, and lead to innovations, changes, and better decisions. Conflict pushes people to seek more effective ways to address it and improves organizational functions (cohesion, clear problem-solving procedures). Effective conflict management can, over time, lead to productive outcomes that enhance organizational health. Conflict itself is neither good nor bad, but its impact depends on how it is handled (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Crawford and Bodine, 1996; Dipaola and Hoy, 2001).

Under certain conditions, conflicts can function beneficially in educational organizations, serving as a condition that leads to the professional development of educators and administrative staff. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (1993), the term "professional development" includes acquiring knowledge and skills in new subjects, supplementing previously acquired knowledge, and enhancing teaching ability, collaboration skills, and a deeper awareness of the teaching profession.

Day (2003) also describes professional development as a complex process comprising all natural learning experiences and conscious and planned activities aimed at the direct or indirect benefit of individuals, groups, or schools. These activities contribute to the quality of education in the classroom. It is, therefore, the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, review, renew, and expand their commitment as agents of change toward the moral purposes of teaching. It is also the process by which teachers critically acquire and develop the knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence necessary for sound professional thinking, planning, and practice with students and colleagues at every stage of their professional lives (Day, 2003; Dimitropoulos, 1998).

The professional development of educators is inherently linked to their work, and it is unthinkable for educators not to be continuously and systematically trained. Papanaooum (2003) considers training the primary means for improving teachers' effectiveness and, by extension, education quality. Theofilidis (2012) notes that training content should focus on attitudes that the trainee educator should develop, knowledge they should acquire, and skills they should cultivate to be effective in their work.

According to Saitis (2000), an educational professional, whether as a teacher or an administrative leader in education, cannot be adequately equipped for their pedagogical or administrative duties without systematic training, especially in light of the rapid advancement of educational sciences and the assumption of administrative roles in public education.

Educators develop professionally in many ways. Each teacher can expand their knowledge independently through personal study, training courses offered by the Ministry of Education and universities, distance learning, or postgraduate studies. They also learn significantly by interacting with individuals with expertise and experience in learning and teaching issues, from their students regarding their teaching, but most importantly from other educators, particularly colleagues in their school (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1993; Pasiardis, 2004).

Finally, the creation of a proper communication climate in educational organizations plays a crucial role in educators' professional development. In an open communication climate, teachers feel safe to express themselves freely. This leads to good collaboration, mutual understanding, and job satisfaction within the educational organization. According to Everard and Morris (1999), when members of an organization feel threatened and find it difficult to express themselves freely, they feel inferior and oppressed. In such an environment, communication tends to disappear, while aggression and conflicts become common occurrences.

5. Effective Conflict Management through a Communication System from the Perspective of Educational Leadership

From the above, it is evident that communication is a process of interaction, mutual understanding, and influence among individuals. It is the means by which people connect, collaborate, and achieve common goals. Collaboration cannot be achieved without it. According to Bourantas et al. (1999), the ability of organizational leaders to communicate effectively influences the proper functioning of organizations. Often, poor communication is the root cause of conflicts and dysfunctions within an organization. Therefore, it is imperative to develop communication skills among both leadership personnel and employees.

Additionally, Theofilidis (1994) notes that effective communication and good collaboration among members of the teaching staff are essential for solving school problems. This is because staff members are encouraged to resolve their issues and work out appropriate solutions.

Moreover, Pasiardis (2004) points out that the greatest problem in modern organizations lies in the communication systems established. Many school goals are not achieved due to poor or insufficient communication among members. Often, the prevailing climate in a school organization is negative because communication, information sharing, and coordination are inadequate processes within the organization. Therefore, the creation of effective communication and information systems is a necessary prerequisite for the survival of modern organizations (Pasiardis, 2004).

To mitigate the destructive consequences of conflicts, Everard and Morris (1999) recommend adhering to some basic principles:

- Maintain communication with the party whose interests conflict with yours and do not postpone discussions, hoping the problem will resolve itself.
- Speak directly to the other person rather than behind their back, and avoid rallying supporters around you.
- If conflict arises between departments, try to promote joint programs on issues everyone can work on and view them as opportunities for personal development.
- Avoid an "all or nothing" orientation and understand all sides of the dispute.
- Prevent conflicts caused by reward systems, and if such systems exist, abolish them. Avoid wasting time on flattery or favoritism and focus on results.

According to Athanasoula-Reppa (2008), the ability to handle conflict and the skills to resolve it are among the key elements of success for an educational leader. Effective leaders must cultivate attitudes and skills for managing conflicts. The only way to achieve this is through self-discipline and practice. When disagreements arise, it is important to:

- Say "no" to confrontation.
- Present ideas and emotions calmly, clearly, and concisely.
- Learn to listen and develop empathy.
- Cultivate the ability to ask questions instead of making declarations.
- Evaluate all aspects of a problem and understand the pressure faced by the other party.
- Clearly articulate common goals that will help both sides overcome methodological differences, forget past grievances, and strive for future success (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Everard and Morris, 1999).

Therefore, educational leaders must understand the characteristics of both positive and negative management to interpret or prevent potential conflicts. A positive leader encourages and inspires others, takes responsibility, is objective, listens and responds to the needs of the group, and seeks solutions. Additionally, they delegate responsibilities, seize opportunities, have a broad perspective, and are willing to learn. Generally, they address problems by identifying their root causes and resolving them.

On the other hand, a negative leader sees themselves as a victim, blames others, is subjective, rejects ideas, and criticizes colleagues. Furthermore, they cannot delegate responsibilities, constantly perceive threats, focus on trivial details without substance, and avoid addressing problems. Instead of solving problems, they concentrate on finding someone to blame (Everard and Morris, 1999).

6. Case Study: Conflict in the School Unit

A student in the 3rd grade of middle school has been causing problems for classmates and teachers since the beginning of the school year. He disrupts lessons, enters the classroom whenever he pleases, and threatens and intimidates his peers. Complaints about his behavior are a daily occurrence, yet the deputy principal and principal only respond with reprimands, taking no substantive measures. Tolerance of the student's behavior is evident to both teachers and students.

The situation escalates when the student openly threatens to hit a teacher. The teacher reports the incident to the deputy principal and the principal. The principal calls the student's parents to inform them about the issue, but they blame the teachers for being unable to manage their child's behavior. Efforts by a counselor to mediate are unsuccessful. The teacher decides to report the incident to the police, as the student continues to make threats, without the support of the principal, who considers the student's apology sufficient.

The teaching staff, after months of observing the student's impunity and the administration's tolerance, decides to support the teacher and requests a faculty meeting to discuss referring the student to the disciplinary council. Tensions run high for several days as the principal initially refuses to address the matter. Eventually, she decides to refer the student to the disciplinary council, following continued threats.

In this case, a conflict initially begins between the student and the teacher but evolves into a conflict between the teaching staff and the principal, as well as between the school and the student's parents. This escalation occurs because necessary actions were not taken promptly to resolve the issue, and poor communication existed among members of the school unit.

The principal convened a meeting with the teaching staff to restore the atmosphere and communication. Through constructive dialogue, she managed to repair relationships, reaffirm her vision for the school, and propose solutions that satisfied all stakeholders. Additionally, a seminar was conducted at the school focusing on effective teaching and educator skills.

Theofilidis (2012) notes that training topics should directly relate to the problems teachers face in schools and their daily practice. This ensures the training is authentic and embedded within the school context, addressing concerns and challenges encountered by teachers in their everyday work. Training that does not originate from the school unit and the real needs of teachers and students is ineffective and unlikely to foster ongoing development and progress. Similarly, Day (2003) argues that professional development cannot be effective if treated as a separate program of activities unrelated to teaching practice.

Saitis (2000) emphasizes that a school principal must possess both scientific knowledge and relevant experience in organizing and managing school units. Without proper training in pedagogical and administrative matters, the principal will struggle to fulfill their mission effectively.

7. Conclusions

From the above, it is clear that the educational organization is a dynamic environment where individuals with diverse personalities, perspectives, goals, and expectations interact, leading to disagreements that often result in conflicts. A principal should neither fear conflicts nor seek to avoid them. Instead, they can leverage conflicts as opportunities for the professional development of both teachers and themselves. Thus, the principal must be able to discern whether a conflict can contribute to the organization's progress or have destructive consequences and establish a communication system to manage conflicts effectively.

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