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SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF CONFLICT ASPECT IN SCHOOLING

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Abstract

This paper examines the sociological perspective of conflict aspect of schooling. Its objective is to analyse and discuss the fundamental principles which have treaties involving conflicts of interests that exist in the school system particularly between the teachers and the learners. Thus, liberal and social democratic perspectives of conflict theory are analyzed and discussed in this paper. It also suggests the way forward. It concludes that the school is held together, not by consensus over values but by coercion, that is, the ability of the school authority to oppose and contain the interest and actions of the pupils. A study like this would improve our understanding and ultimately guiding our knowledge to contribute in strengthening the survival of our school system for the much needed cordial relationship that is required for schooling our children to survive in the modern dynamic society.

Keywords: Conflict; Schooling; Organization; Curriculum; Strain.

Introduction

The existence of individuals, who deviate from norms and the tendency for such deviation to result from inconsistency in the social structure of the school, or between the school and other agencies of socialization, suggests that the simple structural-functional model is incomplete. The tendency of an individual deviance to obtain social support has appeared so far in the division between the formal and the informal, official and unofficial, onstage and backstage areas of school life. Teachers usually work on the principle of divide and rule, isolating the trouble-maker by punishing the class for his bad behaviour or by arranging the classroom to break up his clique. These create tension which remains when the teachers are out of sight (Flanders & Havumaki in Shipman, 1973). All organizations contain groups that are in conflict, not harmony. If goals are to be achieved, these opposition groups

must be forced to tow the official line, even when coercion as well as consensus is present.

It would be surprising to find any organization in which there was no clash of interest between groups. The allocation of persons to different roles, makes each person learn those parts of the culture which apply to his status. None sees the whole picture, formal and informal. Individuals sharing the same status in the same social structure, having the same view of the whole, will tend to develop common interests which are different from those of other status groups. Even a spontaneous association of friends that play games will experience conflict as soon as a captain, secretary or committee is appointed. Such a group will see things differently from the rank and file. Manufacturers and consumers, officers and ranks, managers and workers, governors and governed will all have conflicting interests and will try to achieve different goals within the organization.

In a school, pupils and staff will see the same things in different ways. They will come to school from different backgrounds, with different tastes, experiences and prospects, and will want to satisfy different needs. Inevitably staff will exercise their power to ensure that they get their way, but this often means overcoming the resistance of the children. An official culture will exert power over groups of pupils with different values.

Theoretical Perspective

This paper uses the liberal and social democratic perspectives as the baseline for discussion on conflict aspect of schooling. The perspective is that education either does not or could function for the benefit of the society as a whole. Therefore, conflict aspect of schooling is as well a societal problem (functionalist view) or whatever affects the school, affects the society. Haralambos & Horborn (2006) upheld the views of Bowles & Gintis (1976) that there is close 'correspondence' between the social relationship which governs interaction in the work place and the social relationship of the education system. Liberal and social democratic perspective accepts the view that there are limitations in the education system, but they specify the ways in which they could be altered or improved. They place emphasis on the hidden curriculum of the school system. The personnel in the workforce are expected to possess the right personality, attitude, knowledge and values that would ensure quality output. Quality assurance in the education system would require adequate training for skill acquisition on the part of teachers and other members in the workforce.

Haralambos & Horborn (2006) making reference to Bowles & Gintis (1976) stated that the education system uses the hidden curriculum to achieve

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its objectives in resolving conflicts in schooling. This implies, placing emphasis on the organization process of the school system. It would involve the examination of the relationship that exists between the teachers and the learners at the interactive level in the classroom. At this stage, the emphasis would not be on the contents of the lessons taught or on the examination that the learners take. It would be based on the correspondence relationship between the learners and the organized interactive activities of the schooling system.

Schools and teachers of today are required to create conducive atmosphere, healthy relationship, free and fair inter-personal relationship between them and the society, community, home and the learners. The hidden curriculum through which the school and teachers use their knowledge, professional skills and methods, plays a significant role in addressing conflicts in schooling. It is on this premise that the liberal and social democratic perspectives are used to guide this study.

The Areas of Conflicts in Schooling

The fact is that, whatever conflict that goes on in the education system has its influence on the learners, the home, community and the society in general. Thus, areas of conflicts in schooling are many and some of them are identified hereunder. These include:

- **Sharing of common norms and values:** In school, students are drawn from different cultural backgrounds and made to stay and live together. According to Bhatia & Narang in Okonkwo & Oguntunde(2007), school is a unit of interacting personalities, a field or social forces, a system of formal and informal control, a special cultural world and an image of the society which it is called upon to serve. Schools are expected to achieve equality of opportunity, development of cognitive skills in students, teach society's cherished values to the young and train students for work (Hurn, 1987). According to Durkheim (in Haralambos & Holborn, 2006), schools are first and foremost working organizations like factories or offices; they are places where people are supposed to engage in productive tasks. Schools are expected to make students do things they might not otherwise choose to do. These include, working steadily and consistently at a variety of tasks that result in learning, such as listening to teachers, writing exercises and reading textbooks.

In school, students are also in conflict with these unofficial **three R's** of Rules, Routines and Regulations that must be learnt by students in order to survive to be in harmony with the school system, but may affect their learning process. Students abandon all their cultural differences in favour of

the school rules and regulations (i.e. school culture). The use of common language also is a sort of conflict in school because of its tendency to favour one group against the other. Students from a well educated and English speaking home, who find themselves in school where English language is the only medium of instruction, tend to be at advantage over other children whose parents are illiterate. Going through school also involves learning how to suppress one's feelings and emotions and to subordinate one's own interest and desires to those of teachers.

- **Payment of fees:** According to Marx in Macaronis (1989), payment of school fees makes the school to break up the society into different strata of two great antagonistic classes of bourgeoisies and proletariat, making it difficult for the lower class when it comes to payment of fees the school charges. This brings a lot of conflict among the students, especially in state owned schools where the indigenes pay less than the non-indigenes.
- **Time and Schedule conflict:** This is common in schools and it has to do with order and control in the education system. The most vital control is time. Things happen because they were programmed into specific time. This means that the major part of the teacher's role is to serve as traffic manager and timekeeper, either deciding on a schedule himself or making sure that the schedule others have made is adhered to. Many things follow from this. For example, non adherence to time table means that a great deal of time is wasted or unnecessarily gained. It would be worse when the lesson probably ended before the students had time to master the lesson at hand. As Meighan (1989) points out, the tightness with time that exists in the elementary school has nothing to do with the quantity that must be learned or the children's needs but represents the teacher's fear of loss of control which is nothing but a weapon used to weaken the solidarity and opposition of the children in the classrooms. The reason being that teachers unconsciously imagine a situation where a teacher is teaching and there is a sudden loss of interest and control of the pupils. The conflict here is that pupils are not allowed to think or act for themselves as schools are structured in such a way as to make learners totally dependent upon the teachers. The teacher is in position to do something in education system. It is the teacher's role to declare what that something shall be, and it is the teacher who decides for his pupils on what to do.
- **Status Difference:** Students and pupils regard their teachers and school administrators as authoritative and as permanent members of the school while the students or pupils are considered as the temporary and ignorant members of the school system. The fact is that the teacher-student

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relationship in its conventional form is a form of institutionalized dominance and of subordination. In this respect, The teacher represents the adult group, and becomes the enemy of the spontaneous life of groups of children. The teacher represents the formal curriculum. His obligation is in imposing the curriculum upon the children in form of tasks; whether or not pupils are interested in life in their own world than in the desiccated bits of the adult life which teachers have to offer using the school curriculum. The teacher represents the established social order in the school and his interest is in maintaining that order, whereas pupils usually have negative interest in the educational superstructure imposed on them. Teachers and pupils, thus confront each other with attitudes from which the underlying hostility can never be altogether removed. As Stroll & Fink (2003) put it, it can be seen that conflict exists between those with authority and those without authority as those with authority (teachers and school heads) seek to maintain status quo while the students seek to change it. The fragmentation of school subjects that denied the learners the knowledge of overall educational processes and placed the learners in different disciplines resulting into class stratification is also an aspect of conflict in schooling.

- **Compulsory attendance:** It is a well known fact that children do not want to go to school naturally. They always want to go to school when they feel like. This can be attributed to the students' dissatisfaction of the school environment and the teacher-student relationship. Students are also forbidden to speak their home language at school. Students and pupils are punished in one way or the other for not attending lectures, or for not coming to school at all, this makes students to develop negative attitude towards school or class attendance. Students also see the school gate as a threat to their freedom; this is because school gates show the custodian nature of the school, telling the students that they cannot leave the school environment without permission or before the expiration of schooling time. By and large, students are punished instead of encouraging them to like schooling by investigating into the reasons for their non-attendance. These impede the liberty and social democratic rights of the pupils and result into conflicts in schooling.

- **Evaluation:** Another source of underlying hostility is the issue of evaluation, because, almost anything and everything the student does is likely to be evaluated and the teacher, of course is the chief evaluator. Evaluation *per se* is not the problem as it is an important and indeed intrinsic part of education system.

The school grading system where marks are awarded for pupils' performance creates suspicion between the teacher and the learners as marks could be manipulated by the examiners. Suspicion could lead to agitation and aggression on the part of the learners. Thus, if teachers are to judge the effectiveness of their teaching and the students are to judge what they know and what they are having trouble learning, evaluation becomes an essential educational approach. But the school interest in mode of evaluation breeds conflict especially the rating that assaults students self esteem and self interest. This places the evaluator (teacher) and the learner in conflict situation.

- **The school structure:** This also leads to conflict. With teacher-pupils ratios of one to thirty, forty or even fifty, the dull and slow learners are often sacrificed in the quest of academic or athletic success. The teacher cannot arrange for all to succeed, as the lack of reward for the different ability categories in classrooms remains a major weakness in teaching. Similarly, one teacher cannot ensure that the needs of all in the class are met. Some individuals will become rebels once the initial promise of the informal, play-centered activities develops into more rigid discipline in the school or in the classrooms.

- **Going to school:** This is itself a restriction on the liberty of the learners and the routines within schoolings are continued restraints of the natural desires of the learners. The very existence of school is a limit on freedom of the learners, that produces clash of interest, even among the most progressive. The social democrats have always maintained that human beings, both young and old, should be free in what they think, believe and say, but not necessarily in what they do. The freedom the liberals advocated is not freedom from physical restriction but freedom of mind and spirit.

The conflict of interest and the correction of bad behaviour rarely result in violence. Conflict is rarely vicious, but rather played out between staff and pupils with agreed rules. The class knows how far it can go before the teacher takes serious action. The experienced teacher ignores much misbehaviour which is irrelevant to his definition of the situation. Only when this is threatened does he take action. There is continual give and take, adjusted to the time of the day or the weather and the subject being taught. As a class starts to go too far, the teacher reminds them that this is "the last time he will warn" or spells out what will happen if trouble continues. But even if he has to punish, it will be in a way which is predictable for the

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pupils. The punishment will fit the crime, the number of warnings given and the customary procedures.

Staff and pupils share common definitions of the conflict situation. There has been an institutionalized recognition by both sides that their difference is to be played out according to rules. After an initial jockeying for position, a compromise is reached. Each side gives some ground, but then their relations are also establishing the limits within which conflict is contained. New pupils or teachers have to learn both these aspects before they feel at home in a school. Both will make mistakes through being too lax or too conscientious. The social structure not only allocates and organizes individual, it tends to regulate the conflict between them.

Ways of Combating Conflicts in Schooling.

Conflicts in schooling can be curbed by establishing good teacher-pupil's relationship in all aspects of the school activities. This would include maintenance of rules and regulations in the school. Teachers should not develop poor or low expectation towards pupils before they are given the opportunity to express themselves. This includes impartiality in enforcing rules and regulations of the school. Again, school rules should not be too harsh. It should take into cognizance of the freedom and liberty of an individual child.

Conflicts in schooling is seen by Meighan (1989) as unofficial three R's of Rules, Routines and Regulations that must be learnt by students in order to survive comfortably in the classroom. Teachers are therefore obliged to conform to the official rules of the hidden curriculum. Students should also learn to cope with the delay, denial and interruptions that accompany learning experiences in schools. For example, delay occurs when students wait in assembly, wait in corridors, wait for their turn on the apparatus, wait for the lesson to start, wait for the teachers to become available or wait to be invited to answer a question. Conformity thus becomes an essential aspect of schooling required of education system.

Denial occurs when students are forbidden to talk among themselves, barred from asking questions, sometimes forbidden to pursue a chosen activity, or denied access to academic apparatus because time has run out. When such liberty is impeded, it is designed to conform to social democratic principle and for the general good of learners. Thus, when the school bell rings in the middle of an activity, it indicates that the classroom is needed by another group, the apparatus are needed elsewhere, and perhaps the teacher's attention is needed elsewhere. These are conflicts aspects of schooling and students need to cope with them in order to survive in the education system.

Conclusion

Conflict in schooling is focussed as the clash of interests between staff and students as they interact. It shows how some individuals were subjected to contradictory norms and resulting into role conflicts or strains. The school was now seen to be held together, not by consensus over values, but by coercion, the ability of staff to oppose and contain the interests and actions of the pupils. Staff and pupils seem to have learnt to interact in a routine that is usually orderly and which changes little as some leave and others join. Schools, like all social organizations are held together partly by consensus and partly by force. Thus, using the liberal and social democratic principles of the hidden curriculum of the education system would ease the tensions and conflicts in schooling as analysed in this paper.

