ABSTRACT
          This report summarizes research findings concerning
three types of conflict common in schools: structural conflict, group
conflict, and cognitive conflict. Structural conflict arises out of
the organizational structure. Corwin found that as schools become
more complex, authority problems and teacher administrator conflicts
rise. He also found that structures that allow the expression of
minor conflicts minimize major conflicts. Group conflict arises from
the friction and competition among groups. Blake and Mouton found
that loyalty to a group distorts perceptions of another group's point
of view. Sherif contended that intergroup conflict can be minimized
by introducing goals that only can be attained by the cooperation of
all groups. Cognitive conflict is conflict resulting from cognitive
differences or differences in the way people interpret or use
information. Brehmer contended that simple nonrational cognitive
differences can sometimes develop into full-scale conflict. Hammond
and others found that reducing cross-cultural conflict is difficult
because of differences in past experience, psychology, or social
background. These studies suggest that principals might reduce
conflict by tolerating expression of minor conflict, minimizing the
number of administrative subunits, embracing goals desired by all
groups but not attainable by a single group, and identifying
cognitive differences that may cause conflicts. (Author/JM)

RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

Managing Conflict

The chief delight of a child's kaleidescope is that each turn of the tube throws a finite number of bits of colored glass into a seemingly infinite variety of shapes and colors. The metaphor is an apt one for the problem of conflict management in the public schools. Every turn of the tube provides a different perspective on the problem.

For political scientists, conflict results from competing for influence; for economists, conflict results from scarce resources; for organizational theorists, conflict arises from faulty management procedures; for psychologists, conflict is fostered by personal motives. As different as they seem, these are all current approaches to the phenomenon of conflict.

For an issue that is of such concern to the school district—an issue often discussed in educational journals—surprisingly little research exists on conflict management. Almost no studies have been conducted in the public schools. In fact, the notion that the ambiguous phenomenon of conflict is amenable to empirical analysis is fairly recent.

Evidence

Conflict is so general a term as to be almost meaningless. It describes everything from marital disputes to international warfare. Only when another descriptive term is applied can we begin to focus on the research that is of most importance to secondary school principals.

Of the many types of conflict, and from among the many different empirical approaches, we have selected three types of conflict research that seem most applicable to schools: structural conflict, group conflict, and cognitive conflict. These types are not exclusive of each other but exist simultaneously in all schools.

Structural Conflict. Even though organizations are intended to coordinate functions and reduce tensions, there is reason to believe, as Corwin (1969) suggests, that "some conflict might be expected to be related to the organizational structure itself."

In his survey of routine staff conflict in twenty-eight public schools, Corwin selected five organizational characteristics to serve, as his variables: *structural differentiation* (the number of administratively distinct but functionally interdependent subunits), *participation by subordinates in the authority system*, *regulating procedures* (rules, supervision), *staff heterogeneity and stability* (faculty age, faculty additions), and *interpersonal structure* (social contact outside of school, lunching patterns). Corwin gathered questionnaires and interviews from over seven hundred teachers in three states and computed the correlations between these five variables and ten indices of conflict.

The survey's conclusions reinforce traditionally accepted beliefs about the connection between organizational complexity and conflict. As the school becomes more structurally differentiated (that is, as it has more administratively distinct subunits), "both the rate of authority problems and rate of conflict between teachers and administrators increase." Conflicts between these

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groups also increase with school population.

As teacher participation in the authority system increases, so does the number of minor disputes between faculty and administrators. However, the number of major disputes declines; leading Corwin to theorize that regular faculty participation prevents the aggravation of minor disputes into major ones. Standardization of procedures and emphasis on rules correlate predictably with rates of severe disagreement and heated discussions.

Corwin concludes that the variables of size, structural differentiation, and staff heterogeneity contribute to organizational strain, while cohesive peer relations and participation in the authority system increase conflict only if it is already present.

In a more indepth report of his findings, Corwin (1966) draws a number of conclusions about types and distribution of conflict and some additional factors that influence it.

Nearly half of all conflict occurred between teachers and administrators. Of these conflicts, nearly half (the largest category) were described as conflicts over authority. Twenty percent of all conflicts were over scheduling and the distribution of resources. Conflicts involving values, structural change, and rewards constituted only 7 percent of the conflicts.

Contrary perhaps to traditional beliefs, the "ratio of conflicts reported between teachers and administrators diminishes . . . in schools with more union members." However, as in the case with teacher participation in the authority system in general, the level of minor disagreements increases. Apparently the grievance system operates as a kind of safety valve to prevent the building of minor tensions into open conflict.

Corwin's findings dispute another widely held notion that conflict arises out of job dissatisfaction and frustration. On the contrary, a "person's career satisfaction increased markedly with the total number of conflicts in which he had become involved, the number of conflicts with the administration, and open disputes." After examining the profiles of two hundred teachers, Corwin concluded that the teachers with the greatest professional orientations "tended to have at least slightly higher conflict rates than the typical member of the sample." He concluded that "perhaps only those people who are already committed to teaching and satisfied with their careers and jobs become concerned enough to participate in conflict."

Group Conflict. Every organization consists of groups of people, formally organized or not, with divergent interests. Group theory has demonstrated the efficiency of these groups as problem-solving tools; no modern organization can expect to perform complicated tasks without relying on them. Yet the group mentality fosters a sense of cohesiveness and competition that can act as a source of conflict when two groups must cooperate on a task. Sherif notes that an in-group endows itself with "positive qualities which tend to be praiseworthy, self-justifying, and even self-glorifying," while it projects "hostile attitudes and unfavorable stereotypes in relation to the out-group."

Blake and Mouton demonstrate that the first casualty of group

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interaction is objectivity. In an experiment they gave twenty groups a policy problem and told them that their performance would provide an "indication of their effectiveness as a problem-solving unit." Upon completion of the task, the groups were paired off and asked to exchange their results and evaluate each other's solutions. "Members were urged to increase their understanding of the position of the other group by noting similarities and differences between it and their own."

The results indicate that loyalty to the group distorts comprehension. "Members perceive points they share in

common with a competitor as distinctly their own." The determining factor appears to be loyalty to the group.

Sherif contends that intergroup conflict can be minimized by the introduction of superordinate goals, that is, goals that are "compelling and highly appealing to members of two or more groups in conflict but which cannot be attained by the resources and energies of the groups separately." As an experiment, Sherif created two independent groups with their own norms and hierarchies. Conflict was produced between the groups by having them engage in activities that allowed only one winner. The result was the development of unfavorable attitudes and stereotypes toward members of the opposite group. After instituting superordinate goals, researchers noted a decrease in hostilities.

Cognitive Conflict. Theories like those discussed above presume that conflict is primarily a conflict of interests. When resources are scarce or when individuals see their interests threatened, they will react. Conflicts of this nature could presumably be resolved by convincing groups or individuals that their interests lie in a mutual reduction of conflict between them. Inherent in these theories is the belief that altering motivation will eliminate conflict.

Research in cognitive conflict questions these assumptions. Theorists argue that human judgment is only quasi-rational. Decisions are made not only from objective, rational data, but from the experience of past decisions and past training, social background, and personal psychology. The decision-maker will not always be able to "fully account for the way he arrived at his decision." Because the antecedents of a decision are not always discernable, persons who disagree with the judgment will almost inevitably make assumptions about "sinister motives that the decision maker does not want to reveal." Thus, simple, nonrational, cognitive differences develop into a "full-scale emotional and motivational conflict" (Brehmer).

Cognitive conflict is the most difficult to recognize and deal with because its sources are hidden. Under even optimum circumstances—where men and women of goodwill work under conditions of mutual gain—conflict seems almost inevitable.

Using a complex mathematical model, several investigators have probed the phenomenon of cognitive conflict. In these experiments subjects are trained to think differently about the same problem. The first subject is trained to rely on one approach to the problem-solving task, while the second subject learns to rely on a different approach.

After the training sessions, the two subjects are brought together and asked to collaborate on a set of problems whose correct solution leads to the subjects' mutual gain. The subjects are not aware they have received different training, nor are they aware their training was intended to give them only partial success in solving the problems. When their initial answers differ, they are asked to make a second, joint decision. After this joint decision, each subject records his private estimation of the correct answer despite the compromise solution reached with the other subject. The model provides opportunities to measure the difference in initial decisions and the increase or decrease in conflict after the joint consultation.

In one cross-cultural experiment using this model (Hammond, Bonaiuto, Faucheux, Moscovici, Frolich, Joyce, and di Maio) subjects were asked to predict the future level of democracy using two variables: current "level of state control over an individual" and current "extent to which elections determine the government." However, one subject's training favored greater reliance on the first variable, while the second subject's training favored the second variable. Although this procedure fails to approximate a complex policy situation composed of many variables, it does adequately represent a situation where a policy-maker depends primarily on a single fact or idea that he has come to trust above others, an idea that is the result of past experience, personal psychology, or social background.

Perhaps the most sobering conclusion of the experiment is that conflict reduction is difficult even under ideal circumstances: "the reduction of cognitive differences, although definite, is very slow in the case of the Americans, and . . . conflict reduction is rapidly followed by increased conflict in the case of the Europeans."

Implications

Conflict is an elusive phenomenon to define, observe, and generalize about. In the instances when generalizations are possible, they offer little comfort to the principal in search of a consistent policy. Principals can hardly be held to account for organizational characteristics such as size, level of bureaucracy, or level of standardization in their schools that have been shown to facilitate conflict.

There are, however, some lessons to be learned. As Corwin's research makes clear, the expression of a normal level of conflict in the system must be tolerated. Suppression of conflict may be comfortable in the short run, but the tranquillity that results is likely to be false and may eventually give rise to unmanageable hostilities. The principal must accept, if not encourage, a level of conflict that regularly exposes the school's problems.

Forums should be provided for the routine expression of minor grievances. Involving teachers on building-level management teams may be one way to allow such expression. Grievance committees with union representatives ought to be considered a cooperative rather than an adversary process. Most important of all, the principal must learn to recognize that some conflict arises out of a teacher's genuine loyalty to, and concern for, the school, and its students.

Besides accepting conflict philosophically, there are some practical steps principals can take to prevent it. Where possible, the number of administrative subunits should be minimized, because conflict increases in proportion to a system's complexity. Since the greatest number of conflicts concern questions of authority, the writing of policy statements to clarify areas of responsibility ought to be encouraged.

Sherif's study suggests that some of the conflict between groups in schools could be reduced by emphasizing goals that are desired by both groups but attainable by neither acting alone. One of Sherif's examples involved the sharing of new resources. Since

man\ of the conflicts in schools are caused by the division of resources, divergent groups might be encouraged to share their budgets for unusual expenditures like the one-time purchase of special equipment. Money and personnel might be shared for special joint teaching and counseling programs.

Without agreement on even broader goals, however, communication between divergent groups is likely to return to the creation of unfavorable stereotypes and the loss of objectivity. Principals probably should avoid fostering group mentality even if the groups are engaging in only "friendly" competition. Whenever groups do meet, they will have to be prodded to work toward broad, all-encompassing goals.

The most paradoxical results emerge from research in cognitive conflict. One traditional view challenged by these research findings is the assumption that all parties to a conflict are motivated by conscious loyalties. Principals are loyal to a management ideology; teachers are loyal to a classroom teaching ideology. Conflict between them is generally explained as a conflict of interests. According to this explanation, failure to agree is a result of motivational factors: bad faith, insincerity, stubbornness, or hypocrisy.

But Hammond warns that we may "have been too quick to assign our failure to settle disputes to such non-cognitive factors as motivational differences." Conflict occurs even in situations of mutual gain for both parties simply as the result of cognitive differences, that is, differences in the ways people interpret and utilize information before making decisions. Conflict often occurs as the result of simply not being able to understand what premises underlie another person's decision.

Cognitive conflict is difficult to deal with because its sources are hidden. Such conflict may arise as the result of dissimilar training on the part of the decision-makers (which causes them to view the problem differently). The conflict may occur as a function of the complexity of the problem. Or it may vary with the amount and type of feedback given and received in the problem-solving stage. Cognitive conflict is certainly responsible for both minor and major misunderstandings—from issues of student discipline or resource allocation to questions of curriculum and educational philosophy. In dealing with all conflicts the principal must exercise careful discernment to identify the cognitive factors that may be present. Learning to listen to people—encouraging them to express their feelings and perceptions—may well be essential to the prevention and diagnosis of conflict.

It is probable that these three types of conflict overlap and share important characteristics. Organizational structures create interests and loyalties in the same way that groups do. Group loyalties in turn may be the result of similar cognitions on the part of many people. A teacher's perceptions of the world, for example, may be different from a principal's view because of intervening social, political, and economic factors, to the extent that a true cognitive difference is created between them.

Differences this basic in human perception lead Brehmer and Hammond to conclude that "special aids" may be necessary to help the limited human intellect cope with conflict. But the aids they recommend—computer programs—are some time in the future. Until then, principals must be content to cope with conflict in less than perfect, human ways.

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