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CONFLICT AND COLLABORATION IN PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EDUCATION SYSTEM PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract

The constant challenges of the professional pathway in the education system, along with personal, social or cultural limitations, aspirations and principles, place the practitioners in a context of activity based on collaboration. However, interpersonal conflict appears more and more frequently. The conflicting actions strongly influence the didactic act, the interpersonal relationships within the institution, the academic progress and the contributions brought in the educational system by the teachers. This paper highlights the determinism of the conflict and the difficulty of forming, developing and maintaining high quality professional relationships. Based on our theoretical researches of the last two years, we intend to value some ideas and reflections with a formative impact in the sense of comprehension of the phenomenon of conflict. We approach the conflict at the level of the individual and the interpersonal relations, with emphasis on its modelling force. At the same time, we support the fundamental importance of a changed vision, from the negativism and the malfunctioning of the conflict, to the exploitation of the progress factor it carries. A constructive approach to conflict resolution strengthens professional relationships based on collaboration, both horizontally and vertically (hierarchically). It can be used in intelligent and lucrative ways to optimize activities and guide the professional progress of each practitioner as an integrated and dynamic part of the educational micro-system and the macro-system.

Keywords: Interpersonal conflict, collaboration, professional relationships, educational system.

1. Introduction

Similar to many working environments, in educational institutions and teacher relations, there may be conflicting situations and events that are either of a personal or professional nature. We believe that, whatever the dominant feature of these conflicts, they should not go as far as to negatively affect the school organization, the partnership and professional collaboration between teachers, the relationship with pupils, the pupils' schooling or classroom teaching. Through this paper we aim to highlight some aspects specific to the conflict, its internalized manifestation, and how interpersonal relationships in school can be influenced, positively or negatively, by conflict. At the same time, we emphasize the importance of redirecting the conflict towards performance and professional collaboration.

1.1. A theoretical framework for understanding the concept of conflict

The Oxford English Dictionary (2018) provides a valuable explanation base for understanding the notion of conflict from multiple perspectives. On one side, conflict is defined as a type of tense and long-standing interpersonal relationship manifested through disagreement and/or strife: "A serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one." On the other side, conflict is explained as an inner state in which a person is subjected to emotions, feelings, needs, simultaneous and opposite aspirations: "A state of mind in which a person experiences a clash of opposing feelings or needs." Also, on the basis of explanations offered by the Oxford English Dictionaries, a direct correspondence is made between the conflict as an intrinsic state of a person and the conflict as a form of interpersonal manifestation: "Contradiction between the ideas, interests or feelings of different people determines the conflicting interaction ".

Conflict is a phenomenon that results from the tendency of one of the parties involved, a person or a group of people, to impose their own point of view or interests. In this context, Pruit and Rubin (1986) present the conflict as a divergence of perceived interest or a belief that the current aspirations of the parties can't be accomplished simultaneously. The range of feelings of contradiction and even frustration associated with them can cause conflicting behaviors among teachers. Unfortunately, practitioners from education system can quickly turn from collaborators to opponents.

1.2. Perspectives on self-conflict and conflict vs. collaboration in professional relationships

"Conflict has a very important role in human psychological development. The conflicts we face in life shape our characters, cultures and the world" (Cohen, 2005, p. 12), with important formative valences for the people involved and for their membership group.

In general, conflict is understood as:
- "a form of opposition between the parties;
- an absence of agreement between the parties;
- a way to solve social contradictions;
- a natural process in social interactions" (Lukin, 2007, p. 102).

In the professional collaboration between teachers, conflicts can often arise in the sense of differences of opinion. That certifies that all alternatives are considered, with the related advantages and disadvantages and manifests itself through a state of tension or misunderstanding. An ambiguous style in

the struggle to strengthen the positions of each of the actors causes a distortion of reality, distorting reasoning, until the incompetence of the genuine treatment of the situation. Therefore, conflict should be understood, at the level of social relations, as a form of constant, natural interaction, but which requires a careful approach in a constructive way.

2. Problem Statement

Recent paradigms present conflict as a normal, dynamic, frequent phenomenon in life, a simple and natural feature of the human social system. Society, by its nature, like humans, is not perfect. Therefore, inconsistencies, disagreements and contradictions are inevitable parts of personal, social and professional development and activity.

2.1. Contemporary views on the phenomenon of conflict

Generally speaking, conflict is a state of disorder and agitation, both in-person (intrapersonal) and external (interpersonal). In this theoretical context, two approaches have emerged in the literature in the conceptualization of the conflict.

On the one hand, it is the objectivist approach, which suggests the emergence of the conflict in the social and political structure of society. Some researchers at the beginning of the 21st century refer to the concept of conflict defining it in terms of an objective approach and giving it the synonym of "pause, collapse in the standard decision-making mechanism" (Oyeshola, 2005, p. 105).

On the other hand, it is the subjective approach, which advances the idea that apparent differences and the incompatibility of goals cause conflicts. In this vision, conflict is characterized as "a social situation in which at least two actors strive to obtain at the same time an available set of limited resources" (Wallensteen, 2002, p. 16).

Over the years, research in the field has led to a change in the theoretician's views, and so we can distinguish certain new directions, defined by:

• The theory of human relationships - its followers consider the conflict a natural inevitable result in any group and is based on the principle: Conflict causes unusual reactions of the persons involved.;

• The theory of the interactionist approach - where conflict is not only a positive force within any group, but especially its presence is necessary for the efficient functioning of the group, which presupposes the preservation of a certain functional degree of conflict.

Whether it is an inner/intrinsic conflict, whether it is an externally/extrinsic one, it affects many levels of the human psyche, depending on the particular forms it takes in every life experience. "Individuals are in conflict when they are obstructed or irritated by another individual or group and inevitably react to it in a beneficial or costly way" (Van de Vliert, 1997, p. 5), which demonstrates the omnipresence conflict in human existence.

Due to the high degree of occurrence, psychologists also focus on the many aspects that should be considered when people have to cope with a conflict situation. We intend to support teachers in understanding conflicts between them and to facilitate a real awareness of fundamental issues such as:

• the problem around which the conflict is concentrated does not necessarily have a real, objective basis, but is a subjective experience, which may be of a cognitive, affective nature or both: the perception of blocked goals, a disagreement or feelings of hostility, repulsion, fear;

• the magnitude or intensity of a conflict may vary: a conflict tends to diminish when the force of contradiction decreases and spreads when it grows;

• a conflict is not necessarily identical to a behavioral conflict.

2.2. Teachers' professional relationships between conflict and collaboration

Conflict is a social, dynamic phenomenon, frequently found in interpersonal relationships, throughout the existential evolution, some psychologists describing it as "a situation in which interdependent people have differences (manifest or latent) in terms of meeting needs and individual interests and interfere with the achievement of these goals" (Donohue & Kolt, 1992, p. 2).

A retrospective of the theories of the conflict concept is necessary for a profound understanding of how the theoreticians, practitioners and researchers' approaches to conflict situations have evolved.

At present, it is aimed at a detachment from the traditional approach, in which people saw the conflict as a harmful phenomenon to be avoided, which led to the practice in the educational institutions of a professional relations management based on the principle: conflict can be avoided.

In solving conflict situations between teachers, there must be the responsibility to accurately identify the level of conflict that affects performance and maintaining professional cooperative relationships. At the same time, all the practitioners in educational system can learn to identify the moment when the stimulation of the conflict can have beneficial effects and lead to new forms of professional collaboration.

The identification of conflicts between professors calls for a constructive and mature approach in the form of a consequence and imperative attitude. Such a strategy implies: improving communication, increasing cooperation, tolerance towards different ideas of other people, providing concrete solutions to teachers in terms of educational approaches that have been successful in the classroom or in a certain category of educators. Criticizing and offering reciprocal suggestions at a professional level must be done in an appropriate form and in a diplomatic manner in which the issue, not the person involved, is the point of interest.

Many conflicts between teachers and the management of the educational institution, especially with the school principal, are very delicate and hard to manage. To effectively prevent and/or resolve such conflicts, it is good for each of the parties involved to adopt proactive behavior that seeks to improve interpersonal and organizational relationships.

The school principal should disseminate positive feedback from parents, the local community and different institutional structures or departments. We encourage teachers to ensure that their interesting educational actions in school and extracurricular activities with students and with other practitioners in educational system also recognized and promoted by school's leadership, parents, local community and even by different education specialists.

According to Bocoş, Gavra, and Marcu (2008), for the improvement of the relations, each teacher should:

• look for as many positive contacts as possible;

- show a certain interest in the other's personal life;
- provide help in solving different school problems;
- accept to enter various committees and committees and show interest in building a viable educational community;
- effectively honor their professional status.

3.   Research Questions

During this study we wanted to find answers to certain research questions: what may be the possible causes of interpersonal conflicts in educational institutions, how do conflicts influence professional relations and collaboration in an educational institution, when/ if conflicts can be constructive and what might be the right course of action to be followed by practitioners involved in interpersonal conflicts.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of our study is to investigate some essential aspects related to the dynamics of interpersonal conflicts among practitioners in the educational system and to analyze the interdependencies that are created between interpersonal conflicts and professional collaboration.

5.   Research Methods

The complexity of the phenomenon we studied, the multitude and diversity of the associated factors that had to be considered, and the interactions between them, determined us to have a systemic approach in our research. The chosen methodological system facilitated the analytical, reflexive and critical knowledge of the research topic.

5.1.   Study of the bibliography

During the investigative process we have consulted many bibliographic sources presenting concepts and visions related to the phenomenon of the conflict in general and the manifestation of the conflict in the interpersonal and professional relations. We did a *documentary reading*, which implied careful reading, critical analysis and recording of the most relevant theoretical views about the subject being treated. The study of the specialized bibliography was done mainly by *exegetic reading*, which allowed us to explain and interpret carefully certain important parts of the specialized publications.

At the level of the whole work, we opted for a *thematic approach*, around the concepts needed to understand the theme, not necessarily around an author. For some parts of the paper we opted for a *chronological approach*, also realizing a transversal study sequence, an analysis of the problems from the perspective of its evolution over time. In applying this research method we have adopted an active, reflexive, impersonal and objective attitude.

5.2. Self-observation method

We have completed the study of specialized publications with the constant application of *self-observation*. This research method was a form of valuable experimental observation for us and facilitated a deeper understanding of the phenomenon investigated. Therefore, we consistently appeal to reflective thinking processes, both as researchers and as practitioners in the educational system. Retrospective and prospective queries have supported us in understanding and interpreting the interdependence between conflict and collaboration in teacher's professional relationships.

6. Findings

Based on our research over the last two years, we insist on the positive aspect of confrontation and disagreement, especially as regards the possibility of introducing innovation, change, and new collaborative relationships. Many theorists promote this view and show that there is a direct link between performance and conflict: up to a certain "optimal" level of conflict the performance is steadily rising, and after the conflict goes beyond the optimum point, performance drops with amplification conflict.

7. Conclusion

From the study of the specialized literature, we find a shift of emphasis, from the negative, dysfunctional perceptions of the conflict, to its formative and constructive valences. This approach is increasingly encouraged among practitioners in the education system. Because we know that their professional collaboration is essential, we intend to guide them to change or model their visions about conflict and to support them in reconfiguring the preventive and resolutive approaches to conflict in the school environment in which they work.

Our research is a complex one, which, on the basis of finding, understanding, explaining, interpreting, generalizing, making inferences and logical deductions, creates a theoretical and explanatory framework accessible to practitioners and creates the premises of balanced praxiological approaches to conflict and collaboration in professional relationships.

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