Cooperation in teams of teachers as a factor limiting conflicts in the school environment

Grażyna Bartkowiak

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Abstract

The school community, as many other groups of individuals, that is of people with different visions, aspirations and social expectations, is not free from conflicts that consequently affect students, the most important members of the community.

This paper develops the issue of promoting cooperation in teams of teachers, building an open ambience for teachers' mutual relations and for relations in the entire school community, for sharing knowledge and for giving support. All these have a positive impact on building up school culture and are reflected in students' relations. Such cooperation prevents unnecessary conflicts, limits excessive rivalry and, in consequence, not only does it help fulfill the school's mission but it also raises the quality of life and fosters the development in the entire community (students, teachers, parents, non-teaching staff).

The empirical part of the paper presents the results of the research carried out in 2014 in a group of 67 teachers from three primary and one secondary school. The respondents were asked to establish the frequency and causes of conflicts among teachers, find and name the barriers inhibiting cooperation in teams of teachers, list advantages of that cooperation and think of possible ways to improve mutual cooperation at their workplace. **Keywords:** conflict, cooperation in the school community

Introduction

It is an obvious truth that humans are social beings. They need others to develop, fulfill themselves and fully participate in life and culture, for which they are prepared by the educational system. To function in the society, a human needs to compete with others (not to say fight) to gain resources that are objectively or subjectively limited. As members of a given community, we have both common and different values, aspirations, goals and behaviour patterns. When these patterns are related to the values we believe in, our behavior is more coherent. If we assume the perspective in which conflicts, apart from being beneficial and purifying, can prove harmful for the school life if they occur too often, probably caused unconsciously by teachers or parents involved in school life, they become a negative, inefficient model to follow for students. In that case, the situation needs to be handled with firmness.

This study concentrates on the issue of promoting cooperation in teams of teachers, building an open climate for their mutual relations and for relations within the entire school community, for sharing knowledge and for giving support. All these behaviours, as I have mentioned above, translate into relations between students. Such cooperation inhibits unnecessary conflicts, limits behaviours of excessive rivalry and, in the second place, helps not only fulfill the school's mission but also improve the quality of life of the entire community (students, teachers, parents, non-teaching staff).

The empirical part of the study presents the results of the research that was carried out in a group of 67 teachers from three primary and one secondary school. The respondents were asked to give the reasons of conflicts between teachers, name the barriers that inhibit cooperation in teams of teachers, list profits connected to cooperation and think of the opportunities for such cooperation in their workplace.

Theoretical considerations

Recent data shows that the rate of conflicts in the school environment keeps at a quite high level. Even though, in the contemporary perspective, conflicts are seen as a natural phenomenon, occurring everywhere where people interact (Chełpa, Witkowski, 1995), in the school environment they result in loss of sense of security and have a negative impact on the most important subjects of educational processes – students (Kuratowska, 2013; Mazurkiewicz, 2011). By impairing the sense of security, conflicts make both teachers and parents close themselves to the needs of others (Byron, 2009). Besides, they create a climate that is unfavourable for creative thinking (Bartkowiak, Krugiełka, 2013). In the pedagogical literature, the organizational climate and culture of school are treated as a significant variable, on which depend the cognitive results attained by students (Augustyniak, 2012; Kutrowska, 2013; Madalińska-Michalak, 2013). Social psychologists (e.g. Gable, Reis; Smeesters, Wheeler, Kay, 2010) point at the

role of shared values and common goals, that is of commonly initiated and organized enterprises, as factors that help reach a greater coherence of the team. School community seems to be a good example of that correlation. The role of values as an indicator of school work quality has been developed by many academics (e.g. Bezzina, Madalińska-Michalak, 2014; Dorczak, 2013; Mazurkiewicz, 2014). They are seen as the key determinants of the school's mission.

Delving into the literature and observing schools, we can see that quite often they promote the effort of individuals, for instance of gifted students or teachers whose achievements go beyond the accepted standards, whereas they ignore the profits connected to team cooperation. Only a few school heads notice the necessity of promoting cooperation. However, they say that they do not know how they could do this in a particular school environment and often they feel helpless.

The reasons of this phenomenon can be found in varied conditions. One of them is the social vision – the vision in teachers and parents' minds of how they should act as the continuators of the attained level of civilization development, transmission through generations, mutual expectations, behaviour patterns accepted in the natural social order, petrifying the structure and organization of social life (Bless, Schwartz, 2010; Modrzewski, 2007). In the experience of teachers and parents, this social vision translates into two life perspectives: the objective, culturally conditioned perspective that is distorted as the result of the distortion of a given structure of the social order, for instance as the result of abrupt social changes (Sipińska, 2012) and the subjective life perspective, determined by the patterns of orientation towards past, present or future social statuses. It makes teachers, parents, students and other members of the school community solve their professional problems in a certain way in the circumstances of shaping systems of values.

Even though the school community is created by students, teachers, parents and administrative workers, the present study will consider only selected subjects of the school

community – teachers, their mutual relations and their relations with parents. The purpose of limiting the analysis to this area of relations was, apart from the limited frames of the study, that they are considered particularly significant and generate most conflicts in school (Mercer, Barker, Bired, 2010).

Considering individual conditions of given relations, it seems useful to refer to the personalistic view on human in education that is based on the following assumptions:

• The affirmation of the autonomy that is granted to every human as a free and unrepeatable being.

• The subjectivity of human which excludes treating him as a tool or an object,

• The legal subjectivity, which makes human have vested rights as a rational, free being, capable of being responsible, self-aware and of self-directing,

• Priming the spiritual life of a person in relation to other aspects of life and to the community,

• Social ties in their dialogue and community dimensions, indicating the social character of human, the realization of I through the meeting with YOU (Adamski, 1993, quoted after Śliwerski, 1996, p. 15)

The last of the assumptions listed above is an appreciation of the necessity of noticing the other human being in the educational process occurring in the school community. The consequence of assuming this reasoning is accepting every member of the community – student, teacher, parent or administrative worker – as its equally important member with full rights and his or her own needs, values and expectations requiring special care. Meeting the needs and values understood in such a way can be done through dialogue. Even though the author of the notion of supporting dialogue Stephan Covey understood it as a conversation based on synergic communication enhancing learning land development in the relations: teacher – student, the author of the present survey believes that this notion could by slightly generalized and applied as a tool to enhance the relations in the communication and conflicts in the relations teacher – teacher and teacher – parents.

These reflections imply the necessity of paying attention to how significant the proper choices of candidates for teachers are in the educational process, focusing on the their values (Hobby, Crabtree, Ibbetson, 2004), their good manners (Szpoczek-Sało, 2013) and their motivation to change and learn (Mazurkiewicz, 2011; Institute of Management Superseries, 2007).

It is an obvious truth that steering and directing one's own actions enhances the level of involvement and motivation to active participation in educational processes of the school community of its individual members (Brophy, 2007). Self-steering and self-directing is, according to the author, the result of three innate psychical human needs: the need of competence (the need of control over the environment one lives in), the need of inclusion (the need of affiliation, of maintaining contact with others) and the need of autonomy (the need of deciding for one's own). These needs should be met and school as an institution that is part of the educational system should create conditions for the involvement in learning and work of the members of its community (Mazurkiewicz, 2014). This involvement looks different from the perspective of students, teachers and parents but all of them make a significant contribution to the educational process.

Managing conflicts, as seen from the school's perspective, is not an easy task for the school head. However, it cannot boil down to the school heads' actions alone (Mercer, Barker, Bird, 2010) because they manage schools not on their own but by creating conditions for cooperation, initiating it and maintaining the involvement of the entire school community (Mazurkiewicz, 2014). The role of school heads, as understood in this way, is connected to the conscious transfer of influence to the team, made up by competent members, which was called by Barbara Kożusznik the phenomenon of disinfluntization (Bartkowiek, 2010).

In the school community, parents, next to students, teachers and administrative workers, play an important role too as they entrust their greatest value – their child – to school. Their involvement is crucial for the efficiency in realizing school's

mission and particular goals (Bobula, 2012).

The considerations of the issue allowed for formulating the following research problems:

1. What are the most frequent reasons of the conflicts occurring in the school environment in the relations parents – teachers and teachers – teachers?

2. To what extent are teachers aware and know of possibilities of promoting cooperation in the school environment?

3. Do teachers – and if so, to what extent – perceive cooperation in the school environment as a means of preventing unnecessary conflicts?

The organization and the area of the research

The research was carried out in a group of 67 teachers from three primary schools and one secondary school. It was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, teachers (a few school heads included) from another 83-member group gave their own assessment of the reasons of conflicts occurring in the school community between teachers and between teachers and parents and then gave proposals for enhancing cooperation in these relations. As a result, lists

of 10, 12 and 11 possibilities of improving and enhancing cooperation were created. Then, using the method of competent judges, these lists were reduced to respectively 5, 5 and 4 most important proposals, basing on the criterion that the statements were repeated in at least 51% of the cases. In the second stage, the teachers were given a questionnaire prepared from the selected lists and comprising 12 statements and were asked to point at those which they believed described best the situation in school. Then, they were presented another questionnaire composed of 11 statements and comprising a pre-made list of possibilities of improving cooperation. They were asked to choose the proposals they would accept themselves. Additionally, the present results of the research are also based on the data from 12 in-depth interviews that were carried out individually. During the interviews, the respondents analyzed the answers to the questionnaire but in some cases they presented their free reflections as well.

The results of the research

Considering the reasons of conflicts in the school environment led to the recogni-

Table 1. The reasons of conflicts in the school environment (in the relations between teachers and between teachers and parents) indicated by the surveyed teachers.

The reason of conflicts occurring in the school environment	Numer of people	%[1]
No information and no sufficient knowledge among parents on teachers' work and involvement	38	56,72
Individualism and reluctance to cooperate among most of the teachers	35	52,24
Demanding attitude of parents	27	40,30
No interest in teachers cooperation among most of the school heads, performing the role of administrators	15	22,38
Other reason	28	41,79

[1]Because the choices were not exclusive (table, 1-5), the total percentage exceeds 100%

Source: own elaboration

tion of quite different categories of assessment. The statements showed that on one hand, the teachers were very critical towards their own attitudes and on the other, did not have a very good opinion on parents' involvement in the school life [Table 1.].

The gathered data shows a varied distribution of reasons of conflicts in the relations teachers – teachers and teachers – parents that were indicated by the surveyed teachers. As it has already been mentioned, the surveyed teachers were very critical towards their own professional group, they held themselves and school heads responsible for the lack of motivation to cooperate. The individual interviews basically confirmed the previously obtained data but some respondents denied that there were any problems in relations and claimed that there was good cooperation in teachers teams. A deeper analysis of the problem revealed other reasons: no tradition of cooperation, excessive workload caused by teaching duties, awareness of the necessity of cooperation along with the difficulty of reaching an accord among teachers, etc. The teachers pointed also at the fact that closer and more frequent contacts prevent an array of conflicts of impersonal character. Even though these statements were not numerous (ca. 5-8% of the statements), they show a relatively high level of teachers' awareness of why such cooperation should be undertaken and promise a positive outcome of actions taken to initiate and enhance such cooperation.

Contrarily to the critical view on the level of cooperation among teachers, the research revealed no teachers' criticism towards their relations with parents. The gathered data shows that teachers tend to hold parents responsible for the unsatisfactory effects of their cooperation with the school environment. In the view of most of the respondents, parents present a demanding attitude, are not willing to cooperate with teachers, do not know much about their work and put most educational and pedagogical obligations on the school. A deeper analysis of the teachers' statements (regardless of the fact that it would be more objective to interview the parents themselves) proves that they blame two extreme types of parents' attitudes for that situation: the traditional one, assuming their lack of involvement in the educational process which is teachers' domain, and the opposite one, in which parents have the attitude of a demanding customer, client or even 'a passive spectator of a traditionally directed theatre play'. The teachers are aware that these attitudes can be the result of life frustration, overworking, mere laziness or lack of awareness, yet they think it inhibits undertaking cooperation between parents and teachers. Sometimes the reason might be 'more objective', namely – parents are not sufficiently mentally and emotionally mature and do not understand their role as partners in the process of their children's education.

As for the possibilities of enhancing cooperation both between teachers and between teach-

Table 2. The possibilities of cooperation as actions preventing conflicts in the teachers environment indicated by the teachers

Type of cooperation between teachers	Number of people	%[1]
Subject teachers meetings	43	64,18
Integration parties for teachers	5	7,46
Demanding attitude of parents	1	1,49
Intercoaching	49	73.13

Source: own elaboration

Table 3. Forms of cooperation suggested by teachers as actions preventing conflicts in the relation teachers – teachers

Suggested form of cooperation between teachers	Numer of people	%[1]
Educational walks	9	13,43
Establishing common standards of solving problems	8	11,94
Peer-coaching	3	4,47
Sharing good educational practices	34	50,75
Recording and analyzing lessons together	3	4,47
Analyzing students' works together	1	1,49
Action research procedure	2	2,98

Source: own elaboration

ers and parents, it is worth noticing that the teachers themselves saw the solutions, which allows us to be optimistic about the development of such cooperation in the future [Table 2].

However, the level of teachers' awareness of possibilities of promoting cooperation in the school environment can be considered quite low.

The surveyed teachers considered real only the cooperation via parents councils or directly via email (which some of the teachers proposed).

In turn, while considering cooperation between teachers, most of them chose meetings of subject teachers. The answers point at the already developed and tested forms of cooperation, highlighting that they served their purpose. However, in the list created by the teachers, what draws attention is that the respondent assessed positively 'the already existing cooperation in the teachers community'. It might be because the actual forms of cooperation were relevant, which should not be depreciated, or because the surveyed teachers did not know how such cooperation should and can look. It seems promising that one of the teachers gave intercoaching as one of the possibilities of enhancing cooperation in the teachers community. This form of cooperation allows teachers to develop partnership, regardless of their position, work experience, etc [Table 3].

Further analysis, when teachers assessed given forms of cooperation, revealed that sharing good educational practices is quite popular with them. The low level of acceptance of other forms of cooperation might indicate that the teachers do not know how to use them. It is worth noticing that the cooperation of teachers via internet was not put on the list of 'novelties' on purpose. As for this form of cooperation, it should be promoted more broadly in the teachers community (studies in periodicals, journals and monographs) and some research on its practical use should be carried out. The role that the school head should play is equally important.

Conclusions

The gathered data, apart from showing the image of cooperation in the school environment and the possibilities of enhancing this cooperation, yet again points at the particularly high rank of educational leadership in which the teacher's role and the involvement of other members of the school community are understood actively.

The school head, by initiating cooperation in the school community based largely on teachers' activity, can prevent potential conflicts or let the community choose the solution that would be the best for it.

That is why it is hard to overestimate the importance of the teacher as the creator of

the current and, for sure, the future reality, no matter whether it is considered from the perspective of the present or future generations. It seems to be a truism to say that the reality is constantly subject to changes. Surely, it changes and will change faster and faster but some universal values in the role of the teacher can still be found along to those that will and even have to change. The school head plays a particular role as the person who influences or even decides as to not only the way teachers are and should be but also the way cooperation is undertaken in the entire school community.

This reasoning leads to the conclusion that creating a school starts with the school heads promoting cooperation: their attitudes to the world, to people, to their closer and further surroundings, their sense of social vocation, their professionalism as experts in a certain domain, and most of all, their manners and high level of morality.

It is probable that such a school head, playing the role of a leader of the school community, would try to fulfill his professional goals cooperating with well selected teachers who join the community to meet their professional, personal, and social ambitions. However, it is important for school heads to be aware that in spite of their formal power, their mission is a social service, they are only members of the community and the value of their work is assessed on the basis of their ability to initiate cooperation in the group pursuing significant and far-reaching goals.

Therefore, in the current reality managing people in school can be done only by an authentic decisive participation of students, teachers, parents and administrative workers. By trusting the other, accepting common values and setting common goals, they become a learning community, which leads to changing the school as an educational institution.

References

Augustyniak, E., (2012), *Komunikacja częścią kultury organizacyjnej szkoły*, in: Czerwiński, K. Knocińska, A., Okrasa, M., *Szkoła, komunikacja i edukacja. Komunikowanie się w różnorodnych relacjach interpersonalnych*, Wyd. Adam Marszałek, Toruń

Bartkowiak, G. (2010), *Kierunki zmian filozofii zarządzania ludźmi*, in: Bartkowiak, G.,, *Psychologia w zarządzaniu. Nowe spojrzenie*, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego, Poznań, pp.167-173

Bartkowiak G., Krugiełka A. (2013),*Czynniki stymulujące kształtowanie twórczego myślenia w środowisku akademickim*, in: Korim, V., Użdzicki, R., *Szkoła w perspektywie jej realnych przeobrażeń. Zarządzanie -Kompetencje-Kreatywność,* Wyd. Adam Marszałek, Toruń

Bless H., Schwarz N., (2010), *Mental Construal and Emerge of Assimilation and Contrast effects: The Inclusion/Exclusion Model*, in: Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 42, Elsevier Inc.

Bobula, S., (2012), *Rodzice partnerami szkoły. Partnerstwo czy co?* in: Mazurkiewicz G., (eds.) *Jakość edukacji. Różnorodne perspektywy*, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków, pp. 297-310

Borbhy J. (2007), *Motywowanie uczniów do nauki*, Warszawa, PWN

Bezzina, Ch.,Madalińska- Michalak J., (2014), *Przywództwo służebne: spojrzenie w przyszłość*, in: Kwiatkowski, S.M., Madalińska- Michalak, J., *Przywództwo edukacyjne. Współczesne wyzwania*, ABC a Wotlers Kluwer Business, Kraków, pp.81-93

Byron M. (2009), *Education, Training and Becoming Critical* in: Freng A.., Byron, M. Fleming M., *Becoming Intercultural Competent Through Education and Training, Multilingual Matters*, Bristol-Buffalo-Toronto.

Dorczak, R., (2013), *Dyrektor szkoły jako przywódca edukacyjny- próba określenia kompetencji kluczowych* , in: Mazurkiewicz G. (eds.), *Przywództwo i zmiana w edukacji. Ewaluacja jako mechanizm doskonalenia*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków, pp. 75-88

Chełpa S., Witkowski T. (1995), *Psychologia konfliktów*, Wyd. Biblioteka Moderatora, Warszawa

Covey, S., (2007), *Komunikacja synergiczna*, in: Steward, J., (ed.), *Mosty zamiast murów. O komunikowanie się między ludźmi*, Warszawa, PWN

Gable S.L., Reis H.T., (2010), *Good News! Conceptualizing on Positive Events in a Interpersonal Context*, in: Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 42, Elsevier Inc.

Hobby R., Crabtree S., Ibbetson J., (2004), T*he School Recruitment Handbook. A guide to attracting and keeping outstanding teachers*, Rudledge Falmer, New York

Institute of Management Superseries - Coaching and Training Your Work Team, (2007) Institute of Leadership & Management, Elsevier, Great Britain, p. 55-59

Kutrowska B., (2013), *Współczesne spojrzenie*

na rolę zawodową nauczyciela udzielającego pomocy uczniowi, in: Korim V, Uździcki R., *Szkoła w perspektywie jej realnych przeobrażeń. Zarządzanie – Kompetencje - Kreatywność*, Wyd. Adam Marszałek, Toruń

Madalińska- Michalak J., (2013), *Przywództwo edukacyjne. Rola dyrektora w kreowaniu kultury organizacyjnej szkoły*, in: Mazurkiewicz, G., (ed.), *Przywództwo i zmiana w edukacji. Ewaluacja jako mechanizm doskonalenia*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków, pp. 23-46

Mazurkiewicz G., (2011), *Przywództwo edukacyjne. Odpowiedzialne zarządzanie edukacją. Wobec wyzwań współczesności*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków

Mazurkiewicz G., (2014), *Przywództwo edukacyjne – ambitny projekt zmiany*, in: Kwiatkowski S.M., Madalińska-Michalak, J., *Przywództwo edukacyjne. Współczesne Wyzwania*, ABC a Wotlers Kluwer Business, Kraków, pp.37-64

Mercer J.,Barker B., Bird B., (2010), *Human Resource Management in Education. Contexts Themes and Impact, Leadership for Learning Series*, Rudledge Firm

Modrzewski J., (2007), *Socjalizacja i Uczestnictwo społeczne, Studium socjopedagogiczne* Poznań

Simeesters D., Wheeler S. Ch., Kay A.C., (2010). *Indirect prime – to behavior effects: the role of perception of the Self, Others , and situations in connecting primed constructions to social behavior*, in: Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, vol. 42, Elsevier Inc.

Sipińska D., (2012), *Personalistyczny wymiar społecznej roli nauczyciela w (re)konstrukcji osobowości młodzieży*, in: Matysiak-Błaszczyk, A., Modrzewski, J., (ed.), *Socjalizacja dysocjacyjna w doświadczeniu indywidualnym i społecznym. Inspiracje teoretyczne i próby pedagogicznych ingerencji,* Poznań-Kalisz

Szpoczek-Sało M., (2013), *Kryteria ewaluacji*, in: Faliszek, K., *Wprowadzenie do badań ewaluacyjnych.Aspekty teoretyczne i praktyczne na podstawie doświadczeń badawczych*, Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne „Akapit", Toruń

Śliwerski B., (1996), *Z perspektywy pedagogiki personalistycznej*, in: "Edukacja i Dialog: No. 6 (79)