

Cultural Responsiveness as a Component of Conflict Management in Secondary Schools

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Current conflict management practice in public schools seldom reflects the varied worldviews and backgrounds of disputants, nor does it often address the causes of conflicts. In increasingly diverse North American communities, this often results in disproportionate numbers of marginalized students being suspended and expelled. Research was conducted in a south central Ontario school board to examine the conflict management practice of secondary school administrators. The language of cultural proficiency was used as a framework to describe what respectful attention to cultural diversity might look and sound like in the management of student conflicts at school. Cultural responsiveness theories suggest that interaction between individuals of different cultures and ethnicities is enhanced when school administrators are able and willing to learn and to appreciate cultures different from their own. This article provides a brief summary of the research and the implications for school boards with diverse school communities.

The research was guided by the following investigative questions,

- 1) According to the perspectives of students, cultural liaisons and administrators themselves, in what range of ways did certain administrators in one school board handle student conflicts?
- 2) How were these conflict management actions responsive (and unresponsive) to cultural differences?

A qualitative method was used to conduct the inquiry. The participants included six secondary school administrators, four students (who attended different schools from the administrators interviewed), and seven cultural community liaison workers. The study used semi-structured individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis with this sample of participants. The questions used in the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were designed to elicit descriptions of administrators' behaviors in managing conflicts with students, and personal understandings and experiences of the participants. Six administrator participants were each asked to describe two student conflicts that they had managed. They were asked to try to select conflicts in which the backgrounds of the student disputants were different

from their own backgrounds. Four semi-structured interviews with students were conducted individually. Two focus group interviews were held with cultural community liaison workers.

The findings from the research concluded that the conflict management practices of selected administrators were generally found to be inconsistent with the constructs of cultural proficiency in research literature. Despite the change in school policies to encourage alternatives to traditional punitive approaches to conflict management, the practice of most of the administrators described in the study did not demonstrate a discernable shift away from punitive practices. With the exception of one administrator, most of the administrators interviewed, and described in other stakeholders' interviews, did not appear to demonstrate evidence of consistent culturally responsive actions in their management of conflicts involving students. When alternative conflict management practices were used, they most often had been added to punitive practices, rather than replacing them.

Relationship-building was identified as a key theme in the actions of administrators that distinguished culturally responsive actions from those actions that were culturally unresponsive in the management of conflict incidents. In conflicts where interviews offered more evidence of relationship-building actions on the part of the administrator, their interaction with disputants and their parents was generally more positive, whereas in interactions in which administrators, disputants, and/or cultural liaison workers described fewer or no relationship-building actions, stakeholders viewed those interactions as less positive and less culturally responsive. The relationship building actions of the administrators in the study were: 1) showing willingness to learn about the disputants, 2) attempting to establish trust, 3) creating opportunities for disputants' stories to be shared and understood, 4) communicating effectively, and 5) demonstrating care and compassion. These relationship-building actions align with the key tenets of cultural proficiency theories. Therefore, the findings of the research support and illustrate the feasibility and usefulness of cultural responsiveness in school administrators' management of conflict with students.

The study exposed the challenges that continue to impede the implementation of culturally responsive practice in administrators' conflict management. These challenges included misconceptions of current Safe Schools policy, adherence to traditional punitive practices and belief systems, and other factors such as scarcity of time and training. Despite these challenges,

the actions of one of the administrators provided a picture of what attention to culture could look like in secondary school administrators' conflict management. This image offers support and hope for a proliferation of such patterns of action. When educators adopt a culturally responsive mindset, they filter their perceptions of actions, contexts, and stakeholders, to allow for greater understanding and more effective interaction with others different from themselves (Bucher, 2008; Cunningham, 2003; Lindsey et al 2009).

The findings of the study suggest a need for information dissemination as well as training to support administrators in their transition to culturally responsive alternative approaches to conflict management. Accessible training for administrators that would explicitly address how to be cultural responsive in conflict management, may help to address the lack of cultural responsiveness generally observed in the conflict management practices of the small sample of administrators in the study. Because culture is dynamic, overlapping and complex, training in culturally responsive conflict management should provide for flexible (rather than narrowly prescriptive) and ongoing learning. Developing the skills required for cultural responsiveness is a fluid, incremental and cumulative process that takes time, lots of work, and practice (Bucher, 2008). Training should allow administrators to constantly examine their cultural lenses, and to identify and examine systemic barriers such as power structures and belief systems in an effort to eliminate these barriers. As well, training should allow for the identification and utilization of resources, such as parents, cultural community liaison workers, and other partners from various ethno-cultural communities. A focus of the training should be on facilitating administrators' learning how to use such partnerships in support of their conflict management practice. Additionally, training and on-going consultative support should coach administrators in the necessary skills of cross-cultural interaction, and in understanding how openness to, and learning of, new knowledge about students and others in their schools could impact their decision-making in conflict management.

These findings have clear implications for increased student achievement and wellbeing. Senior board personnel might consider continuing to encourage (and refine) administrators' use of alternative participatory conflict management approaches, by providing mandatory conflict management training programs with an explicit focus on cultural responsiveness. Inclusive schools are not those in which difference is merely tolerated; rather, they are environments in which school leaders and other stakeholders welcome and actively seek to learn about difference.

Initiatives to develop and transform the conflict management practices of secondary school administrators will further school boards' efforts in making their schools more inclusive learning environments for their increasingly diverse communities.

A complete copy of the study can be found at the following link:

https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/29490/1/Walker_Rosemarie_P_201106_MA_thesis.pdf