TOWARDS A CULTURE OF SUSTAINABLE CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND MANAGEMENT IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: THE CASE OF GWERU DISTRICT.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was aimed at finding out whether a culture of sustainable conflict transformation and management existed in Zimbabwean Primary Schools. The need for conflict transformation and management in Zimbabwean school was spearheaded by the President’s office launching workshops for high level personnel in the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture as from the year 2002. At the International level the need for conflict transformation and Management in schools was realized as way back as 1991 in the United States of America. The study was delimited to the primary schools on the basis that if you intend to transform society catch the children when they are still young. It was a qualitative study which employed the ethnographic and systems designs. It was undertaken through focus group discussion, open ended questionnaires and in depth interviews. Respondents to the study included 234 teachers, 100 children and one District Education Officer (DEO). It was found that the present practices in classrooms and schools were not conducive for conflict transformation and management. The study also revealed that there were weak structures for promoting conflict transformation and management. The study recommended, inter-alia, training in peer meditation and change from emphasis on competition to co-operation and collaboration.

Key Words: Conflict transformation, Conflict Management, Culture, Sustainable Development.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is inevitable at all levels of human behaviour. In a world of finite resources and multiple ideas or beliefs conflict is an inevitable product of opposing actions and values (Sellman, 2003; Kretner and Kinicki, 1997; Jandt, 1985; Deutsch, 1973 and Ferguson, 1977). What the above implies is that instead of striving to get rid of conflict it is pertinent that it be transformed and managed to meaningful levels. If conflict is managed and transformed it enjoys the following advantages: presents opportunities for learning or improved efficiency, develops the skills of communication, opens up important issues or highlights problems, develops trust, relieves anxiety, suspicion and stress (Rawlings,1996). These bring about sustainable development. If proper conflict transformation and management mechanisms are instituted, heads of school and teachers are left with more time to attend to their core business of administration and teaching respectively and this tends to greatly improve pupil performances and relations (Caufield, 2000). Sound conflict transformation and management should have a spill over effect into the community. Community members will experience improved relations and that in turn will lead to concentration on economic activities that will lead to greater productivity and will also lead to cooperation and collaboration in whatever activities they are undertaking leading to sustainable development. There is therefore need to have classroom management practices, school management practices and school structures that support conflict transformation and management. If conflict is not managed well destructive characteristics of conflict namely creation of fear and neurosis, lowering confidence and aggression and
violence (Rawlings, 1996) occur. These do not augur well for sustainable development. 

The researchers have been primary school teachers and heads for so many years and have realized that numerous conflicts occur among pupils, among teachers and pupils and among teachers and members of the community. These have been caused by, among other things, shared resources, differences in perceptions and values, individual differences, a lot of competition, gossip, prejudice and violation of human rights. Those who handled the conflict lacked training on how to transform and manage the conflict and hence employed short fix solutions which worsened the conflict and sometimes resulting in the conflict from the school spreading into the community worsening relations and leading sometimes to community members not functioning collaboratively when the need arose. Discussions with some teachers also revealed the issues mentioned above were true that is the numerous conflict and the numerous causes.

Issues of child abuse in primary schools have been reported in Zimbabwe primary schools as exemplified by a case of a female deputy head who was reported flirting with a pupil aged 16 (Daily News, October 27, 2012), a primary school teacher who fondled breasts of a pupil (Chronicle, November 22, 2012) and a primary school teacher who was reported as having raped nine primary school pupils (Masvingo Star, December 3-9, 2012). Such cases could be greatly reduced if a culture of conflict transformation and management is existence in the primary school.

The President’s office realized the polarized nature of society and launched conflict transformation and management workshops for higher level officials in the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture beginning in the year 2002 and ending in 2006 (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2006). It was intended that these would in turn train District officials who would cascade the training to heads and teachers subsequently. Up to date not much has been done.

It would appear that insufficient research has been undertaken on conflict transformation and management particularly in the primary schools. This study wishes to explore whether a culture of conflict transformation and management exists in the primary schools of Gweru District, Midlands Province of Zimbabwe.

The questions that guided this study were:

1) How can classroom management practices promote a culture of conflict transformation and management that will lead to sustainable development?

2) How can school management practices promote a culture of conflict transformation and management that will ultimately enhance sustainable development?

3) To what extent do primary schools have school structures that support a culture of conflict transformation and management?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Conflict Research Consortium (1997) views conflict transformation as not simply eliminating or controlling conflict but recognizing and working with its dialectic nature. This implies that since social conflict is naturally created by humans who are involved in relationships the relationships change when it occurs so on its own it can have destructive consequences can be modified or transformed so that self – images, relationships and social structures improve as a result of conflict. Conflict Research Consortium (1997) indicates that conflict management is a long term process directed to resolution of conflict.

Culture is derived from the German word Kultur which means civilization and a cultured man was synonymous with a civilized man (Ezewu, 1983). This implies that a civilized man must have been processed and naturalized in his or her culture which shows that culture is a society’s body of customs, beliefs and social institutions.

Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993:92) cite Simirach’s definitions of culture as “a set of understandings or meanings shared by a group of people”. This definition implies perspectives, values, assumptions, and beliefs shared by a group of people

Development according to Wilson and Woods (1982:12) is “a multidimensional process involving both quantitative and qualitative improvements in society…not simply more output, but fundamental changes in society including improvements in social, economic administrative and spatial organization of activities”. Development aims at alleviation of basic poverty, the provision of adequate employment opportunities and lessening of glaring inequalities (Todaro, 1982). These views on development are adopted in this study.
Whole school approaches to tackling violence in schools have been found to yield good results (Salisbury and Jackson, 1996). Schools need to examine the relationship between aggressive behaviour and their organization, policies, discipline and teaching styles. Nelson, Martella and Marchand – Martella (2012) suggest four components of the school wide programme namely; ecological arrangements of common areas of the school that is hallways, cafeteria, rest rooms and playground; establishment of clear and consistent behavioural expectations; active supervision of common area routines to prevent disruptive behavior from occurring and to respond effectively when it does occur and use of empirically validated disciplinary response policies and procedures by classroom supervisors in order to stabilize how staff members respond to problem behaviours in classrooms. In the first year of the programme consensus – building and participatory planning should be undertaken.

Another school wide technique could be open classroom meetings (OCM) proposed by Emmeth and Monsour (1996). These meetings are intended to promote communication and personal relationship skills, listening skills, ability to communicate feelings and problem solving skills. They are also promotive of mutual respect for each other’s differences. In OCM children learn to express their own thought and feelings and to develop the attitudes and skills necessary to listen to thoughts and feelings of others. Through these children and teachers increase their understanding of and empathy for each other. Increase understanding often leads to increased respect and appreciation for differences and contributions of all class members. Members of the school community also begin to feel more cared for and to care for each. Emmett and Monsour in Glasser (1969) propose three types of OCMs namely problem solving meeting, educational diagnostic meeting and open ended meeting.

OCMs however require the following skills; active listening, accurate paraphrasing, identification of feelings and open – ended questioning.

The whole school approach, though requiring a huge investment in time and effort, calls for an initial firm establishment and needs to incorporate the consultation of the wider community (Sellman, 2003). The involvement should continue into implementation. The initiative also needs regular monitoring, evaluation and modification where necessary (Sellman, 2003). There is need for dialogue, direction and cohesion within the school which needs to extend to external agencies and the community served by the school. There should be participation in framing behaviour management policy and its implementation as a continuous cycle of application, review and modification (Daniels et al, 1998).

Regarding participation a variety of strategies could be used. These could include quality circles (Robbins, 1993), informal methods (Beach, 1980), committees (Appleby, 1994), democratic centralism structures (Gwarinda, 1993) and suggestion boxes (Appleby, 1994).

In this participation influential members of the school community should give on-going support to whole school cultural change needs. Sufficient commitment to change is necessary. When this commitment is available reduction of violent incidents could be seen within a year but change is less immediate at secondary schools (Sharp and Thompson, 1994).

The issues to be attended to are community relationship, value, organization, environment, curriculum and training.

The supportive environment includes the following, according to Cohen (1995):

- Cooperation between school and community in developing policies.
- Values of co-operation and non-violence, which permeate all school relationships and teaching styles.
- Principles of school organization and pedagogic practice built upon motives of equality, inclusiveness and non – violence.
- An environment that is conducive to co-operative behavior.
- a curriculum that attends to issues of both content and process conflict resolution skills.
- Pupils being given both the training and opportunity to learn how to resolve conflict for themselves. If conflicts are difficult to resolve they can be arbitrated.

The whole school approach is premised on having clear conflict management policies and procedures (http://www.vadr.asn.au). This would be integrated within school policy areas such as equal opportunity, anti-harassment/bullying, welfare, discipline, occupational health and safety policies. School administration would model effective management of conflict, staff would model positive, co-operative and
collaborative relationships and staff is to use co-operative processes in the classroom. All staff need to receive professional development in conflict management. The school should also engage in partnership with local community organization and groups to develop approaches to the prevention of conflict.

The whole school approach should aim at the creation of a peaceable school. Peaceable schools include transformation of selves, of beliefs, of relationships and ways youths are viewed and treated. This entails a culture of non domination and control. A peaceable school is where everyone is made to feel important and where youths are given meaningful opportunities to explore learning (Caulfield, 2000). This entails how to make decisions that are critical to thinking skills and use of words rather than force to persuade. It also entails a non-competitive and non-hierarchical atmosphere (Caulfield, 2000).

In Zimbabwe child friendly schools are encouraged. A child friendly school according the Handbook for School Development Committees (2010) is a school that; focuses on the global needs of the child, recognizes, encourages and supports children’s capacities as learners, helps children learn what they need to learn, promotes child- seeking, gender-sensitive, out-of-school education and enhance child health, well being, is free from violence and abuse, raises teacher morale and motivation and mobilize community support for education.

Another approach adopted is multicultural education. Multicultural education according to Kasambira (1998:203) is “the educational strategy in which students’ cultural backgrounds are used to develop effective classroom instruction and school environments”. It is designed to support and extend the concept of cultural pluralism and equality into the formal school setting. Such education would place the students at the centre of teaching and learning process, promote human rights and respect for cultural differences, acknowledge and build on the life histories and experiences of students’ micro-cultural membership, critically analyse oppression and power relationships to understand racism, sexism, classism and discrimination against the disabled, young and aged, critique society in the interests of social justice and society in the interests of social actions to ensure a democratic society.

METHODOLOGY

The study used the qualitative methodology. This study employed ethnography and systems designs. Focus group discussions were carried out in 10 urban and 2 rural schools of Gweru District. Each focus group was made up of five female teachers and three male teachers which brought the total number of teachers subjected to focus group discussions to 94. In each of the schools where a focus group discussion was held with teachers a focus group discussion was held with five girls and five boys. Apart from the focus group discussions seven teachers in twenty primary schools participated in answering open ended questionnaires. The District Education Officer of Gweru District was subjected to an in-depth interview. The qualitative methodology was preferred because it acknowledges the idea that different people construe reality in different ways (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Meaning is therefore constructed and knowledge is referential or nominal (Wamahai and Karugu, 1995, Merriam, 2009). Ethnography establishes people’s culture (Sellman, 2003). The systems theory points out that a system is made up of interdependent parts the school and the families are interdependent (Owens, 1991). Focus group discussions were preferred because they allow members of the group to build on each other’s comments and reactions and can help a group of people to come to a consensus (The WBI Evaluation Group, 2007). In-depth interviews have been found to have the capacity of gathering rich data regarding a phenomenon (Flick, Von Kardorff and Steinke, 2004). Open ended questionnaires have been found to be ideal in gathering opinions (Anderson, 1994).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study will be presented following the three types of subjects interviewed advanced at the beginning of the paper namely the school head, the classroom teachers and school pupils.

Classroom Management Practices

The focus group discussions brought out the following issues regarding the classroom practices from the teachers, pupils and heads of schools:

- There was predominately the employment of ability grouping and where mixed ability groups were preferred there was domination of the group by those who have superior ability said pupils, teachers and heads.
The rules that govern behaviour of the pupils were made by the teacher with no consultation of the pupils.

The teacher chose the prefects without consulting the students or pupils.

The prefects noted behaviour that deviated from the rules and no effort was made to get views from the pupils and respect these views said the pupils.

Testing in class is norm-referenced which was intended to give positions and no effort was made to do test item analysis for the purposes of establishing areas where children are lagging behind and therefore taking corrective measures. After an end-of-term test teachers busied themselves by giving positions rather than attending to the children’s areas of difficulty said pupils and some heads of schools.

Lessons were largely teacher centred said heads of schools.

All children pointed out the fact that lessons were delivered as if all children were the same.

Questionnaire reactions of the teachers also referred to the issues that were brought out by teachers in the focus group discussions.

The focus group discussions with the pupils further featured issues like, favouratism by the teachers, use of corporal punishment to resolve conflicts the domination of group work by able pupils, non-consultation of pupils in the crafting of classroom rules, their voices not being heard regarding their views and competition which usually led to enmity between pupils.

The in-depth interview with the District Education Officer revealed that schools encourage competition, use of ability groups and rotating pupils in groups according to their ability, existence of rules which are made by the teacher with little consultation of the pupils, concentration on norm-referencing during testing and the use of corporal punishment to resolve conflicts.

The responses of the teachers, children, and the District Education Officers concurred on what needed to be done to bring about classrooms which had a culture of conflict transformation and management in most instances. They agreed that there had to be participation by everyone in the making of rules, the choosing of prefects and in group discussions.

They also concurred on the issue of de-emphasizing competition and in its place have collaboration and co-operation.

They also agreed on the issue that training on conflict transformation and management was necessary. Some heads, most teachers and all children confirmed that they had no training in conflict transformation and management and that they needed that training.

Some teachers and heads of schools also pointed out that there was need for multicultural education so that children and teachers could appreciate aspects of tribal cultures since prejudice prevailed in some areas.

Some teachers and heads of schools also pointed out the need for inclusion so that pupils and teachers had a positive attitude towards those with disabilities and those who were less able than the others. Children pointed out the need to rotate group leaders for the groups.

School Management Practices that Promote Conflict Transformation and Management

The focus group discussions with teachers and children revealed that currently school management practices were:

- Bureaucratic which imply that decisions are made at the top with little participation of the grassroots and parents said most teachers.
- Valuing competition not cooperation and collaboration. People talk of the need to cooperate and collaborate but the situation on the ground showed competition was fostered. It was fostered when those teaching the same grades are compared for example on how their children pass said most teachers.
- Emphasizing strict adherence to policy from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education which was not to be questioned though it was made without the participation of all stakeholders said most teachers.
- Not taking any regard for the provision of walkways for disabled people and provision of facilities for those who might be in need
of them because of their differences from others said some teachers.

- Showing denigration of those who made mistakes in front of workmates and other school personnel said some teachers and some children.
- Showing gossip as a way of gathering information which might result in others saying lies about other people and hence create conflict said some teachers and some children.
- Favouratism was said to be prevalent.
- Rampant streaming according to ability said most teachers.

The responses from the in-depth interview with the District Education Officer (DEO) concurred with the above stated issues. But the DEO lamented on the absence of a policy on human rights from Ministry. Those teachers who reacted to questionnaires revealed the same state of affairs in schools as depicted above.

The responses of the teachers, children and the DEO on management practices that could promote conflict transformation and management were in many issues similar.

They concurred that democracy should prevail in the schools. Teachers, children and parents should participate in decision making. Even pupils with disabilities should be allowed chance to air their views voiced some teachers. The DEO suggested the introduction of child school development committees who would get ideas from pupils and pass them to school authorities.

Most teachers stated that comparing teachers because of the performance of their children should be done away with. This practice creates enmity between teachers. Teachers will not be open to share brilliant ideas with other teachers fearing that other teachers could use their ideas and surpass them when they are compared.

Most teachers and most children stated that streaming should be done away with. Teachers who were allocated supposedly backward classes did not put their maximum effort. These teachers were in most cases demotivated. There was also stigmatization of those pupils in the classes which were taken to be backward. These pupils were called by various names and their self esteem was lowered.

Most teachers stated that competition should be replaced by collaboration and co-operation. Competition in most cases led to bullying. Those bullied end up not coming to school. The conflict which was a result of bullying ends up in the community where brothers, parents and sisters get involved said children. Some children ended up resorting to unorthodox means of out-maneuvering like copying and cheating during examinations said some children.

Some teachers stated that schools had to make an effort to attend to the needs of various teachers and children without favouratism. Committees were supposed to be set up to look into issues rather than the administration some teachers also stated.

Most teachers stated the need for continuous communication of issues pertaining to the school by everyone so that personnel, parents and teachers would be kept informed.

The Structures which Support a Culture of Conflict Transformation and Management

The focus group discussions with teachers and children, responses from teachers on questionnaires and the DEO’s in-depth interview responses brought out almost similar issues with regards to the presence of support structures for a culture of conflict transformation and management in the primary schools.

Children, teachers and the DEO stated that there were no communication structures like committees specifically for conflict transformation and management. What existed were disciplinary committees which sometimes attended to conflict issues.

The DEO stated there were no committees of teachers and children which could act as early warning signs for impending conflicts. The DEO also pointed out they were talking to heads of schools about introduction of child School Development Committees (SDCs). The committee for parents existed. In this committee teachers were involved.

Most teachers and the DEO stated that schools did not use newsletters to pass on information and did not have suggestion boxes where complaints and advices were deposited. The schools also lacked have structures for identifying the forms of conflicts that occur and prepare ways of how to transform or
manage them. All children, all teachers and the DEO indicated there were no training sessions being carried out in the schools with regards conflict transformation and management.

Most teachers pointed out that schools did not have facilities for differentiated needs of the children. The respondents all agreed the above structures were necessary.

DISCUSSION

Discussion was tackled under the three areas namely classroom management practices and conflict transformation and management, school structures that support a culture of conflict management and management.

Classroom management practices and conflict transformation and management

Overall it was discovered that much of the classroom practices did not support a culture of conflict transformation and management. Most of the practices did not agree with the practices put forward by Cohen (1995) as cited by Sellman (2003) that is an environment supportive of values of cooperation, principles of school organization and pedagogic practices built upon motives of equality and inclusiveness. Cooperation according to Coleman and Deutsch (2001) has been found to develop in students greater commitments, helpfulness and caring for each other regardless of differences in ability level, ethnic background, gender, social class or physical disability. It also leads to the development of skills in considering perspectives of others, emotionally as well as cognitively. Consequently this leads to the development of greater self-esteem and greater sense of being valued by classmates. This was necessary for developing positive attitudes toward learning, towards school and towards teachers. Children learn more in subjects where cooperation is encouraged as they acquire more skills and attitudes conducive to effective collaboration with others. Cooperation also helps children overcome an alienated or hostile orientation to others which has been developed as a result of their prior experiences. Equity and inclusiveness have also the same effects pointed out above about co-operation.

The responses on how conflict transformation and management could be enhanced in the classrooms were in agreement with some of the advice given by Cohen as cited in Sellman (2003) and http://www.vadr.asn.all. The issue of the need for multicultural education was also emphasized.

School Management Practices, Conflict Transformation and Management

Overall it was discovered that much of the school management practices in the primary schools did not address conflict management. A culture of dictatorial tendencies existed as confirmed by Ministry of Education Sport and Culture (1996). Zvobgo (1997) also contends that the scenario is reinforced by the top-down chain of command and a system of administration by inflexible mandates from the higher levels of authority enforced with harsh consequences for any form of dissent. The practices emphasize competition rather than cooperation and collaboration. This might be the reason why conflicts emanate from gossip. The system of examinations emphasizing norm-referencing instead of how much children have gathered from their learning so that appropriate remedial action could be taken leads to competition. The schools are also resorting to streaming according to ability which results in some classes being labeled as poor. This issue corroborates the findings by Chisaka and Vakalisa (2003) that pupils in low ability classes were regarded as of low intelligence.

The responses given about ways of creating a culture of conflict transformation and management in enabling peaceable schools agrees with the advice given by Coleman and Deutsch (2001), Sellman (2003) and Caulfield (2001).

The Structures That Support a Culture of Conflict Transformation and Management

Overall it was discovered that the structures that should support a culture of conflict transformation and management were weak in most primary schools. The schools did not have structures like teacher and children’s committees. Parents committees were however, available. There was no use of quality circles and suggestion boxes as noted by Robbins (1993). The cooperation between the school and community in developing policies as suggested by Cohen as cited by Sellman (2003) was partially evident in that school development committees existed. Pupils were not afforded opportunity to learn how to resolve conflicts for themselves through programmes like peer mediation. Parents and teachers were not given this training either. Training of parents and all other school personnel in conflict
transformation and management is considered as important by Coleman and Deutsh (2001). This is important to create norms and expectations around conflict management throughout the school community. Parents will end up not wasting a lot of time attending to conflicts but attending to productive economic work that brings about sustainable development.

The finding on non availability of facilities for differentiated needs of children goes against the requirements of Handbook for School Development Committees (2010).

CONCLUSIONS

What has been revealed by this study is that current practices in classroom management and school management do not promote a culture of conflict transformation and management. There is emphasis on competition, individualism and top down policies which implies there is very little of participatory decision making. It can also be concluded that there are no school structures that support creation of a culture of conflict transformation and management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need to train teachers, pupils and parents on cooperation. In training children efforts should be made to dispel the misconceptions about cooperation pointed out by Coleman and Deutsch (2001) that cooperative learning does not prepare students for the adult world which is highly competitive, high achieving students are penalized by working in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups, grading is unfair in cooperative learning and that good students do all the work while the lazy ones get a free ride. It is also important to make school personnel aware that the results of cooperative learning take three to four year before teachers feel well skilled (Coleman and Deutsch, 2001).

There is need for training of teachers, pupils and parents on peer mediation and on issues related to conflict transformation and management. Training could be cheap if it is handled by trained local personnel who might mean each school having a trained counselor.

There is need for Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to have a policy on conflict transformation and management.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should train teachers who could in turn train others in a cascading manner to save on money to be spent on training.

Further research could strive to elicit views of parents on the issues explored in this paper.

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