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Managing Conflict by School Leadership: A Case Study of a School from Gilgit - Biltistan

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Abstract – **Managing conflict at school has been an age-old challenge for educators. Conflicts are a natural part of life and therefore a natural part of school life. Learning to deal constructively with conflict is a life-skill need for educational leaders. This paper reports a case study of a private English medium school of Gilgit-Baltistan about exploration of the conflict management which advocates two approaches to manage conflicts at school level i.e. to follow strict rules and regulations and penalizing on violation and secondly, empowering the stakeholders to resolve their own problems by their-selves.These approaches have proved that competence in conflict resolution skills can also lead to the increased social and academic achievements in the short run and a more harmonious world in the long run.**

Keywords – **Conflict Management, Strict Rules, Penalizing Students, School Leadership, School Discipline.**

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a small scale study to explore the strategies of Conflict Management adopted by the principal of a private high school in Gilgit-Baltistan. Before going on to the actual happening and the subsequent exploration; it wouldbe tried to elaborate/describe the Conflict and Conflict Management separately in the light of different literature and the understanding thereafter.

What is Conflict?

Webster's Dictionary defines conflict as "a battle, contest of opposing forces, discord, antagonism existing between primitive desires, instincts and moral, religious, or ethical ideals."Conflict: Tension between two or more social entities (individuals, groups) that arise from incompatibility of actual or desired responses (Raven & Kruglanski, 1970). According to Katz & Lawyer (1993), conflict is a situation or state between at least two interdependent parties, which is characterized by perceived differences that the parties evaluate as negative. Conflict is natural among human being. Conflict, to differing degrees, occurs daily in everyone's life. Conflict is in and of itself, is not necessarily good or bad. It's the way that conflict is handled that makes the outcome positive or negative. If handled effectively, conflict can create a good learning experience. If handled ineffectively, conflict can quickly escalate to physical and emotional violence.

What is conflict management?

Conflict management is what we do when we identify and deal with conflict in a reasonable manner. To manage conflict, skills like effective communication and negotiation are needed. The term conflict management has become an ever-expanding umbrella that is used to cover a variety of approaches.Conflict management teaches life skills, negotiation strategies, mediation skills.

Different studies have been done to explore Conflict Management. According to Katz. N.H & Lawyer. J.W. (1993);

On the positive side, conflict can provide an opportunity for creativity, renewed energy, drama, development, and growth to individuals, groups, and organizations, resulting in increased cohesion and trust.The conflict is covert or overt; the object of conflict management is to achieve a constructive emotional state in all parties and a clear, mutual understanding of one another's view. To manage the conflicts two processesinterpersonal process and group process are essential; Interpersonal Process: Notice the tension and begin to listen, Continue to listen, Summarize the other's view, State your view, Handle defensiveness, Invite summary of your view, summarize both sides, Diagnose needs versus beliefs. Group Process: Notice the tension and say what you see, hear and feel, Convey the importance to you of honest reaction, Reflective listening – have the attitude, at all times of a listener, Summarize positions and interests – make a clear distinction between this phase and the next, Express appreciation, Diagnose needs versus beliefs.

II. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

To explore the strategies of effective conflict management, a prestigious school of Gilgit-Baltistan was chosen, which has been its over dominating fame in educational sector spread over a couple of decades. The management of school believes that foundation of their life and School is well laid and cemented by the sacrifices and sweat of their Founders, Administrators, Principals, Teachers and the Student Community. This is what a token of appreciation displayed in school campus communicates to the visitors. Their loyalty, dedication and devotion have carried them through all these almost 20 years of storms and struggles.

Today school houses nearly 1000 students, of all creeds and classes of respectable families. School has four sections; while the administrative structure comprises of a head teacher in each section, reporting to an overall Principal. The Principal declared herself as policy maker along with the honorary board members under which school runs. The school campus is a built heritage with its excellent feature of construction.

The journey to this school caused by the research question; "What are the strategies of a head teacher to manage conflicts among students at school level?"

III. RATIONALE

There are certain rationales which were the motivating factors to conduct this mini research. Among them following were the driving forces:

Head teachers need to know how to manage and resolve conflicts. Some educators believe competence in conflict resolution skills can lead to increased social and academic achievement in the short run and a more harmonious world in the long run; so, the intention was to prove this statement.

Managing conflict at school has been an age-old challenge for educators. Conflicts are a natural part of life and therefore a natural part of school life as well. Being the leader of a school for many years, faced many challenges; among them was the conflict management among students and now it was the time to empirically observe handling such situations by other experienced leaders.

IV. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The research participant was the principal who has been associated with this institution since long. She describes herself as a rather strict disciplinarian, with a keen understanding of human nature; she has often been accused of dictatorial tendencies, but knows the value of silent leadership. (She portrayed herself in this manner).

V. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As a researcher, this study initially helped to understand the issues and strategies to solve them, which contribute to improve the leadership practices in future. It also helped to bring to the forefront the issues related to leadership and management. These findings will help management, head teachers and teachers to make leadership process smooth in their schools.

VI. LITERATURE REVIEW

School managers and leaders need to understand what is entailed in conflict management and need high conflict competence to be able to be effective in their schools. When conflict managers have determined and defined the nature of the conflict in a conflict situation, they try and find ways of resolving it. Various conflict writers have highlighted various ways of resolving these conflict situations. Many of these are relevant in school situation. Effective school principals will have the qualities highlighted in conflict literature. Blake and Mouton (1964) Identified five conflicts solving strategies; smoothing, compromising, forcing, withdrawal and problem solving. Furthermore, Dana (2001) avers that leaders need to comprehend structure to be able analyze conflicts well. There are six parts of conflict structure that people can pay attention to:

- Interdependency – How much do parties need one another?
- Number of interested parties- How many distinct parties, individuals or groups have an interest in how the conflict is resolved?
- Constituent representation-Do the parties represent the interests of other people who are not personally or directly involved in the process of resolving the conflict?
- Negotiator authority- If the parties consist of more than one individual, say a department within an organization, is the person or team of people who represent the interests of that department within an organization, is the person or team or team of people who represent the interests of that department able to make concessions or reach creative solutions without going back to their constituents for approval?
- Critical urgency-Is it absolutely necessary that a solution be found in the very near future to prevent disaster?
- Communication channels-Are parties able to talk to each other face to face in the same room.

Dana perceives these six dimensions as elements that are necessary to be able to analyze conflict well. There are many similar theories that analyze conflict resolution and management. Anderson. (1996) contend that negotiation is one of the most common techniques for creating agreements during conflict situations. Furthermore, these authors cite Putnam who defines negotiation as a type of conflict management characterized by an exchange of proposals and counterproposals as a means of reaching a satisfactory settlement. The Harvard Business Essentials publication (2003: xi) concur with the above definitions when they aver: Negotiation is the means by which people deal with their differences. Whether those differences involve the purchase of a new automobile, a labor contract dispute, the terms of a sale, a complex alliance between tow companies, or a peace accord between warring nations, resolutions are typically sought through negotiations. To negotiate is to seek mutual agreement through dialogue. Negotiation is an ever-present feature of our lives both at home and at work.

Negotiations also present a form of conflict management that is more consciously controlled. Yes although negotiation involves more controlled communication than other conflict situations, the overall process is marked by greater ambiguity because of the stakeholders' lack of control over the outcome (Anderson. 2003). Negotiations are sometimes plagued by pitfalls that might hinder any success in resolving the conflict situation. Deutsch (1991) highlights aspects such as cultural factors and how they have a potential of hindering negotiations. Deutsch argues that negotiators need to have an implicit understanding of cultural assumptions which are likely to determine how negotiators from different places perceive the world. "Lacking such knowledge, negotiators from different cultural backgrounds are likely to misunderstand one another and apt to engage in behavior that is unwittingly, offensive to the other: circumstances not conducive to constructive conflict resolution" (Deutsch 1991: 36).

VII. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research paradigm was chosen for the study, as it was desired to explore the phenomenon by close observation of the practices and interviewing to find out the strategies about conflict management. It was only possible in the real-life context or situation as Maykut& Morehouse (1994) say, "Qualitative research emphasis on understanding through looking closely at people, words, actions and records". Within the qualitative paradigm, the case study method was employed for the study. As Yen (1994) also cites in Merriam, "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear evident"

VIII. DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

For data collection, interview and observation was chosen. For this study semi-structured interview and formal and informal discussions were employed to probe more. Through interviews, gathered an in-depth understanding of particular context or setting. A non-participative observation was also the tool to collect data, through which it was tried to observe the head teacher's routine activities, without disturbing the scene.

IX. FINDINGS

During the exploration, many aspects of conflict management were came to observation and understanding, however; two finest aspects of conflict management seemed more dominantly working and effective in this school, which were the sources to maintain and sustain an effective school mechanism.

1) Strict Rules and Regulations and Penalizing on Violation

Students are always expected to follow the rules or live with the consequences. In this prestigious institution, strict rules and regulations for the students were followed and according to the principal, "Stick to your principles because rules are rules to be followed". During the discussion with the principal, she very much emphasized on discipline, rules and regulations. She, a bit aggressively told me that, "Students' rule and regulations are much strict as we don't accept indiscipline, and we are always strict for it, rules and regulations are final and binding". Principal further elaborated that, "putting off or avoiding issues may make matters worse", so we try to solve the problems at its initial stages. The penalty (a form of conflict management) for the violation of rules is much interesting and worth to mention here. On the violation 'minus marking' has been introduced and the class teacher maintains the record, and these markings of-course affect the final grades. Because of this rule, the conflicts rate is very much low. School is proud to maintain the strict rules as principal told us that, they don't want to jump to the modern ways of teaching and management abruptly and blindly. All the teachers and management along with the principal must have the educational priorities for the

school, but maintaining the discipline, making every student follow the rules is the priority number one. These rules and regulations were displayed in the campus on visible places with the highlighted fonts. Parents were also taken in loop about the rules during the admission process. So; this was identified as an approach to strict the students to abide by the rules, else be ready for penalty.

During the observation, students behavior and respectable social interaction with fellow students, teachers and with the visitors was very much evident of excellence in social relationships while the honor boards displayed in the school campus were the evidences of academic excellence of this school. Hence it is stated with confidence that competence in conflict resolution skills can also lead to the increased social and academic achievements in the short run and a more harmonious world in the long run.

2) Students Council – Empowered Stakeholders

There are always many allies and collaborators out there who can help on this journey of conflict management at school level. School has an excellent and active Students' Council including Principal, prefects of all sections, behavior councilor, cleanliness councilor and all these try to solve the problems if arise. Principal is heading this council and the rest are mostly students so they have also been empowered to resolve their own problems.

Likewise, every section has a semi-independent head teacher, who works to smoothen the atmosphere of the section which contributed to the overall environment and culture of the school. Principal explained that she has motivated the Students' Council to think before action. This is a crucial principle in working with conflicts. If your intention is to intervene in conflicts then try to influence for the better(Fisher, S. 2003).

X. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The selection of the single case study design naturally brings many limitations as far as the generalization of the result of the study is concerned. However, by understanding something about this particular case more in depth, we might eventually learn something about more general phenomena. The findings of this study cannot be generalized on the whole population because the study is limited to one school only.

The school was running in a very systematic way and my visit to school was also taken very formally. So to collect data, I couldn't create an atmosphere (actually, being treating as a guest, I was not in a position to freely wander around the school) to discuss and interview in the most natural settings, but all became very much 'formal'.

XI. CONCLUSION

Concluding this paper, which advocates two approaches to manage conflicts at school level are to follow strict rules and regulations and penalizing on violation or simply saying that follow the rules or live with the consequences, seemed a first priority in the school which cannot be tolerated in any case. Principal and all the staff are stick to

the rules because they perceive that "putting off or avoiding issues may make matters worse", so they try to solve the problems at its initial stages. This approach has proved an excellent conflict management in the school and consequently the excellence in social relationships can be observed and increased academic achievements can witnessed.

Secondly, empowering the stakeholders to resolve their own problems by their-selves has been an excellent strategy to manage conflicts.However, there might be a great challenge for the school in future. The coming years will show more remarkable changes for which the school will have to gear itself to show 'some' flexibility in the rules and regulations. School is doing very well in terms of conflict management by strictly following the rules, but sometimes we have to show some flexibility.

Conflict is characterized by perceived differences and negative emotional states. The issues in conflict can be thought of as tangible and intangible – as needs or beliefs. Conflict often results in destructive ends, but it doesn't have to be this way. Collaboration and compromise are usually available as alternatives in a conflict situation. School is exercising the same, but a bit more compromise would also be helpful.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Darvesh Karim
- M.Ed. (Aga Khan University –Institute for Educational Development in 2009 – Educational Leadership and Management)
- M. A (Political Science from Karachi University)
B.Ed. (Allama Iqbal Open University)
- B.A (Karachi University)
- Computer Courses (Various Institutions)
- Three Cambridge IT Awards (Cambridge University through British Council Islamabad).

My educational journey as a teacher starts almost 18 years back in 1997, when I had initiated a computer institution – High Mountains Computer Institute - HMCI – in Karimabad Hunza as a pioneer institute in the valley to impart modern technological skills and knowledge which I had gained in Karachi during my study, to the young generation of the area.

While managing the said computer institution, I got an offer from the management of Hasegawa Memorial Public School Karimabad Hunza in 1999 which is a well reputed English medium school, to join as a (computer) teacher. I accepted the offer and my initial appointment with the said school was as a teacher, then promoted and assigned administrative tasks as an admin officer along-with my casual teaching and finally positioned as Principal of the school. During this period (1999 – 2007), I endeavored to gain insights into the students' learning psychology from in-class and off-class communications with them so as to bring something new for each lesson and I gained much experience of school leadership and management.

However, the origin of my intense interest in education, an interest which has now evolved into an aspiration and a career in the field, happened during my undergraduate studies (B.Ed). A workshop facilitated by the two young graduates from AKU-IED changed my understanding of education and, together with it, the course of my life as well. Those graduate students were young, vigorous, and highly intelligent, demonstrating impressive teaching expertise. In particular, I was fascinated by their unique teaching methodology which they had flourished at AKU-IED. Through their teaching I came to realize that education should be dominated by advanced concepts, assisted by effective teaching strategies, both of which are vitally important for bringing out a greater social role from education. Education represented for me a field in which I can achieve more satisfying personal development. So, a strong inner desire and a question aroused in my mind at the time that will I be fortunate enough to get a chance to study at AKU-IED, so that I could be able to transform myself to a professional in education like these two young fellows?

With this inspiration and particularly the university's powerful pedagogical resource, vibrant intellectual atmosphere and a comprehensive curriculum, (I had heard about) I was very much eager to get a chance of studying at AKU-IED. The year 2007 proven itself the luckiest year for me, when I was selected for the M.Ed course at AKU-IED and I assume it the fulfilment of my inner desires and the response to my earlier question which was eagerly aroused in my mind. My option for Educational Leadership and Management course was motivated by my strong interest in the application of modern teaching and leading methodologies and educational management institutions and especially the integration of information technology, in the field of education and in the nature of a series of revolutionary changes resulting thereof. My final thesis as an M.Ed. student is also on the same line which is exploring head and deputy head teachers' attitude towards using computers in education.

Currently I am working as a Senior Instructor at Professional Development Centre North, Aga Khan University, Gilgit for last seven years and facilitate various courses at the institution for the teachers, community leaders, SMSs and for mother support groups.