

Conflict in the school context: tensions between technical and interpretative perspectives

El conflicto en el contexto escolar: tensiones entre perspectivas técnicas e interpretativas

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Abstract: The school is defined as a complex organization in which its relational dimension is explanatory from its operation. In response to this, the research, from a qualitative methodological perspective, aimed to explore from the representations of management teams the plot of conflict in school organizations, investigating the ways of approach, the mistakes that are made, and the role played by the leadership. The results allow to conclude the presence of an attitude and a position in the face of the conflict that is instrumentalized in the sanction, avoidance and accommodation, operating as a mechanism of unconscious and conscious incompetence.

Keywords: Conflict management; Type of leadership; School culture; Bureaucracy and control.

Resumen: La escuela se define como una organización compleja en la que su dimensión relacional es explicativa de su funcionamiento. Atendiendo a ello, la investigación, desde una perspectiva metodológica cualitativa, tuvo por objetivo explorar desde las representaciones de equipos directivos la trama del conflicto en las organizaciones escolares, indagando las formas de abordaje, los errores que se cometen, y el papel que juega el liderazgo. Los resultados permiten concluir la presencia de una actitud y una posición ante el conflicto que se instrumentaliza en la sanción, la evitación y la acomodación, operando como mecanismo de incompetencia inconsciente y consciente.

Palabras clave: Manejo del conflicto; Liderazgo; Cultura escolar; Burocracia y control.

Introduction

The school constitutes a historically configured social organization. From Weber's perspective (1984), bureaucracy is the mold that serves as the matrix of the first modern school organizations. And from Foucault's approaches (2009), disciplinary logic models the internal life of bureaucratic

organizations. Both authors highlight the problem of power and domination as central to the analysis of school organizations.

This organization appears strongly stressed in a postmodern scenario, as there are other conditions that preside over the development of contemporary societies. In that sense, the institutions responsible for the socialization of children “now disappear, withdraw, or simply inhibit and lose effectiveness in this regard, which increases the functions and workload that the school has to support” (Castro, Ferrer, Majado, Rodríguez, Vera, Zafra, Zapico, 2007, p.13). These tendencies call into question the Taylor-type organization, therefore, the type of bureaucratic organization, based on obedience to statutory and predictable rules, is no longer up to the occasion.

In this scenario, putting the school at the center of the change that is currently being pursued by the educational reform and change processes in Chile and Latin America implies an integral impact on its institutional conditions, its pedagogical processes, the management, the team vision of the educational community, and the relationship of schools with their environment. At present, the political discourse compromises the recognition of education as a social right that promotes integral learning and that opens its doors towards an inclusive and intercultural conception capable of receiving, without any distinction, all children, youth and adults who attend their classrooms.

In order that these principles become a reality in all educational establishments requires understanding the nature of the school as a complex and deeply relational organization in which, naturally, the conflict emerges and, therefore, the need to regulate it to favor coexistence and ensure the development of school organizations. On the one hand, the openly relational character of educational organizations, and on the other their traditional tendency to control and bureaucracy, explain the gaps between what is declared and intended; and what ultimately ends up being observed in institutional practices in terms of resistance to innovations or changes.

Taking into account these aspects, this research was conducted, aimed at exploring the plot of conflict in school organizations, incorporating as a distinctive element the representation of

management teams around the conflict, investigating the ways of approaching it, the most frequent errors that trigger it, and the role developed by leadership.

From a methodological point of view, the perspective of comparative education was assumed, addressing the issue in two socio-cultural contexts with the intention of adding to the investigation of the problem: Chile and Paraguay. We worked with 50 education professionals who hold positions of managerial responsibility, who offered their representations regarding the object of research.

N° participants	50
Levels	Primary and Middle
Context	Maule Region - Department of Caaguazú
Sex	Men. 22 - Women. 28
Sectors / Zone	Urban. 37 - Rural. 13
Years of experience	0 to 5 years: 12 – More than 5 years: 38

Table N°1: characteristics of study participants

Source: self-elaboration

A qualitative approach was chosen, some inputs of the social science narrative paradigm were recovered and the subject was valued as an actor in his own process. The design used was a non-experimental transectional type with an exploratory-descriptive depth level (Hernández, Fernández and Baptista, 2010), through the interpretive case study method (Pérez, 2007). The type of inquiry we perform is retrospective and not longitudinal. We focus research on a particular present, 2017, and from there we guide the development of interviews.

The methodological approach required an intensive approach through the use of a semi-structured interview with the research subjects, while the interpretation and discussion of the results was developed from the so-called content analysis.

Development

As Fernández (2001) points out, the school is both reproductive and transformative. This implies that when societies change, but they do so erratically or unpredictably, the school faces the confusion and crisis of what questioning means to its previous way of functioning. At present, social changes have triggered educational demands on the school, highlighting the inadequacy of

the school culture of modernity (Esteve, 2003; Esteve, Franco and Vera, 1995; Vera and Esteve, 2001). Against this, the educational system is stressed in its structure and operation, and in the various interactions that give rise to the processes of human and social configuration. From Vera's perspective (2007) "education is a complex reality formed by networks of dynamic systems whose results are not very predictable" (p.20).

In this scenario, it is necessary to problematize the existence of various forms when it comes to understanding the school from the perspective of the organization: the school as a formal organization (with a network of hierarchical roles and a conception linked to the idea of authority); the school as a ritual system (with informal practices that hide the true ideologies and play a role in the cultural fabric of the school giving it transmitting power); the school as a bureaucracy (linked to the notion of effectiveness while eliminating emotional prejudices, basing order on the system of institutionalized roles reinforced by the use of reason). To them is added the school as a complex organization (where the understanding of the educational cannot be achieved without considering the understanding of the organizational phenomenon). Related to this, the school as a paradoxical organization (with an ambivalence understood as school property by the presence of three interrelated components such as people, structures and resources). And finally, the notion of school as a contradictory organization, given the existence of "gaps between the theoretical formulation and the practice carried out in schools" (Santos, 2000, p.98).

When facing to this these forms of understanding of the school organization, it is important to consider that the new social demands show how insubstantial it is to explain the operation of the centers by going exclusively to a type of functionalist and normative argumentation. The contributions of new approaches have enriched and incorporated an interpretative knowledge of reality and a vision of the organization closer to that of social reality. Recovering this perspective means entering a complex and rich world of subjective meanings where individuals develop and give meaning to organizational practices and activities.

Once we give full access to individuals, their actions and the context where they take place, as determinants of what happens in organizations, we are recognizing the relational dimension as an explanatory of the organizational functioning. "Through them, individuals and / or groups consent, establish or defend spaces of power, intrigue and mobilize to promote their ideological

and practical approaches and, in general, their interests, intentions or objectives within the organization" (González, 2003, p.131).

This relational feature assumes that organizations are places of struggle between competing interests through which reality, meanings and values of school life are continually negotiated, a space in which leaders' actions are key. However, taking into account the contexts and situations in which leadership is exercised is a necessity as well as an urgency.

Both international and national research is convergent in showing school leadership as a critical factor in the improvement of school establishments and ultimately the achievement of student learning, especially significant in those most vulnerable establishments (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006); Robinson, Hohepa, Lloyd (2009); Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Harris, Leithwood, Gu, Penlington, Mehta and Brown, (2009); Weinstein and Muñoz (2012); Bellei, Valenzuela, Vanni, and Contreras (2014). An educational center is not just the director or his management team, it is not enough for them to know what they want "(Rey and Santa María, 2000, p.110), it requires think about people, their support and resistance, the relationships that exist between them, what they are willing to give, among other variables. The above is explained in the meantime, "in the educational institutions they receive, produce and transport every day great des quantities of information, of unequal interest and urgency, by different routes, of different origins and categories" (Carnicero, 2005, p.31).

One of the challenges and elements of complexity faced by leadership is the management of the coexistence and participation of the school community, as consensus is not a feature that can be taken for granted in the school organization. Following González (2003), this implies recognizing that "the existing disagreements between people / groups and their respective attempts to influence the dynamics and functioning of that may lead to conflict, a habitual facet of life in the school" (p.132).

The conflict, understood as a problem, issue or matter of discussion, occurs when there is a confrontation between the parties, and that, in general, trigger oppositions and strong emotional reactions. Generally "associated with the search for a competition, possess a specific social

situation, enjoy a certain supremacy, play a role that entails some degree of prestige, or simply, in having different visions of things" (García, 1997, p. 185).

It is important to recognize three visions of conflict: the technocratic-positivist vision, very aligned with the bureaucratic and disciplinary nature of school organizations, based on the idea that "the conflict and internal dissension of a society are inherently considered antithetical to the proper functioning of a social order" (Apple, 1986, p. 125); the hermeneutic-interpretative vision of the conflict "replaces the ideology of control, with the interpretation of understanding, meaning and action" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 88), the conflict, from this rationality, not only does not refuse, but which, in addition, is considered inevitable and even positive to stimulate the creativity of the group.

Finally, the conflict in the critical perspective is not only seen as something natural, inherent in all kinds of organizations and life itself, but also is configured as a necessary element for social change: "The conflict can basically be focused as one of the motivating forces of our existence, as a cause, a concomitant and a consequence of change, as an element as necessary for social life as the air for human life" (Galtung, 1981, p. 11). Therefore, conflict is considered as an essential instrument for the transformation of educational structures, which is, in short, what the critical theory of education aspires to.

This last perspective tries to overcome linear theories or cause-effect explanations, because "minimizing educational phenomena is falling into reductions that distort the educational reality because, basically, what they achieve is to design falsely simplistic situations without taking into account that it is possible the complex approach to complex situations" (Colom, 2006, p.30). The various visions of conflict are strongly conditioned by the culture of school institutions. Culture that, from the perspective of Pérez-Gómez (2005), is defined as "the set of beliefs, values, habits and dominant norms that determine what [a] social group considers valuable in its professional context, as well as politically right to think, feel, act and relate to each other" (p.162).

Schools, understood as institutionalized human groups for specific purposes, are creators of culture to the extent that they shape horizons of meaning and spaces for interrelation. Therefore, the conflict is recognized as a consubstantial element to interpersonal relationships at school, and

emerges when the educational community is not able to give a positive response and uses aggressive or violent methods or avoids its responsibility. The results of the research process are organized in three sections: culture in the face of conflict, the role of leadership, and frequent mistakes in addressing the conflict

Culture in the face of conflict

Category	Subcategory or unities	Definition
Culture in the face of conflict	1.1 Sanction	The conflict is antithetical to the proper functioning of the social order, which is why it is corrected and punished
	1.2 Evasion - fear	The conflict becomes invisible, it is not assumed
	1.3 Simplification	The conflict is minimized in its scope and implications for institutional functioning
	1.4 Burocracy	The conflict is instrumentalized in action protocols

Table 2: categories, subcategories and definitions associated with the forms of approach to the conflict

Source: self-elaboration

Culture of the sanction and the negative aspect of error

The organizational practice of the educational institution is defined by the presence of a punitive control action that disregards the process of monitoring the actions carried out, which affects the possibilities of identifying the failures of the organization at any time, determining the necessary corrections, and adopt the relevant decisions required by each new situation.

Probably the approach of the conflict from the sanction, the lack, and the error, show the characteristics that define its instrumentation in the school institutions. The latter aspect is highly identified by the participants:

- The disqualification of people compromising their whole being, and not limiting themselves to the conflict situation, is usually issued judgments that only impoverish the discussion and forget that language creates realities (S7)
- A very common mistake is to punish from the punitive and not from the formative, a practice that has been very difficult to eradicate to incorporate new approaches (S12)

- There are leaders who do not control their emotions, seek the culprit or assign blame, attack the person, not the problem. Weakening the other by intensifying their insecurity or threatening the sinking (S3)

Culture experiencing the conflict between evasion and fear

In this scenario the actions of fear and evasion that the leader usually mobilizes in relation to requirements, problems or needs triggered within the organization are recognized as a source of conflict. These attitudes and behaviors in the face of conflict disregard the need to coordinate activities and maintain sufficient fluidity among people in order to achieve an integrated and cohesive organization. Likewise, these attitudes show a rather passive resistance to the conflict as well as the following passages reflect. In the first case it is intended to minimize its presence, nature and size

- The biggest mistake is not to assume the signals that emerge from the problem, with the expected consequences of this, which will be materialized in the non-solution or aggravation of the situation in question, as it is avoided or attempted to minimize (S16)

In the second, it shows the fear that it generates in both a disruptive situation, and therefore defined as negative

- Believe that the conflict is "fight" and must be avoided so as not to "enlarge the problem", maintaining a kind of false healthy coexistence, which is only appearance and causes demotivation and lack of commitment to the school institution (S28)

Third, it is also characteristic not to take care of the problems, letting them pass.

- There is a forgetfulness, sometimes momentary or prolonged, of the established norms and procedures. I have seen dialogues between the parties that evade the problem, do not assume it, nor intend to commit to its overcoming (S8)
- The most frequent mistakes made to address conflicts occur when people find it difficult to take a firm and determined position, even if they recognize the need to do so many times the decisions are postponed and conflicts increase (S36)

Bureaucracy culture

The structure of school organizations shows the definition of functions and activities to achieve institutional objectives, and the establishment of work systems and procedures, however, in practice these procedures are not always used to guide institutional behavior.

Regarding the protocols for action, there is difficulty in aligning these instruments with the requirements of day-to-day life, where the unsuspected complexity of the practice requires implementation capacity with flexibility and openness.

- At present, internal regulations must include action protocols ... agreed, participatory and when something happens, they have not contemplated that conflict specifically, or find that the sanction has been very mild or not appropriate for the magnitude of the conflict (S1)

There is a weak use of procedures and protocols for action.

- Acting by executives in a precipitous, unilateral and sanctioning manner shows the limited use given to the respective coexistence manuals (S44)
- Normatively, a series of protocols have been installed that seek to generate procedures to solve the conflicts and generate a good environment, however, this is of little use when we forget them and do not act on the problem, we let it happen (S22)

Culture of Simplification

From a more hermeneutic-interpretative view, there are serious difficulties in making the conflict visible as unavoidable and even positive elements as a concomitant for the functioning and change in school organizations.

First, it constitutes an indicator of an organizational complexity that is often neglected or ignored and based on its human character, and therefore interactive.

- The tip of the iceberg hides an unsuspected complexity in school institutions that must be explored (S1)

- It is because life itself is full of new realities that pose a permanent change, in addition, where there are human beings and they are related to each other, the conflict arises naturally and we easily forget that (S48)

Secondly, the opportunity that conflict represents for organizational learning is often unknown.

- Managers sacrifice efficiency, practice of *laissez faire* is developed where the most affected are those involved in the conflict ... the community is denied to develop learning opportunities and is inefficient and inaccurate in solving them (S15)
- When it becomes difficult to understand other people's points of view, it is often necessary to integrate different positions of people who see a problem from different perspectives (S9)

Thirdly, and as a consequence of the above, the conflict is emerging as a still-emerging organizational learning space.

- In a system such as education, the way in which conflicts can be approached is of particular concern because it is a task to which the real importance it has not yet been given. Sometimes the exploration of eventual disagreements is not considered, denying the possibility of learning from each other's experiences, a consensual conclusion is not reached after the resolution of a conflict, that is, the creative contribution of the parties involved in it (S31)

2. Leadership

Categories	Subcategory or unities	Definition
Leadership	1.1 Look / perspective imposition	The directive action promotes the vertical demand when facing the conflict and managing the decisions.
	1.2 No analysis of situations and contexts	Presence of a leadership incapable of committing an action of renewal and innovation in a living and changing institution, immersed in a context in profound transformation

Table 3: categories, subcategories and definitions associated with leadership in the face of conflict

Source: self-made

In the line of the technocratic - positivist vision of organizations, the leadership qualifies the conflict as negative and undesirable, acting in such a way to correct and above all avoid it. If decision making is the defining act of the managerial function, leading is a process that begins and ends in decision making, which is essential in times of conflict.

Leadership to impose look / perspective

In this direction, directive action promotes the vertical imposition of the perspectives from which conflict management is faced.

- Acting by the managers of the establishments imposing their eyes and perspectives without attending other positions, and focusing decision making on authority and verticality, disregarding the same coexistence manuals (S8)

Consequently, the vision of those who integrate and participate in the school organization ends up being neglected, as well as their motivation.

- The creative contribution of the parties involved in the conflict is not collected or considered (S24)
- It is not uncommon to find leaders who generate negative criticism instead of constructive opinions that add commitment (S34)

This lack of consideration of people, and therefore the potential of internal agents, translates into practices anchored to the unilateral administration of management orders that are expected to be followed without questioning or discussions, which is why actions of the following type emerge:

- One of the biggest mistakes made is to believe that you are the owner of the truth and be unable to look at the conflict from the outside, the lack of empathy can lead to more difficult situations (S5)
- Do not accept that you were wrong, do not go back in some situations or decisions that deserve to be reviewed (S41)
- Permanent desire to impose one's own idea, as the only parameter of action. (S18)

Very aligned with standardized visions of leadership, leaders act from verticality, bureaucracy and rigidity.

- The lack of flexibility presented by some leaders in the school to adjust their own emotions, thoughts and behaviors to changing situations and conditions, not everything is linear in the development of people (S30)
- School leadership does not assume instances of conflict resolution, there is a dialogue of deaf, it is very common when the parties do not assume what they have to do (S27)
- Sometimes, by adopting uncompromising attitudes, problems of greater magnitude are triggered (S30)

From that point of view the need to understand that organizations are not only constituted by structures, but by complex relational systems that give it its particularity and also its complexity is claimed.

Leadership that does not analyze situations or contexts

There is evidence of leadership with difficulties to promote change and compromise an action of institutional renewal and innovation given the presence of a social context immersed in a reality in deep transformation to which it must serve and respond. Consequently, practices inscribed in the following guidelines are observed:

- Acting by the managers of an educational establishment in a precipitous manner, imposing a position, without consulting with other members of the group, addressing solutions unilaterally and applying sanctions from the authority, defending their positions, considering them as the most correct (S11)
- Most of the time leaders are immersed in the daily contingency and lose perspective on situations (S2)

Frequent mistakes

When analyzing the conflict situations that arise in schools, it is possible to notice the presence of a series of practices, which operating as true automatisms and biases condition the interactions between the subjects, and help explain the emergence of the conflict.

The recurring error expressed by the investigated subjects is related to the tendency to strip the complexity of the conflict, trying to minimize it.

- The mistakes that I have perceived most in schools are that you want to cover yourself by hand, that is, to avoid the problem or postpone it so that the other person can solve it, or that time can deliver the correct solution. Often when something very complicated has already happened and this was just the tip of the iceberg (S22)

Following this perspective we find scarcely rational actions, such as

- Manipulate the other with guilt, blaming another for what has happened (S8)
- The parts that had problems are not found. Let time pass to address the problem. Do not attend in a timely manner (S14)
- Get carried away by the rumors, without the ability to anticipate, it is always believed that there is something personal behind (S38)

Somehow, these attitudes are often stained with the belief that one is always right, therefore, the interactions develop in contexts of:

- Always want to win (S7)
- Impose single-person ideas from the management (S19)
- Mistrust, insecurity and / or arrogance (S26)

Finally, unconscious incompetence is also recognized in the generation and approach of problematic situations, specifically reported in:

- Demonstrate preference, not knowing how to separate or have perspective (S13)
- Lack of follow-up of proposals or agreements for conflict resolution, which is often the cause of new conflicts (S46)

- To divide and to generate grupismo (S17)
- Not understanding what the problem is. People focus on their interests, and the approach to the problem is lost (S31)

Conclusions

One of the challenges facing school leadership is the management of coexistence and conflict resolution. Exercise that is resolved between the discourse of interpretative approaches and the practice of rational technical approaches. Managers do not escape this tension and in their professional experiences they demonstrate an understanding that demonstrates this instrumentation of conflict in educational processes. It is conceived as a problem to avoid, and for this reason linked to a tax leadership focused on the sanction that ends up wasting the possibility of recognizing it as inherent in human relationships, and turning it into a learning potential for the organization.

In the representations developed around the conflict the mechanism of unconscious incompetence and conscious incompetence would act. According to the first, we observe the presence of leaders who, in the face of the conflict, manifest behavior that is not appropriate, and do not realize that they are being incompetent and, therefore, act believing that they are doing very well. According to the second incompetence we have leaders who, although for some reason become aware that this act is not adequate and become aware that they must change, it is difficult for them to do so, because the incompetent way of acting continues in them.

Hence the need to review some elements that articulate the culture of these establishments, and that are manifested in biases and beliefs, which must be broken with the intention of moving forward. Specifically we refer to: openness, teamwork, review of cultural assumptions, and forms of conflict resolution, all of them mediated from an anchor axis such as collaborative culture.

We propose collaborative culture as an anchor because the intention to collaborate implies a better understanding of the variety of new challenges posed by a changing environment in order to ensure survival and prosperity.

The opening appears as one of the first conditions to favor the change of the culture in relation to the conflict and is associated with the acceptance of the other as a legitimate other, which forces us to review the paradigms, biases and assumptions that mediate human relations.

For this, necessarily, it is necessary to advance in the review of the cultural assumptions that make up the organization, an issue that is not quite simple because we live immersed in them, we get used to them and take them for granted, configuring the most immaterial elements of the Organizational culture

From there, favor teamwork, to finally move forward in resolving conflicts. Understanding that different interpretations of reality generally generate discrepancies. Conflict is an ineffective way to regulate discrepancies.

The results of the study allow to conclude the entrenched presence of an attitude and performance, in short, a position in the face of the conflict that tends to relieve the following forms of coping:

In the first place, competing, when the concern is only in oneself, in getting what you want regardless of the interests and reflections of others. It is characterized, then, by a high assertiveness and by the absence of cooperation, a style known as win-lose. Second, the tendency to avoid when, aware of the existence of a conflict, it is avoided at all costs and is not confronted. And, thirdly, to accommodate, when one becomes unconcerned about his own and only seeks to satisfy the interests of the other, does not confront, but yields to what others want.

However, they visualize the need to advance also in the positions of agreement / negotiation, and in collaborating when seeking to satisfy the interests of one and at the same time satisfy those of the other. It is characterized by high assertiveness and high cooperation.

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