Complexity in Conflict Management and the Role of

Democratic School Principal

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Abstract: The present paper presents the complexity in conflict management from the school's principal point of view. It explores and bibliographically validates that the democratic leadership model is the most appropriate for conflict management within the school environment. The methodology applied in the present paper is bibliographical research. Conflicts can be categorized in cognitive (duty) or emotional, individual or organizational, horizontal or vertical, functional or dysfunctional and occur between teachers, teachers-headmasters, students and parents. The sources-causes of conflicts can be found in external or work environment and individual factors. The consequences of the conflict depending on its management can be either positive or negative. The principal does not avoid conflict but confronts it and takes advantage of it. The headmaster must manage conflict through mediating democratically and aiming at cooperation.

Key words: complexity, conflict management, democratic school principal

1. Introduction

Throughout the last years the role of educational administration has been the object of multiple scientific research and has sustained fundamental changes within the educational systems of many countries including Greece. The constantly evolving social, cultural and financial conditions affect the school unit function, as it constitutes an open system in continuous interaction with the local and broader community. Scientific research and the need to adjust to social and cultural changes of the time brings about changes in education curriculum among other, imposes the introduction of novelties, working together with social and local agents, the restructuring of administrative duties, the necessity of autonomy and effective management in the school unit. Inside this dynamic framework, within which the school unit is faced as an open social schema in constant contact with the social-cultural surroundings and everyone involved in the educational practice, the study of the role of the school principal in the light of democratic leadership and particularly, the part which concerns conflict management, is an exceptionally complex matter given the pedagogical, physiological, administrative and organizational issues involved. The basic motivation for this research paper has been to highlight conclusion concerning the exercising of democratic leadership by the school principal. Highlighting these conclusions can be a useful tool in the hands of every school principal asked to manage in a democratic way conflicts that arise in an exceptionally dynamic and complex environment.

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2. Conflicts: Causes and Consequences

The school unit, as already mentioned is an open system and its function involves individuals of different cultural and social backgrounds, different sex, different age and different interests such as students, educators, executives, parents , local players etc (Φασουλής, 2006). The school principal is asked to manage an abundance of strategic and organizational issues, such as decision making on educational issues, improvement of the school infrastructure, cooperation with senior executives, parents and the local community, the implementation of ICT etc (Άνθης & Κακλαμάνης, 2007). During this decision making process, interpersonal conflicts or contrasts expressed in disagreements, aggressiveness, passive resistance issues arise.

These conflicts can be cognitive or affective. Corwin (1966) and DiPaola (1990) have pinpointed in their research that common conflicts in schools are cognitive (duty), while affective conflict are manifested to a lesser extent.

Conflict in a school unit can acquire various forms, and therefore receive many definitions. It may arise as much as an issue of fulfilling duties, as an issue of interpersonal differences, but also out of a misinterpretation of a concept resulting in a mild misunderstanding. Conflict in a school includes personal conflicts with colleagues or executives within the school unit as well as conflicts with students, parents or individuals and agents of the school environment (Imazai & Chouchi, 2002). According to scientists of Developmental Psychology (Shantz & Hartup, 1992) students' involvement in conflict is a process of development and learning. The effort to eliminate such conflicts is equivalent to deprivation of a development and learning opportunity. Unfortunately though, conflict between students often manifests itself through violent behavior such as fighting, swearing, demeaning comments, acts of violence, ghettoizing, destructions (Ελευθεριάδης, 1998, Μαυροσκούφης, 2007).

According to Pawlak (1998) conflict arises because at least two members are in dispute about an issue. Conflict can be individual (conflict in individual decision making), organizational (conflict of individuals or groups within a school unit) or be a conflict between organizations (there is a conflict between organizations or groups outside a school unit) (Stoner, 1989).

Conflict is characterized as horizontal or vertical depending on the hierarchical level of the individuals involved (Blacke Mouton, 1961, Schein, 1980, p. 172). The vertical conflict occurs between individuals of different hierarchical level, as for instance between a teacher and the principal, while the horizontal between individuals of the same hierarchical level, that is between teachers. Vertical conflicts are naturally greatest and stronger than the horizontal ones.

Concerning the impact on an organization, conflicts can be distinguished in functional and dysfunctional, defining as functional the ones that the object of conflict is the working and cognitive object and as dysfunctional the ones that the conflict has acquired an emotional tone which makes the conflict harder and is accompanied by a personalization of the conflict. Conflict of duties usually has a positive impact on the function of the organization (functional conflict), while emotional conflict leads to negative consequences for the organization (dysfunctional conflict) (Chouang et al., 2004).

Sources of conflicts can be categorized as follows (Masters & Albright, 2002):
• external environment
• working environment
• Individual factors such as personality, psychological condition and health condition of the employees.

The causes that can lead to a conflict vary, for example there can be differentiation in the goals of groups in a

school unit, blurred duty boundaries (Walton & Dutton, 1969).

More contemporary researchers stress that under certain circumstances conflict can have beneficial effects (Tjosvold, 1991; Van de Vliert & De Dreu, 1994). According to Jehn (1995), Tjosvold M. (1995), Everard & Morris (1999), Ματσαγγούρας (1999), Σαΐτης (2002) and Παπασταμάτης (2005) there can be positive and negative effects of conflicts in organizations.

More in detail, some of the positive effects of conflicts are:

- the dissemination and weakening of a more serious tension (Σαΐτης, 2002; Singh, 1995).
- the search of new methods of action and best solutions (Singh, 1995).
- the increase in cohesion and performance inside the group. The levels of cooperation and efficiency rise (Σαίτης, 2002).
- the reinforcement of self-esteem and improvement of personal relationships (Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1995).

The main negative causes of the conflicts can be summarized in the following:

- Disbelief and disturbance of interpersonal relationships (Everard & Morris, 1999).
- The conflicts can cause indifference, sense of inferiority (Singh, 1995), insecurity, absences, complaints, transfer requests, hostility and in extreme cases aggressiveness.

3. Conflict Management

Conflict management within the school unit becomes particularly complex, given that it involves theoretical concepts such as democracy, leadership, human relationships management. Apart from the complexity of the situations themselves, through which the element of conflict emerges in the school unit, understanding the conflict points to the need to comprehend concepts complex by nature related to the meaning and course of a conflict. It is therefore obvious that the matter of conflict management within the school unit on the side of the democratic principal involves in its theoretical formulation many different fields and scientific approaches. Conclusively, concerning such a complicated field, it would be naive for anyone to claim they can formulate a general theoretical schema which can summarize the principles concerning conflict management under the umbrella of democratic school leadership for every social and cultural framework.

Nowadays the idea that successful administration depends largely on the ability of efficient conflict management. It is common that the members of a group cannot settle their differences by themselves, therefore the principal is called to act as a mediator (Scholtes et al., 1996). In case a principal decides to mediate in a conflict, before taking up this part, he or she has to realise the complexity of the issue and wonder whether the timing is right, the issue of the conflict is solvable, if he can remain neutral, whether he has the credibility required, he has the level of energy demanded, the time and the skills for a successful mediation and whether non-mediating entails greater risks than mediating.

Principals who consider conflict as undesirable and attempt to minimize or make it disappear actually obstruct creativity and innovation (DeDreu C., 1997). On the contrary, those who consider conflict essential, try to integrate it in the organization's culture as something absolutely normal. As Burns (1978) mentions leaders do not avoid conflict. They confront it, they take advantage of it and finally systemize it, through affecting the tension and issue of conflict, they customise it and mediate in it.

To successfully address conflicts the principal among other has to (Σαΐτης, 2002, Medina et al., 2002): know

and predict possible sources of conflict and respond in time

- identify immediately the type of conflict
- encourage public discussion on duty issues and appease or resolve emotional issues
- know and be able to use all techniques of conflict management and their consequences
- monitor the conflict resolution process and guide issues from emotional type to duty-related issues
- strengthen the functioning of the group

According to Rahim (2002) for the conflict management to be successful, it needs to meet the following criteria:

- meet the needs and expectations of the members of the organization and maintain the balance among them,
- lead to a moral resolution

More specifically, effective conflict management needs to have the following goals, which are completely compatible with the democratic leadership model:

- avoiding escalation (Masters & Albright, 2002)
- decreasing emotional conflict (Rahim, 2002).
- resolution of the real problem that led to conflict (Masters & Albright, 2002).
- selection of strategies, so that greater trust, understanding, respect and cooperation develops (Σαΐτης, 2002)
- dynamic conception of solutions (Masters & Albright, 2002). There is not only one solution to every problem
- supporting interpersonal relationships (Masters & Albright, 2002)

4. Conflict Management During Decision Making

The principal of a school unit as much as the group of teachers participating in the decision making process share an important role. According to researchers decision making techniques spread within the dipole of authoritative and participatory model, with an extension of many similar styles. According to B. Everand and G. Morris (1996, pp. 53–54) decision making styles are divided in the following categories:

- the authoritative style, in which the principal decides on his/her own.
- the persuasive style, in which the principal of the school unit through the power of persuasion, justifies and attempts to convince the other members of the educational team explaining and justifying the decision he has already made.
- the advisory style, in which the opinions of the whole educational team are taken into consideration before the final decision is made.

Naturally, conflict resolution between two conflicting parties with the unique goal and objective of finding a mutually acceptable solution can occur through negotiation between these conflicting parties (Walton και McKersie, 1965).

Generally speaking, the main focus of the conflicting parties during a negotiation is on the compromising-conciliatory attitude and in no case an aggressive attitude.

The role of the principal and the attitude he chooses to adopt is very important. Conflict management is on the substance of the matter the way the principal chooses to act after a conflict has emerged. Initially, it is

important to refer to the difference between "conflict resolution" and "conflict management" (Rahim, 2002). Conflict resolution aims at minimizing or ending the conflict within the existing system. Conflict management entails the planning of effective strategies aiming at reducing the malfunctions and supporting the positive impact of a conflict, so that learning and effectiveness of the organization is enhanced.

Organizational conflict management includes all diagnostic procedures and mediation in conflict (Rahim, 2002). The principal's democratic mediation in this case can be a) procedural by changing accordingly the emotional and operational conflict and allowing the members to learn how to implement different styles of crisis management, or b) structural maintaining a moderate degree of operational conflict over minor duties and decreasing the possibility of emotional conflict through modifying the sources of this conflict.

Conflict management includes the techniques that the two conflicting parties will use to confront it. These techniques are divided in two categories:

a) they both win

b) they both lose

c) The one loses and the other one wins. The first case is naturally the goal set.

The determination but also the evaluation of the intentions of the other party plays an important role in the conflict process. The strategic intentions of the other party as far as conflict-handling is concerned can be classified on the basis of two dimensions:

- cooperativeness, that is the effort to satisfy the other party's interests
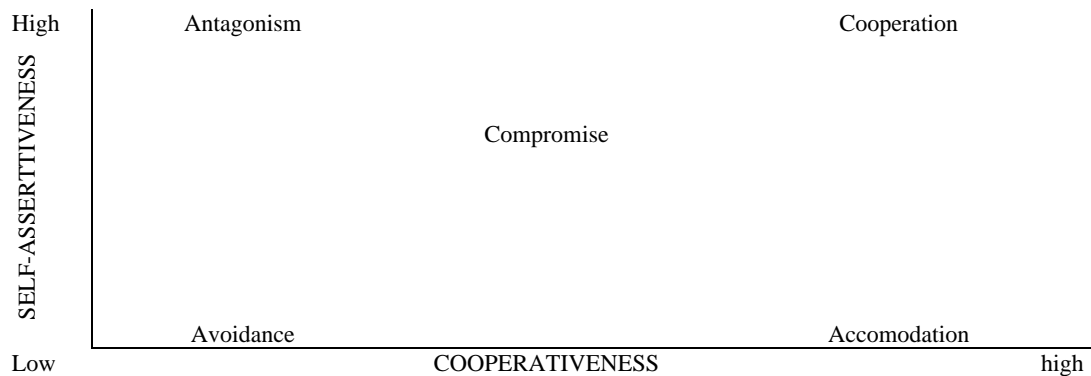- self-assertiveness, that is the effort to satisfy their own interests.

Figure 1   Two-Dimensional Classification of Conflict-Handling Modes

Source: Adaptation from Thomas & Kilman, 1974, p. 11

As everyone can realize from the above mentioned diagram, there are five possible modes of conflict approach:

- on one hand, competing, characterized by complete self-assurance and effort to satisfy our own interests, totally ignoring the other party's interests.
- on the exact opposite side, accommodating mode is characterized by the effort to satisfy the other party's involved in the conflict interests.
- compromising, which as a mode, contains a moderate degree of self-assurance and cooperation.
- cooperating, which as a conflict-handling mode implies a high degree in both dimensions: a desire to fully meet the objectives of both parties or composing all views.
- avoiding, finally, is characterized by complete indifference to the interests of both parties and the

individual tries to abstain from the whole process (Thomas, 1977).

5. Conclusions

The group dynamics often generates strong oppositions, and then the role of the school unit principal-leader is not only to supervise the decision-making procedure but also contribute to the development of group dynamics during this process. Democratic leadership should therefore play a supportive and mediating role, taking into consideration the democratic ideals mainly and not simply exercise control. The members of the organisation should take up their responsibilities, not remain passive receivers of others' decisions and participate in decision-making process within the school unit. It is clear that the principal has to be a leader demonstrating supportive attitude and be able to detect and identify conflict, distinguish its dynamics and the positive or negative effects, have the necessary skills of conflict management, implement democratic conflict-handling modes (equality, respect, reward) in a practical and effective way and not avoid conflict but actually systemize it and benefit from it.

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