

Teachers' Experience and Perceptions on Conflicts at Schools: Their Solution and Addressing

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Abstract

School is a social institution that is charged with two main responsibilities by society: to educate and to protect the children and their development. Providing a safe and complete education for all the students is a difficult challenge, since the conflicts at school facilities are increasing. Many of them derive from the misunderstanding of others' aims, feelings, needs or actions. Students must be taught to respect and appreciate the distinctions between people, understand prejudice, causes and ways of the action and its form. This study aimed to analyze teachers' perception on conflicts that appear in school facilities, their causes, consequences and how they practically deal with conflictive cases at schools; and identifying some interventional forms for the resolution of these conflicts. The study shows that conflicts are a disturbing problem at school and sometimes teachers claim that it is difficult for them to deal with conflicts. Teachers report some of the main causes of conflicts, such as social websites, different interests and viewpoints, individual differences among them (family background), lack of communication and the way of communication, linguistic and cultural differences, disciplinary offences, lack of parental supervision, lack of education related to tolerance, lack of strict discipline and lack of disciplinary measures. School should be focused more on youth education to prevent conflicts.

Keywords: conflicts, school, teachers, students, experience

1. Introduction

Schools are often centers of tension: time after time they manifest problems in a community. Conflicts are an occurrence in human relationships, and are the result of non-conciliation, differences in spiritual and cultural values, and opposing interests. Educators agree that the majority of schools now spend less time on academic work, because the discipline tasks takes more time. This affects academic standards and performance negatively, but it is necessary because of the great need to teach civilization values, tolerance, justice, equality and peace. It is also widely acknowledged that violence towards teachers, fellow students and even property damage in education facilities and around communities has increased dramatically in recent years (Onsarigo, 2007).

The causes of conflicts are poor communication, concurrence for insufficient resources, different purposes (Plunket, Raymond, 1989). Six sources of conflict are: limited resources, interdependent work activities, activity differences, communication problems, perception differences, common environment (Gray & Strake, 1984). Some of the identified strategies for conflict resolution are: calming down, compromise, obligation, withdrawal and problem solving (Blake and Mouton, 1964).

According to the literature, conflicts have constructive results and characteristics (Burton & Dukes, 1990, Valsiner & Cairns, 1992). Constructive characteristics of conflicts are: when they make it possible to learn or improve the efficacy of human relationships; develop communication skills; bring to attention important issues and problems; develop belief; reduce stress and anxiety. Destructive characteristics of conflicts are: when they generate fear and nervousness; decrease confidence, self-esteem and security; spend energy on less important issues; destroy creativity; cause aggressiveness and violent behavior.

A number of theorists argue that conflicts are an inevitable phenomenon at all levels of the human behavior. It is a component of thinking and learning processes and cognitive development. (Aronson 1999, Desforges 1995, Wood 1998).

Ross (1993) also argues that successful management of conflict should address fundamental sources of constructive conflict and these are the development of common interest of judging parties, as well as these parties' transformation, the interpretation of the needs and motives of each-other. Snodgrass and Blunt (2009) claim that an unaddressed conflict can create nonfunctional environments and schools which deprive students of the right to civilization through free and equal education. Anderson, Foster-Kehn and McKinney (1996) explained that negotiation is one of the most common techniques used to create disputes in conflictive situations.

2. Methodology

To accomplish the objectives of the study, quality method for the gathering of the data is used. Literature review as an initial step served even to prepare the instruments and to create the basis for the study framework. The quality method can be described as an effective model which occurs in its own natural environment and which enables the researcher to be involved greatly in the actual experience (Creswell, 2003). Interview is more than an instrument; it is an exercise to reach in the depth of discursive structures which build the worlds of the "subjects". It is the condition for the creation and development of a criticizing reflective dialogue, as well as the development of a temporary consensus for practical purposes without creating a totalitarian, sterile monologue (Schostak, 2002). The quality method consisted of gathering thorough information from teachers. For this reason, teachers' perceptions and experiences on conflictive situations at schools were explored in depth. Cohort in this study included 48 secondary and high school teachers. Participation criterion was having encountered conflictive situations at school, so that they shared their experiences on conflictive situations at schools and the forms that were used to solve them.

The data were gathered during October – December 2014. All the interviews were immediately registered and transcript. The collected materials were analyzed using thematic content analysis technique. Seidel and Kelle (1995) consider the role of coding as an appropriate phenomenon that collects data and analyses these phenomena with the aim of pointing out the similarities, differences, models and structures. Transcripts were read several times so that the researcher became familiar with and had a deeper understanding of the collected information. This process was an attempt to permit the text to suggest the coding and analysis topics, as well as to restrict the prejudgments of researcher when choosing the topics.

3. Results

3.1 *Reasons and consequences of conflicts*

Teachers report some main causes of conflicts such as different social websites, different interests and viewpoints, individual distinctions between them (family background), manner or lack of communication, linguistic and cultural differences, disciplinary offences, truancy (mainly boys), lack of parental supervision, lack of tolerance-related education, teachers' authority, lack of strict discipline and lack of punishing measures, conflicts in the family that serve as models of conflictive behavior to children, nonparticipation in sport activities as a way of spending the energy that characterizes this age group. Teachers themselves report that in some cases conflicts are to be blamed on the teachers:

"Conflicts at schools appear among teachers and students' contingency. Some teachers are unqualified; some students come from families with social and economic problems. The majority of conflicts are teacher-student and teacher-parent".

Conflicts bring many consequences to students involved in the conflict, to other fellow students, to teachers, family members and community as a whole. All the interviewed teachers approve of the various consequences based on their own experience. Some of the consequences they list are: disputes that degenerate worse; hatred for each-other, which usually extends to family and community; breakdown of cooperation and normal learning process; students become aggressive, withdraw from society; degradation of teacher and student model; truancy; low level in knowledge gaining, etc.

3.2 The role of school, teachers and parents in addressing conflicts

All the interviewed teachers claim that it is very important that conflicts be identified in time and concrete measures be taken to eventually solve them. Only one third of the interviewed teachers report to having used mediatory methods, restoring dialogue or support until the conflict has been solved. The rest of the teachers report they stopped when the conflict was identified, consultancy on the conflict, and a modest effort to solve it. Conflicts at school most of the time are considered a management issue than an opportunity to develop and learn. There is a great necessity that students be helped and oriented by the teachers to solve conflictive situations.

"Children must be helped and oriented by adults; they do not always realize the consequences of the conflicts."

All the interviewed teachers report that the school and the parents play an important role in youth education to solve conflicts in a peaceful way.

"School is the main institution that makes efforts from the beginning of every conflict to cope with it in every way"

3.3 Family role in solving conflicts

Teachers consider family support to be important in solving and preventing conflicts. The results of data analysis show that girls have a greater tendency to ask for help from parents even when conflicts happen at school, compared to boys who frequently ask support from their peers or solve the conflicts on their own.

All the interviewed teachers report that family intervention is very important to solve conflicts. Family is considered as a very important supporting tool which is not always available or cannot react in time to conflictive situations.

Teachers report that in some cases family not only lacks help to solve problems, but sometimes prevents and makes its resolution more difficult.

"Families are insensitive. Even though they bear the main role, they are not there in cases of conflicts due to their businesses and personal problems and income earning is more important for them."

20 out of 48 interviewed teachers report that children show conflictive behavior as a result of conflict models they have experienced at home. In such cases, parents not always can help to enhance the cases at school.

3.4 Methods of managing conflicts

Teachers report communication strategies as one of the main methods to solve conflicts. They consider student skill development as very important to use such techniques as negotiation, restoring dialogue. Parental involvement is another suggested alternative since they can create an important family-student-school balance.

Boys more than girls, use physical strength to solve conflicts. In some cases teachers claim that it is difficult to cope with their behavior since they immediately involve in physical violence. Students prefer being helped by their peers to solve conflicts or to solve them themselves. The strong bond to their peers is the reason why they often consider them a very important supporting tool. Girls more than boys, ask help from their parents or teachers to solve problems.

Conflicts are constructively managed when teachers and students understand the conflict nature right. Managing conflicts requires the ability to understand how they can be managed in different situations. 34 out of 48 interviewees report that they encounter different difficulties during conflict solving. Some of the difficulties they report are: lack of skills to manage conflicts in some school staff; difficulty to convince the parties to deal with themselves on what they have done; denying being guilty threatening loudly each-other; refusal to confront in sessions for conflict resolution; bias to one party; *"if the conflict is between the teacher and the student, teachers can support the teacher and not the student, despite the fact that the teacher can be guilty"*

Teachers report that it is necessary for students to learn the skills to solve conflicts, developing their knowledge, behavior and values that promote conflict resolution in peaceful ways.

40 out of 48 interviewed teachers report that the role of the psychologist and social worker at schools is very important to counsel and follow up children that are involved in conflictive situations.

4. Conclusions

Schools continue to be the institutions of tensions, manifesting the problems in community. Addressing conflicts at schools is a necessity and an inevitable process. It is necessary that school staff in cooperation with teachers and students to create a standard procedure to address conflicts and students be aware that in the cases of conflicts they will go through some certain steps which aim at evaluating the situation, taking concrete measures to conflict resolution and following up until eventual resolution. Teaching the youth their rights and especially their responsibilities for a normal learning process at individual, group, school and community level should be continuous. Students should be aware of different values, diversity, cultures, attitudes, needs and viewpoints that exist between students, teachers and parents and which usually cause inevitable conflicts. The models that school provides the students with should implant constant tolerance, cooperation, dialogue, belief and communication. Communication strategy creation related to conflict issues at schools which focus on special needs and opportunities of the teachers, teenagers, parents and community is a must. Adults themselves should design and develop positive practices that help students see the world from the other child's point of view. Teacher themselves agree on the need to develop skills to evaluate school environment, to create strategies to make students aware of the conflicts and to deal with conflictive cases at school.

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