Reconceptualizing problem-solving and conflict resolution in schools: a multi-disciplinary perspective

Y.L. Jack Lam
Chair Professor, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Abstract
Engulfed in the rising tide of youth misdemeanors and youth social problems, public educators everywhere are looking for means and ways of restoring social order and ecological sanity to the classroom and the school. While there is no ready-made panacea for the deep-rooted problems, the present writer points to a necessity for improving the contextual conditions of the school to nurture a multi-disciplinary approach of problem-solving and conflict resolution. It is through the breakdown of the traditional compartmentalization of disciplines and jurisdictional isolation. Can the school unleash collective wisdom and engage in a self-renewed process of organizational learning to surmount the growing severity of students’ anti-social behaviors that threaten to derail school reform?

Rising youth violence in schools
As societal milieus become more complex and the traditional institutional tri-partnership among church, family and schools in the education of the young crumbles, the public school alone is confronted with an increasing number of students saddled with a diversity of social problems (Lam, 1996). Reflective of these problems are reported incidences of youth suicide, violence, homicide, abuse, and other criminal offences. They are becoming common topics in newspapers, magazines and professional journals and are not confined to any country or region (Bushweller, 1994; Grady, 1996). More subtle offences such as verbal abuses, misdemeanors and petty criminal behaviors which occur almost daily in many schools but remain largely unreported, complicate an accurate statistical tabulation and distort the magnitude of their impacts on school management.

There are many causes for the rising tide of youth violence. Given the complexity and scope, these are beyond the confines of this article for an in-depth scrutiny and discussion. Suffice it to say, for the time being, that family breakdown, drug abuse, economic issues (including unemployment and poor housing) and poor education ranked top as causal factors (Bushweller, 1994). Accompanying these primary causes are some of the immediate reasons that precipitate students’ violent behaviors. Chief among these is fear and a lack of knowledge and skills in resolving differences. More specifically, students who take guns or knives to school do so because they fear for their safety. They feel “they have no choice” (Vail, 1985, p. 37). Further, these students do not have sufficient knowledge about

Current approaches of handling student problems and conflict
In face of the growing complexity of students’ problems, most educators still resort to the traditional approach of reacting to problems or crises as they arise. Classroom teachers, counsellors, vice-principals, principals and other resource personnel in the school system might take turns to tackle the issues. Alternatively, they might work together as a team in dealing with the problems.

There are several problems inherent to the current approaches. First, few administrators, as some researchers observed (e.g. Posner, 1994), under pressure to “do something” about violence, have the resources or the expertise to assess the extent of their school’s violence problem. The lack of expertise in dealing with students’ problems has much to do with the way principals are trained. Traditionally, educators aspiring to be school principals are exposed to different models of leadership in their preparation programs.
These include the structural functional model (e.g., Hughes, 1990, p. 27), the model of cultural pluralism (Hoy and Miskel, 1987, p. 116), the interpersonal model (Ribbins, 1985), the political model (e.g., Ball, 1987; Blasé, 1991). But as Allison (1996) states, well-conducted empirically-based theory will not itself provide insight into the real administrative work of human action, choice and value. Flor and Troskey (1996) also lament that few teacher-training programs prepare future teachers for the kinds of collaborative work needed to be productive team members in coping with the challenges of the school.

Dissatisfaction with the traditional ways of preparing school administrators lead to some fundamental reorientation of program focus. The move toward cognitive-science approaches to school leadership with central constructs such as problem space, problem structure, schema and the like (Allison, 1996) represents some of the approaches of reconceptualizing the training focus. By reinforcing the earlier arguments of Hemphill (1958) and the conviction of current researchers in educational administration (e.g., Leithwood et al., 1994) that “Problem solving is a productive conception of leadership”, Bridges (1992) has formally developed a problem-based learning for administrators. Such a formulation catches the imagination of both practitioners and university program designers and numerous versions of problem-based programs have been developed (e.g., Katz and Lawyer, 1994; Cordiero and Campbell, 1996). The gap between professional preparation and pragmatic administrative needs seems to be closing at the present stage.

Unfortunately, even as the educational administration program is being revised and improved, a second inherent problem, i.e. the lack of appropriate school structure to accommodate new leadership skills (House, 1980) is encountered. What amounts to the appropriate structure is that in the regular patterns of human interaction within the school organizational setting, members should be given a greater degree of opportunity and involvement in decision making. In the context of responding to the organizational needs in the face of school violence, the structure of the school should encompass such models as intervention assistance teams (House et al., 1990), teacher collegial groups (Keedy, 1990), principal’s advisory councils, instructional support teams and lead teacher committees (Hallinger and Richardson, 1988). What amounts to the so-called “new leadership” skills are those facilitating the involvement of teachers in “self-managed teams” (Conway, 1990, p. 153). Despite years of deliberation, research and advocacy for school restructuring through site-based management (e.g., Brown, 1990; Lam, 1996), it would seem that decentralization remains more rhetoric than reality. The discontinuity between skills-found in-the-training- programs and skills-observed-in-practice can create problems of irrelevancy, frustration and even psychological alienation among all concerned.

This structural shortcoming is not insurmountable. As House (1990) insists, appropriate structural modifications do not need to be invented de novo. Joiner (1987) suggested that task teams and employee involvement groups as described earlier could be used to bring people to work together effectively. By using the expertise of members of the task teams, the best knowledge about how the work should be done can be obtained.

### Toward a multidisciplinary approach to problem solving and conflict resolution

#### A three-dimensional framework

Assuming that principals are now able and willing to empower and mobilize the group, and assuming that the school structure is now in place to allow teamwork to be put into practice, we should be ready to explore the alternative of tackling complex student problems. Essentially, there are three dimensions that need to be considered to ensure that a holistic perspective is brought to bear on the tasks on hand (Figure 1).

The first is the type of student problems to be resolved and the categories are conceptualized into whether the problem encountered is routine or non-routine, and whether there is sufficient information or not at the time when the issue arises. The nature of problems will determine whether the organization has a sufficient repertoire of past experiences in handling the issues and to what extent the fact-finding process needs to be undertaken.

The second dimension deals with the process of problem solving. Basically, there are three distinct stages in the process. Educators begin with the identification of the problems or sources of problems. The crystallization of the problem parameters will assist problem-solvers in searching for feasible solutions in certain directions. Through the narrowing and elimination of less desirable solutions, the final choice for the course of action will be taken.
Figure 1
A multi-disciplinary model of problem-solving/conflict resolution

The third dimension encompasses members of the problem-solving team, which is playing a key role in dealing with students' problems. Included in the team are front-line educators such as classroom teachers who are likely to be the individuals first coming across the issues. The principal will be the one who will eventually pull the team together, involving counselors, resource teachers, and even legal consultants. It is not unusual to have the principal expanding the team to include other stakeholders beyond the school personnel, such as parents, social service agents and probation officers, depending on the nature of the case. However, for the present practical purpose, it may suffice just to confine the team to school personnel. After all, if the principal is unable to ensure the smooth operation of the school team, involvement of other parties may be disastrous.

Dynamics of roles and training
Given the normative emphasis for inclusiveness in the conceptual framework, the school will run into difficulty from time to time when it attempts to put individuals with different roles, experiences and training backgrounds together. For one thing, the perspectives of classroom teachers will be very different from those of the principals, counselors, resource teachers or legal consultants and the languages each of these groups use will be vastly different. To the untrained individuals and teams, divergent perspectives and languages lead to a communication breakdown and a total dysfunction of the team with the result that there will be more frustration than reward when the team is in session. This is not unusual or surprising given that their organizational roles and past training help shape the way team members focus on the issue, define their frame of reference, develop their own unique criteria in choosing solution alternatives and finalize their preferred choice of action. The technical languages which each category uses further compounds the problem of achieving a unifying action plan in resolving students' problems.

For illustration, when "routine" disruptive behaviors occur and information pertaining to the circumstances in which such misbehaviors take place is more or less complete, the classroom teachers, being mostly education generalists, do not have specific remedial strategies other than those they acquired from their training in classroom management courses. Their primary focus is to restore an orderly learning environment (i.e. workable classroom ecology) so that other students will not be adversely affected. In their solution mind set, they normally confine their framework of reference to individual need discrepancies. When it comes to choice of solutions, their criteria are shaped by their role as classroom advocates.
In the case of school principals, disruptive behaviors call for administrative responses characterized by consistency of treatment if previous precedents can be cited. In their search for a ruling on the case, principals are governed by existing rules and regulations. Their criteria for choice are dictated by what seems best or most efficient in restoring equilibrium for the school system.

Confronted with similar situations, counsellors are mostly concerned about balancing collective and individual students’ states of “well being”. They will be preoccupied with locating means of narrowing the detected need discrepancy that might explain why students misbehave. They will assume the role of students’ advocates when the stage of defining “choice criteria” is reached.

Resource teachers strongly influenced by their psychological training, focus primarily on speedy intervention so that the “misbehaved student” can be put back on their normal footing. Misbehaviors to these educators signify that the present approach of dealing with students is not workable and the search for alternative means must be pursued in earnest. It is only when their misbehaved students regain their footing that intra-personal stability can be restored and that teachers can re-establish contacts with them (Saphier and Gower, 1982).

For the legal consultants or educators having exposure to school law, students’ problems are measured in terms of severity in breaking the existing rules of acceptable conduct. The focus is on whether the act of misbehavior violates minor or major school rules or whether it constitutes criminal offence. In the search for a viable solution, the delicate balance between individual and collective rights is being weighed carefully. Among the criteria used in the selection of a final solution, the concern for procedural fairness is paramount.

As one begins to move towards more complex and non-routine problems, educators assuming differential roles and having divergent training backgrounds will be entertaining varying focuses, references, and choice criteria before reaching a solution. Hopefully, the chosen action plan in resolving problems and conflict will be put on a trial run, subject to further refinement before becoming institutionalized in some form of school policy (Lam et al., 1998).

**The necessity of a multi-disciplinary approach of problem solving and conflict resolution**

In outlining the varying focus, references, and choice criteria of different educators, one senses the potential danger of the breakdown of teamwork, as on the surface, there is little commonality that can be readily identified. On the other hand, beneath the apparently irreconcilable terms of references and technical languages that come with traditional disciplines, there is an underlying unifying purpose of neutralizing students’ anti-social behaviors and restoring proper order in school. When we labour towards the common purpose, it should become apparent that variations of perspectives and approaches are actually strength and not a weakness.

Indeed, to capitalize on the differences of positions adopted by different members in the team, we need to emphasize the fact that the divergent perspectives are complementary to and not mutually exclusive of each other. A brief synopsis of causes leading to students’ violent behaviors should provide some common framework for the team to labour on. As indicated earlier, these problematic students are experiencing emotional or intra-personal instability brought about by fear, anxiety and anger. Their lack of inter-personal skills discourages them from venting their feelings through positive channels. The subsequent anti-social behaviors directly threaten the collective well-being of the school, and this highly chaotic person-organizational relationship is generally not to be tolerated by school authority lest it becomes infectious.

A comprehensive solution to the detected problem should address these three levels of inter-related conditions or behaviors. Evidently, no one discipline can offer sufficient insights in dealing with the multi-layered problems. The disciplines of special education and educational psychology, in general, contribute to the understanding of students’ problems through the range of assessment and intervention options that have been developed in managing diverse needs found in exceptional populations. They contribute to the understanding of a student both as a learner in the acquisition of knowledge and as a person in his/her growth and development amidst the complex web of interpersonal relationships in a school organization. But by the same token, through its preoccupation with individuals and their unique needs, intervention programs seldom rise beyond this level to address collective and social needs.

Counselling looks at problems in terms of the needs of the individual with reference to the organizational health. Therefore the role is most likely one of moving the group to work together and to use individual...
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strengths to creatively problem solve in an attempt to find solutions which reflect the needs of each segment of the whole. The limitation of counselling, as a discipline, are prescribed by the limitations of in-depth knowledge of the human psyche and by the blindsers conditioned by the value preferences and culture of the dominant society. Reference to other educators thus becomes desirable.

Educational administration examines problems by focussing on issues of role ambiguity, structural disruption, policy deviation, undesirable precedent-setting, aggravation of collective well-being and managerial dysfunction. Likewise, solutions selected take on a macroscopic concern for retaining organizational stability or operational consistency. Treating problems/conflict in a logical and rational manner, and resolving them in the name of collective good, represents the major contribution of educational administration, as a discipline. But when it comes to the unique nature or causes of problems/conflicts, seldom do principals have specific solutions or remediation for the highly individualistic problem roots. Calling for assistance from the counsellor, resource teacher, school psychologist, becomes a necessity.

School law provides a legal frame of reference for educators in categorizing the nature of problems and in determining the procedures of executing solutions. While incapable of exploring the root causes of an issue, classification of the nature of offences will help mapping the direction to which the alternative solutions should be sought. Associated with the choice criteria in finalizing the intervention strategies, individual rights are to be balanced with collective rights, legal obligations, procedural fairness, standard of care to individuals and groups, degree of necessity for involving law enforcement agencies and the legal consequence of the action taken.

Thus, by integrating the unique theoretical contributions from five separate sub-fields: special education, educational psychology, counselling, educational administration and school law, we arrive at a multiple-layered solution that deals with the intra-personal, inter-personal and personal-organization dimensions of “trouble makers” in school (Figure 2). The subsequent intervention strategies inevitably are far more superior to those, which any single discipline can offer.

Aside from the mechanics of building team spirit and polishing group dynamic, educators, in adopting the multi-disciplinary approach of problem solving and conflict resolution, should realize the need to break away from the artificial compartmentalization of knowledge organized by traditional disciplines. By cultivating free and deliberate cross-fertilization of diverse disciplines, educators have freed themselves from the rigid mindset and set the stage for other stakeholders to be involved in addressing the deep-seated social problems that will help transform disruptive students into serious scholars.

Figure 2
Conceptual analysis of student’s problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holistic Perspectives</th>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Perspectives</th>
<th>Theoretical Base</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal-Administrative-</td>
<td>(Systematic)</td>
<td>Ed. Admin.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Org.</td>
<td>(Rational)</td>
<td>Law</td>
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<td>Inter-</td>
<td>(Social)</td>
<td>Counselling</td>
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<td>Counselling</td>
<td>(Attitudinal)</td>
<td>Theories</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Special Ed.</td>
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<td>Personal</td>
<td>(Mental)</td>
<td>Ed. Psy etc.</td>
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References


Further reading