LESSONS LEARNED IN DEVELOPING A CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MODEL FOR IMPLEMENTING LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION POLICY

By
CHANYA APIPALAKUL
Institute for Dispute Resolution
Khon-Kaen University,
Thailand
E-mail address: achany@kku.ac.th
Tel + 66 43 343 453
Fax +66 43 343 454

ABSTRACT

The aim of this project was to develop a conflict management model for Local Authority Organization (LAO) on developing and implementing the   educational policies in school. Participatory Action Research was employed in a process for conflict identification and solution to enhance a positive relationship of LAO and Basic Education School (BES). Twenty four participated samples included LAO chief executives and members, school administrators and teachers, and school board. The main identified conflict issues were a complicated administration authorization, inflexible budget management, misunderstanding of existing and contracted teachers, noncompliance of maximum welfare and bonus, and nonconformance needs of LAO and School. Face to face honest communication was recommended as an appropriate mean to improve the BES and LAO relationship, particularly both sides needed to listen, acknowledge, and evaluate. Consequently,   the BES and LAO could create mutual trust and credibility for management of the rural community school's education concerns.

Keywords :   *Lessons learned in developing, conflict management   model, implementing policy, and local administrative organization*

1.0 Introduction

When the government's plan to decentralize the public school from the Ministry of Education to municipalities, district administrative organizations and provincial administrative organizations. Much of the authority for education decision making devolved from the Education Ministry to local organizations. In making education policy, these new governance bodies were faced with the demands and expectations of two groups : basic education school personnel and the local administrative organization. (Cogan et.al., 1997). The basic education school personnel, especially, have felt disempowered by this new governance structure due to a loss of education autonomy over education decision making (Sirikul Bunnag, 2005) Conflict often arises when there is a loss or threat of a loss (Fisher, 1999).

This study explores the existing conflict between personnel of basic education school and local administrative organization within its boundaries through an action research

process. This conflict is a long-standing conflict involving a Local Administrative Organization (LAO) policy decision to place contracted teachers into the study school (School A), and change school management according to LAO regulation.

The intent of this study was to identify factors that were contributing to the conflict, to explore facilitators and barriers to a positive local administrative organization and basic education school relationship, and to develop a conflict management model for implementing education policy in small community. Secondly, the study was constructed to bring both the negative and positive components of conflict to the attention of the stakeholders to encourage a collaborative problem-solving atmosphere. It was hoped that a creative problem solving approach could be used in the construction of a conflict management model that both basic education school and Local Administrative Organization could use.

The action research included twenty-four stakeholder interviews, focus groups, field notes, and weekly observations. The analysis of this conflict concentrated on the school personnel, the group that had expressed its discontent with the LAO's decision to put contracted teachers into the study school. The research also include an ongoing literature review to identify external factors that were contributing to the conflict.

Recognizing that the stated issues often represent only the surface of the conflict, analysis of this conflict was based on the premise that underlying the overt issue of this conflict was an identity conflict. Using Northrup's (1989) model of analysis and Rothman's (1997) ARIA Framework this school/LAO conflicts was approached as an identity conflict that had the potential to be transformed through a process of dialogue and reconciliation.

1.1 Overview of the Problem

The study school (School A), Sichompu District, Khon Kaen Province is one of the voluntary schools transferred to be in the responsibility Phuhan District Administrative Organization, Sichompu District, Khon Kaen Province on 29 August, 2006. Under LAO's responsibility, the expectation of better education management would be made by the following reasons; the shorter administrative authorization, flexible budget management, maximum welfare and bonus. The most expectation is student quality as indicated by better performance, after 6 months of school transferring. It was found that expectation has not been made, less freedom and flexibility of budget management, non-equity of personnel administration. This has become the strong conflict and get stronger between and school. The school would like to transfer back to the previous organization, Khon Kaen Educational Service Area 5, has denied to accept the school back, leading to the adverse problem of education administration. It is on urgent need of Phuhan District Administrative Organization to solve such problem, more over, policy decision to place contracted teachers into School A to solve personnel shortage, it is also the first priority.

Phuhan, Local Administrative Organization, Khon Kaen Province. Phuhan, LAO is one type of the local administration, of which the status is the juristic person. Administrative of LAO is conducted under the District Administrative Organization regulation and administrator committee. Members of LAO has been formed by electing local people as for 2 peoples of each village, 14 members in total. Administrative committee is consisted of four persons including 1-chief executive, 2- deputy chief executives, 1-secretary. The chief executive is directly elected by the local people. The role of chief executive is to administer the LAO following the designated policy. There are 9 members to be responsible for education. The rest members have duty in the secretariat office, internal audit through the financial and civil divisions.

1.2 Overview of Government and Administrative Structure

The constitutional government and monarchy laid down in the 1932 constitution specified three basic concepts regarding the governmental structure of Thailand. Firstly, the monarch is regarded as Head of State,   Forces and Upholder of the Buddhist Religion and all other religions. Secondly, a bicameral National Assembly, which is comprised of Member of Parliament and Member of Senate, administers the legislative branch. Thirdly, the oversees the executive branch covering the Council of Ministers which is responsible for the administration of 19 ministers and the office of the Prime Minister.

1.3 Framework of Education

1.3.1   The 1997 Constitution of The Kingdom of Thailand

The new Constitution promulgated in October 1997 contains several provisions relating to education, religion and culture. It is started in Section 81 that the state will "improve education to be in harmony with economic and social change", which means that the Government is committed to initiate educational reform whenever it is necessary to keep up with the pace of change.

Besides, it is provided in the constitution for the first time that all thai people will have an equal right to receive basic education for at least 12 years, of quality and free of charge (Section 43).

1.3.2   The 1999 National Education Act

1.3.3   Educational   Administration   and   Management   :   Transition to a New Structure

In accordance with the 1999 National Education Act and the Bureaucratic Reform Bill, the agencies with the main responsibility for educational provision, namely the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of University Affaires and the Office of the National Education Commission, have been reorganized into a single Ministry, the Ministry of Education (MOE).

However, local education administration is still under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior (MOI). In addition, other ministries also take charge of the management of education in specialize fields or for specific purposes.

The reform of educational administration and management is based on the principle of unity in policy and diversity in implementation as well as decentralization of authority to educational service area, educational institutions and local administrative organizations.

1.4 Administration and Management of Education by the State

Education in *Thailand* is administered and managed by the government at tree levels: central level, educational service areas and educational institutions at all levels of education. (ONEC, 2003)

1.4.1 Administration at Central Level

After the reorganization of the administrative structure, the main responsibility for education in *Thailand* is under the *Ministry of Education (MOE)*. According to the amendments of the *National Education Act,* the *Ministry of Education* is responsible for promoting and overseeing all levels and types of education; formulation of education policies, plans and standards; mobilization of resources for education; promotion and co-ordination in religious affairs, art, culture and sports in relation to education; as well as the monitoring, inspection and evaluation of educational provision.

1.4.2 Administration in Educational Service Areas

In each educational service area, there will be an area Committee for Education comprised of representatives of community, private, and local administrative organizations; teacher associations; educational administrator associations; parent-teacher associations; and scholars in education, religion, art and culture. The Area Committee for Education and its Office will be responsible for the following: 1) Overseeing, establishment, dissolution, amalgamation or discontinuance of basic education institutions; 2) Coordination, promotion and support for private educational institutions in the educational service areas; 3) Coordination and promotion for local

administrative organizations so as to be able to provide education in accord with educational policies and standards; and 4) Promotion and support for education provided by individuals, families, community organizations, private organizations, professional bodies, religious institutions, enterprises, and other social institutions offering a variety of training.

1.5 Administration and Management of Education by Local Administrative Organizations

In accordance with the *National Education Act,* local administrative organizations can provide education at any or all levels of education according to readiness, suitability and requirement of the local areas. The *Ministry of Education* is responsible for prescribing the criteria and procedures for assessing the readiness of the local administrative organizations to provide education including co-ordination and promotion of the local administrative organizations' capability to provide education.

2.0 Conflict and Models of Conflict Resolution

2.1 Overview of Conflict

During the interview sessions of this project, participants were asked to define conflict. Most saw it as a negative human reaction to a situation between two parties- a disagreement. A few recognized that there was learning to be had from a conflict experience on the way to finding "a middle ground." Coser (1956) states that conflict is "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals" (p.8). However, Coser saw this only as a working definition from which to depart towards a view that was conflict contributing to positive functions such as tension release, balancing power, and increasing group cohesion. Others working in the conflict field have also espoused the positive aspects of conflict that lead to creativity, valuing of diversity, problem-solving, and grater self-awareness (Tjosvold, 1991)

2.2 Approaches to Conflict

Dealing with conflict is very much linked to the context of the conflict-a family, neighborhood, an organization or a country. How individuals approach conflicts is related to their personalities as much as their circumstances, Thomas and Kilman (1994) have identified five approaches that North Americans use towards conflict: accommodation, collaboration, avoidance, competition, and compromise. These approaches are used singly or in combination depending on such things as a person's personality, philosophy, skill, and knowledge (Picard, 1998). Groups and organizations may choose to take different approaches to conflict depending on their culture, history, power, and resources. Some of these approaches include : mediation, arbitration, management systems, facilitated problem-solving, the judiciary,

consensus-building, sustained dialogue, war, protests, and strikes (Folger et al., 1997; Fisher, 1997; Costantino and Merchant, 1996).

2.3 Models for Managing Conflict

Models for managing conflict are as extensive and varied as conflict itself. Conflict can be managed and potentially resolved on a continuum ranging from simple negotiation between two people to international arbitration tribunals involving nations to the traditional adjudicative model of each country's legal system. Social conflicts such as ethnic, community, and special interest group conflict can be managed through the conflict continuum or can be approached using third party facilitators to assist the parties in transforming the conflict through problem-solving, dialogue and peace-building. Third parties to the conflict can involved groups and individuals as diverse as industry consultants, educators, Quakers, labor mediators, diplomats, judges, and your next door neighbor. As the conflict field matures and continue to gain interest form many sectors, the approaches to managing and resolving conflict will continue to evolve and multiply, the choices perhaps, overwhelming potential participants. For this reason, parties to a conflict will have to decide what approach makes the most sense to them, is acceptable to both parties, and supports positive change.

2.4 The ARIA Model

As Costantino and Merchant (1996) stress, stakeholder participation in the design of a conflict management process is essential. Stakeholders thus have a vested interest in making the model work. While it is critical to have a model that is stakeholder driven, the proffering of an existing model provides a framework from which to start the discussion. In this regard, the ARIA framework developed by Rothman (1997) was suggested to the project participants as a system of dialogue and reconciliation for the groups in conflict. As Rothman states, "The ultimate goal of the ARIA framework is to foster harmony ad resonance from adversaries' full and honest expression of the deeply felt motivations that lie beneath their conflict" (p.18)

The ARIA Framework consists of a) adversarial framing that brings the resources at stake and proposed solutions to the surface thus producing antagonism, b) reflexive reframing of the conflict focuses on the *why* and *who* of the conflict leading to resonance, c) inventing joint solutions that focuses on the how leading to invention, and d) agenda setting that consolidates all the *who, what, how*, and *why* into action.

3.0 The Study Process

3.1 Introduction

The study process took place over a period of four months. The principal investigator, however, has been involved in the conflict since its inception eight months ago by virtue of her position as the faculty in educational administration department, faculty of education, Khon-Kaen University which cooperate with school for teacher training and provide short course training for LAO members. She has worked with school and LAO for two years.

3.2 The Research Questions

  a) What factors contribute to LAO and basic education school conflict ?
  b) What are the facilitators and barriers to positive LAO and basic education school relations?
  c) In what way would a conflict management model serve to improve LAO and basic education school relations?

3.3 Action Research Approach

The action research approaches for this project consisted of twenty-four interview surveys, three focus group sessions, notes from one public meeting, a learning journal, weekly observations, document review, and an ongoing literature review. Potential participants had to stakeholders in the conflict. Stakeholders include of LAO chief executive and members, school administrator-teachers, and school board.

3.5 Analyzing the data

Guba and Lincoln's (1989) criteria for judging qualitative research was applied to the project :

a)   Credibility-The themes identified by the principal investigator were believable to the participants. The participants in the focus group sessions confirmed   the times. There were opportunities during the focus groups to clarify and/or discuss the summary results of the interview schedule. For instance, one participant in each of the focus groups expressed that they were surprised that the issue of confidentiality had come up. Immediately there was a response from the rest of the group that it was no surprise to them, especially in a small   rural   community. At the end of this lively discussion, the groups each decided that the issue was both privacy and confidentiality. Privacy was referred to as people noticing when you were accessing school management information, while confidentiality meant the local members knowing your status.

b)   Transferability-The results of this research can be generalized or transferred to another context. The research context was a small rural community within a large provincial area.   Within this context were the participants, a small group of stakeholders who were not necessarily representative of the community population but who were knowledgeable, credible, leaders within the community. The project

was context-specific to this school community's conflict with the LAO however, the data was consistent with existing conflict theory, rural culture, and school management research. During the course of this research, the principal investigator had an opportunity to visit school in a rural community in the northern part of the province that was having a conflict with its LAO over the managing change in school. There were signs and a petition posted in stores throughout the community protesting the "school transferring." One teacher I talked with said, "They can't do this. It's our school" Identity was strong, and the newspaper was full of angry letters to the LAO. The principal investigator had an opportunity to speak to LAO members and school members about what this community was experiencing based on this research. There was much nodding of heads and comments that gave assent to this iteration.

c)   Dependability-The research must reflect the changing context in which the research occurs. Because conflict is always evolving, the context of this research evolves too. The venues where the information has been collected are demonstrated as well as we has been giving the data. Within the context of the rural community are the individual perspectives, the different opportunities for expression such as the one on one interview and/or the public meeting, and the coffee room talk. Notes, tapes, and summaries have been kept to provide a record of the research process.

d)   Confirmability-The data collected was transcribed by the principal investigator multiple readings of the data were done to pull out the   themes.   Participants confirmed the themes. A summary of the focus groups was given to the chief executive for his information and acknowledgement of the findings. A journal was kept that gave expression to the principal investigator's fair manner throughout the project. A visit to another rural community in a different geographic region of the province with school transferring conflict demonstrated very similar elements of the conflict in this study.

4.0 Interview and Focus Group Findings

4.1 Governance and Role of Local Administrative Organization

Interview participants voiced that LAO could demonstrate and understanding of a rural school's education needs and issued by making the school feel it is being listened to, the LAO having higher visibility in the school, and some concrete action from the members. This last item was related to the LAO making a concerted to recruit another teacher for School A.

The focus groups went further and recommended three approach that LAO could apply when developing policy that could affect school management in an outlying rural community. The recommendation were listen, acknowledge, and evaluate.

4.2 The Office of Khon Kaen Educational Service Area 5 (ESA)

The majority of the participants knew of the ESA but were uncertain of the role of the organization. Some saw the organization as collecting concerns and communicating those concern to LAO. For some the organization had a watchdog role to make sure education service were being adequately provided. Most recognize that the ESA had no authority in regard to education decision-making. One school member thought that the ESA should have "more visibility and greater function" so that it became the voice of the school in rural communities on education issues. One of the teachers, focus group participants was surprised that people had not mentioned that the ESA should have more says especially since the ESA had come out of the local school.

4.3 School Management Conflicts

Participants were very aware of the conflicts school management in School A. Their answers were very detailed and often included some insights about the conflicts such as perception versus reality, poor communication, expectation versus needs, and resisting change. The primary issues of the conflict were identified as a) complicated administration authorization, b) inflexible budget management, c) existing teachers versus contracted teachers, d) non-compliance maximum welfare and bonus, and e) nonconformance needs of LAO and School

4.4 Communication

Communication as both a barrier and a facilitator was a theme that was interwoven throughout the interview session and the focus groups. Many participants recognized that listening was a factor in this conflict, in that the LAO was perceived as not listening to the school, while the school was perceived as not hearing what was being told to them. Participants expressed a need to have receptivity on both sides of the conflict. There was acknowledgement that teachers got their information "through the grapevine" and "the word on the street." School administrator voiced a concern over this method of communication as contributing to the problem : If teachers in the school have to rely on street conjecture it gets emotional far beyond where they have any justification for being as emotional as they are. Teachers start to speculate why folks in authority are doing certain things, and in fact they're not doing those things.

4.5 Rural School A and Needs

All the participants agreed that rural School A had unique cultures. What made School A unique? The following summary shows what the interview participants voiced a) the school was beautiful and friendly, b) there was agricultural base around here, c) it's far away from Educational Service Area 5 about 150 kilometers, d) there was not highway connection to province, e) The school was isolated and located in the small rural community, f) it had not enough classroom and teachers shortage, g) there were many students' single parent and low student performance, h) There was a lack of supervising from provincial government, and i) it made school's policy and decision making by school board.

School A was one of the voluntary basis schools transferred to be in the responsibility Phuhan District Administrative Organization which was classified as the Local Administrative Organization. Under LAO's responsibility, the expectation of better education management would be made by the following reason ; the shorter administrative authorization, flexible budget management, maximum welfare and bonus. The most expectation was student quality as indicated by better performance. After 6 months of school transferring, it was found that expectation has not been made, less freedom and flexibility of budget management, non-equity personnel administration (between existing and contracted teachers). This had become the conflict and get stronger between and school. The school would like to transfer back to the previous organization, Khon Kaen Province Educational Service Area 5, had denied to accept the school back according to regulation, leading to the adverse problem of education administration.

4.6 Parting Comments

The interview participants were asked to make a final comment on School A, the LAO, and/or the relationship between LAO and school. A summary of these interview comments demonstrated a) the relationship between the LAO and School A is not good, b) there needs to be a way to have school concern addressed, c) there was acknowledgement from the participants the LAO has a big job to do, and is not able to pay attention to school concerns all, and d) there needs to more clear-cut LAO's policy on school management.

A summary of the focus group discussion had recommendation the were primarily directed at the LAO a) recognition the diversity of school context, validate school management, b) provide opportunities for more face to face meetings with school and LAO members, c) communicating using a multimedia approach, d) listening was needed from both the school and LAO, e) acknowledge and respond back to the school, and f) evaluate the implementation of a policy in a timely manner.

4.7 Reflections

What struck the researcher? The researcher was struck by the homogeneity of answers from the different responder categories, the depth of insight and understanding about school management, and the openness of the participants as they shared their attitudes, values, and beliefs. These are people who are engaged in their community. After having completed both the interviews and the focus groups, I realized this was just the beginning of a process that could lead to some relationship building, if not conflict resolution.

In the focus groups it was necessary to provide information and correct misinformation. During the discussion, different points of view came into play as well as points of disagreement. Discussion, i also thought there must be a sense disagreement to surface. There seemed to be higher level of energy during the

morning sessions than the afternoon sessions although the transcription does not necessarily reflect this. The sense of this energy level could have been related to the different mix of personalities of each group, the researcher's own energy level, or the time to day. During the refreshment breaks the discussion often continued or stayed on management-related topics.

5.0 Is this an Intractable Conflict?

5.1 What is the problem?

On the surface it would appear that this conflict involves a common problem for both the LAO and School A that being the need to get three teachers into school. The LAO has opted to try and solve the problem by recruiting teachers it can contract with. The School A, on the other hand, is not entirely satisfied that this is the approach to take. The LAO hopes that once the three contracted teachers are in place then some of the other identified issues such as classroom coverage and availability of the teacher who was absent from work because of illness or meeting, bringing peace to school. Solving the problem would then appear to be a matter of getting new teachers into school. This is also the feeling of at least one of the project participants who noted during our interview, "Product a new teacher out of nowhere ; the other would fall on their knees."

Moreover, the school administrator used to approve the budget for managing school, but now absolutely not. Only chief executive of LAO can approve this budget and school administrator has changed a lot to be a proponent of project for school management. The school administrator was not satisfied that this is the approach to do and lost his status.

5.2 Is this an Identity Conflict?

"The roots of inter group conflict lie in the basic human need for identity" (Folger et al., 1997, P.34). Northrup (1989) believes that the threat to identity may cause or escalate some conflicts. In this inter group conflict between School A and the LAO both the need for identity and the sense of a threat to this identity have come to the forefront.

In the public meeting in October 2007, community participants clearly established the "we" and "us" of the conflict. One of the panel which comprised of : LAO Chief executive, ESA Director, LAO members, School Administrator, and School Board Chair, said to LAO Executive after his explanation of the current school management, "You have made bad mistake." There was much nodding of heads from the audience when this was made. The "You" in this instance was very much directed at the LAO Chief executive who was seen to be the implementer of LAO's policy in school.

The need for School A to be seen as a separate identity form other school in rural community was also a common theme during this public meeting. This same theme was echoed throughout the interviews and focus groups. Several participants referred to the need to see both school and LAO that were integrated for education service as two separate entities with distinct and different identities.

Some participants brought up the fact that decentralization was not created by passing a law. Rather, it must be built by overcoming a series of challenges at the center and periphery. Years, rather than weeks or months, usually pass before reform occurs. Some regions may move faster than at first because they are better prepared to change, for example, they benefit from stronger administrative, greater financial resources, or less polarization. And now, most of the local teachers realized that it has never occurred like those in Thailand. So, the conflict still escalate among teachers, central and local government.

About 3 or 4 decades ago, teachers were the most respectful people in the community ; some of them, especially in Northeast, became politician and had remarkable roles in Thai politics. Then local government have been promoted gradually as the most important organization in Thai politics and democracy since 1999. In this time, teachers had to serve "needs" of this organization. For example, if the local bodies organized some events, teachers had to help them with each events. One might said teachers had experiences of being servants of local.

5.3 Analyzing the Conflict

"An intractable conflicts is defined as a prolonged conflictual psychosocial process…. that has three primaries characteristics : (1) it is resistant to being resolved, (2) it has some conflict-intensifying features not related to the initial issues in contention, (3) it involves attempts (and/or success) to harm the other party, by at least one of the parties." (Northrup, 1989, p.62). Northrup also states that the tractability of a conflict can change over the course of conflict, and particular issues within the conflict can have differing degrees of tractability.

The conflict that exists between the study school and LAO is a protracted conflict with its seeming beginning when LAO policy decision to place contracted teachers and change school management. Underlying these "whats" of the conflict is and identity-based conflict that began when the government legislated amalgamation of basic education school in rural community with LAO. The school views this as a frustration of it need be part of education decision-making, and a threat to its sense of safety and security.

The provincial guidelines for amalgamation required that the existing rural school pass a special resolution enabling rural school amalgamate with the LAO. This would require a general meeting of the community to be called so that all members of the community could vote on the resolution. School A's displeasure with the process of

amalgamation was expressed when the required motion to amalgamate on voluntary basis with the LAO was defeated at the last public meeting of community on august 1, 2006, and on 29 August 2006 the amalgamation with the LAO was completed. (unpublished internal documents, 2006). Under LAO's responsibility, the community expectation of better education management would be made by the following reasons ; the shorter administrative authorization, flexible budget management, maximum welfare and bonus. The most expectation is student quality as indicated by better performance.

A) Threat

The threats in this conflict involve actual losses and perceived losses. Losses have included school transferred from Ministry of Education to district administrative organization (under Ministry of Interior). Perceived losses include participation in education decision-making and recognition of the school's identity. These losses represents a threat to person's sense of safety and security of his/her basic needs (Fisher, 1997 ; Rothman, 1997 ; Northrup, 1989) As Fisher (1997) notes, "…both individuals and groups have undeniable needs for identity, dignity, security, equity, participation in decisions that affect them. Frustration of these basic needs….becomes a source of social conflict" (p.6) With this frustration comes a need to blame someone. As one of the interview participants voiced, "You have to have someone to blame and dump on." Another participant recognized the losses, and attached the responsibility to make it better to the LAO.

B) Distortion

Throughout this research project, the principal investigator has had to correct some of the assumptions held by the school members. This also occurred at the public meeting in October 2007 where certain rumors were put on the floor and corrected by members of the panel. However, these rumors and assumptions were held as truths, and demonstrated the distortion of the information related to the conflict. Included in these rumors and assumptions that were not true were the following. One of the participants at the public meeting wondered why school administrator could not directly approve budget for school management. The fact, he was still approved the budget at first then the LAO chief executive approved later according to MOI regulations. A second rumors was that the contract teachers got more welfare and benefit than the old group of teachers. The contract had no such stipulation, and the LAO maintained that it would be up to all teachers. Another distortion by some of the participants was that there had been no complaints about making school policy when in fact complaints had been arisen just as they worked with school board who had ever done before to revised school policy. This distortion by school members was used to support their position that the LAO was unreasonable to immediately changed school management.

C) Rigidification

The outcome of rigidification is to put both physical and psychological distance between the parties to the conflict (Northrup, 1989). Although some of the stakeholders have demonstrated rigidification in this conflict other have not. With some there was a sense of hopelessness, that nothing could be done about the situation, that central government and those under its control (LAO) would just continue to go on without listening to what communities/school wanted. Others thought that there was hope but that the LAO needed to be a willing participant. Generally, however, the LAO was seen as a negative entity that was not listening, did not have the community's best interest at heart, and was simple too far away to be able to effect an positive changes. The local representatives on the LAO both past and present were never publicly criticized throughout this transferring plan. One focus group participant summed up this stage of the conflict, "I think we see them as big bad boss sitting up there and they see us such a fool.

D) Collusion

In collusion, the conflict take on a life of its own. The parties behave is such a way to keep the conflict going. Again, in this particular conflict there is evidence that only certain school members are in this stage of conflict. Each group in and of itself does not exhibit behavior that would necessarily maintain the conflict. For those who have a power stake in the conflict or rigidification towards anything local education governance primarily, there is a sense of wanting to annihilate the "enemy" by returning to Educational Service area 5 governance. While these stakeholders see a return to ESA as a solution to the conflict, this approach in fact continues the conflict since there is no evidence to support the provincial government's desire to change education management at this time. Also there has been little evaluation of transferring to determine whether LAO is better or worse than ESA (ONEC, 2003).

5.4 Transforming the conflict

Researchers and practitioners in the field of conflict acknowledge that not all conflict is resolvable. Identity-based conflict, especially, can actually be worsened by the application of traditional mediation and conflict management that concentrates on issues and interests rather than the basic human needs of both parties (Rothman, 1997 ; Fisher, 1997 ; Northrup, 1989). Thus the goal for identity conflicts becomes one of transformation. Unfortunately many conflicts do not get recognized as identity- based, and the trend is still to deal primarily with the expressed "what" of the conflict rather than the "why." In a transforming process the intent is to explore the human motivations that underlie the conflict, to get at what the people involved feel most deeply about, and why and how that contributes to the conflict.

One of purposes of transforming the conflict is to transform the identity of each party. Through facilitated dialogue the needs, wants, values and beliefs of each group can be seen as not so different from each other. Some of this transforming was beginning to

happen in the focus group sessions where the researcher had the opportunity to tell the group that what LAO members had expressed was not so different from what school members wanted. Focus group participants also brought different point of view to the table that expressed empathy for the LAO and the impossible task it had before it. This was also put forward by one of the school board during the interview session.

5.5 Accepting or Rejecting the Model

The ARIA Framework essentially becomes a none-issue for the participants had an opportunity to take the model home and look at it but the decision on its use never really developed. One participant saw a danger in that model's first component was to raise the issues. There was a fear of getting stuck at this stage where nothing would get accomplished because of the frustration, anger, and not listening. Another person thought that there needed to be a model to deal with the anger and frustration people were feeling, and at the same time stop rehashing of what had gone on in the past. Others though it would be futile to try anything since the situation with this LAO was similar to school board, and everything hinged on the budget. One participant wondered why we would give LAO a tool that might possibly work against us.

Participants neither accepted nor rejected the ARIA model. They were more inclined to return to a discussion of the overt issues of the conflict the affected them directly such as personnel and budget management. There was not enough time in this research project for the participants to learn about the ARIA model as well as other possible models for managing conflict for comparison. Some in the focus groups were familiar with consensus building as a result of local round table talks, but not everyone's experience had been positive with this model. The principal investigator was also new to the ARIA model, and recognized the need for skilled facilitation from an ARIA expert to bring some understanding of the model to the participants.

The focus group participants did embrace the idea of all the stakeholders needing to sit down at a common table to talk about everyone's expectations while having as the one goal. They envisioned a round table where everyone was equal, people were listening, and people were prepared to be honest. This was the model that the participants could relate to, and the group generally advocated it.

6.0 Local Administrative Decentralization and Relationships

6.1 Issues for Rural Community School

a) Dealing with losses-Rural community schools across the country are facing losses in their communities such as the loss of human resources, civil servant status, and social welfare and benefits from the state. The loss of school management is just another indication to the community that rural community school is being undermined at a time when it is struggling for viability. How rural school choose to deal with these losses that are result of social and economic changes will determine their very existence. Economic Performance studies in Thailand economic outlook for 2003

reported that fluctuating factors of economic will not only result in uncertainty in the world economy but will also bring about basic economic problems in line with the war climate, so rural communities worked with change rather than using traditional political tactics to fight the changes. (ONEC, 2003) Rural schools will need to rely on some of the characteristics of their culture that they have identified to ensure their viability. Concepts such as independence, self-sufficiency, closeness, friendliness, and concern for each other will need to be garnered so that rural schools can develop an action plan to face this loss and any future losses.

b) Expectation versus reality-Many times throughout the focus groups, participants brought up the fact that we were spoiled in our rural community-are rarely had to wait for anything, and we had come to expect that school was the way it would be. Under LAO's responsibility, the expectation of better education management would be made by the following reasons ; the shorter administrative authorization, flexible budget management, maximum welfare and bonus. The most expectation is student quality as indicated by better performance. After 6 months of school transferring, it was found that expectation has not been made, less freedom and flexibility of budget management, non-equity of personnel administration between and school. This expectation got added to the list of issues in the conflict, there was anger and mistrust.

c) Scapegoats-Although scapegoating and stereotyping happen on both sides of the conflict, when this behavior is part of the culture of a group it presents a formidable barrier to building positive relationships and/or resolving conflict. In School A's would like to transfer back to the previous organization, Khon-Kaen Educational Service Area 5, has denied to accept the school back. The ESA Director said that "It's agreement on voluntary basis between LAO and School A, it's not our business." The more opportunities that school has to see the other it names as the enemy as human beings, then the more opportunity there is to avoid scapegoating.

d) Representation-Participants in this research identified the need for good representative at the LAO members table-one who understood education issues and at the same time could bring the needs of school to the decision-makers' attention. Some of participants did not know who the local representative on the LAO was.
It is interesting to note that several weeks after completion of the focus groups, one of the school board told the principal investigator that the local representative on the LAO was one of the most important elements of local administration. This same person, who was an advocate for school return back, had turned some kind of mental corner in accepting the LAO as a reality, and recognizing the importance of good representation at that level.

e) Relationship-building-If the LAO continues then the school will eventually have to accept the reality of this political structure, and consider building a more positive relationship with the LAO. Those most responsible for doing this will be local politicians and informal community leaders. Along with these local stakeholders, LAO members and local management will need to participate in some face-to-face

meetings with school to increase the dimensions of communication. There will need to be a willingness to begin a dialogue from both the school and the LAO so that needs and wants can be discussed with the purpose of proposing solutions and building trust.

f) Responsibility for education-Many times throughout this project, participants mentioned the need to take responsibility for one's own education. Participants reminded each other of a time in the village's history when education for children only accessible by hopping on very rare bus and traveling into town.

There was also a mention of alternative education such as non-formal education should be appropriate, respond to the requirements, and meet the needs of individual groups of learners, and informal education should enable learners to learn by themselves according to their interests. Participants expressed a need for more education promotion that would allow people to make choices based on good information.

6.2 Issues for Local Administrative Organization

Issues for LAO that arose from this research include the following :

a) Recognizing rural diversity-The participants in this research, for the most part saw the study school as having its own unique culture. They saw themselves as distinct from neighboring school with which they had been integrated, but at the same time expressed a need for cooperation between the LAO and school. The LAO will need to recognize that rural school are diverse, they has distinct identities, and they want their identity acknowledged. This could be accomplished through a value statement recognizing the diversity and uniqueness of school with in rural community. Policy development, planning, and service delivery is then done with an awareness of valuing diversity.

b) Communication-Participants wanted LAO to use all the communication avenues at its disposal for communication LAO information in the rural community/school. Participants also expressed a need to be consulted prior to any major policy proposal that would affect them directly. The school wanted to be listened to and wanted acknowledgement that the LAO had heard them. There was a need to communicate face-to-face, and a need to have more opportunities to met. The participants also wanted honesty in the communication. They did not want the information "spun" to put a positive slant on a decision that was going to affect them adversely.

c) Relationship-building-The LAO has as one of its objectives to *Strengthen Public Participation*. The LAO/school conflict itself will provide the opportunity to engage the community/school in discussions that will contribute to the goal of public participation. This process has begun already with the public meeting in October and subsequent meetings of LAO chief executive, provincial officer, ESA director, and

District representative. These face-to-face meeting with the decision-makers give stakeholders the sense that they have the Top management's and the LAO chief executive attention. The meetings are an opportunity to express the details of the problem, find out the facts, and to feel the emotions and frustrations of each other. While the outcome of these meetings may not be to everyone's liking, they show that the LAO open to meeting with stakeholders and trying to work through the problems.

d) Policy making and implementation-The action component of this research was intended to be the development of a model that the LAO and school could use in the developing and implementing of policy in a small rural school. This research only began to touch on the development of such a model. However, the participants offered concepts the LAO could use when considering both the development and implementation policy. The three main concepts were listen, acknowledge, and evaluate. The school wanted its need heard, consider and acknowledged. It also wanted a means of evaluating a policy, including timelines to see what was working and what was not working. There was a willingness from the participants in this research for collaborative problem-solving around developing policy. The participants also wanted consultation before implementation of a major policy such as new school management under transferring structure.

f) Fiscal responsibility-There was an appreciation from the research participants that the LAO had a budget from central government (35% of transferring) and taxation to manage, and there were some hard decision to be made. Moscovice (1999) state that making these difficult choice will require, "some resolution of conflict among the special interest groups in the community who have stake in the budget allocation exercise." In this research project the school saw itself as single interest group competing with other school for services. While money was never acknowledge by the LAO, especially, school administrator had ever approved many different of school projects but now he could not do like that as a conflict issue for the study school, it was raised by members in School A as being part of the problem. At the public meeting some participant asked the LAO chief executive if money was the problem. He said that money was not an issue but it was more an issue of not enough teachers. School members, however, were aware of the high costs of recruitment. Since so many of the research participants identified the management of a budget as one of the primary roles for LAO, the LAO's credibility at a public meeting might be raised if the budget concerns around the costs of recruitment and retention of contracted teachers who got the social welfare and benefit more than the state teachers, can be acknowledged.

g) Integration and rationalization of education service-school members talked to the principal investigator on interview session that some provincial governments are less interested in school empowerment than in rationalization of services and reduction of expenditure. They went on to say that the devolution of education from school to the LAO, "has been used as an avoidance strategy by government faced with tough choices as service expectation exceed perceived taxation capacity." At the same time

a national shortage of teachers has added to the dilemma for LAO as they try to identify duplication, integrate, and rationalize services for a frustrated and angry school members.

6.3 Barriers to a positive relationship

For the study school these barriers included a preference for elected representation on the LAO, being too far removed from local area, and not comprehending how the LAO could understand their particular education needs, for a process that was envisioned by Council of Ministers to bring education decision-making closer to the rural community seems instead to have made communities feel more alienated from the decision-making process. This perception of alienation from the decision-making process has been another theme running through this conflict. As of result of this perception, school members have recently mounted a campaign to get the province to dissolve the LAO and from a new LAO with elected members. This is a rigidification of the conflict expressed as wanting the LAO to disappear. Other contributors to this rigidification have involved the constructing of social and psychological barriers such as differing beliefs, values, attitudes, expectations, political agendas, and poor communication. These are in addition to structural and real physical barriers that both groups have had to cope with. Structural and real barriers include the large geographic educational service area, the distance of the rural school from the ESA, the legislated governance system, and scarce resources. While social, psychological, and structural barriers have the potential to be changed, geographic barriers present challenges that require creative approaches to lessening the "distance" between the LAO and school. Participants in this project identified all of these barriers, but also identified approaches to helping bring some of these barriers down.

6.4 Facilitators to a positive relationship

The facilitators identified by the participants for building a positive relationship were :

a) proximity-people need to be able to see each other and have the opportunity to sit around the same table.
b) Equality-all the participants around the table need to be considered equal.
c) Communication-There needs to be listening on both sides and respect for what each other is saying. Every kind of communication medium needs to be used to get the message across.
d) Honesty-there needs to be an openness, a "card on the table" approach to any dialogue or communication.
e) Evaluation/reflection-There needs to be an opportunity to stand back and reflect and ask if this is working. There needs to be a scheduled time for evaluation.

6.5 Recognizing Rural Diversity and Uniqueness

It is evident from this research project that School A saw itself as a unique rural school with much of that uniqueness coming from the fact that it was a rural community school. Participants voiced their concerns about the LAO not appreciating what it meant to be a rural community. Although two rural school are represented on the LAO, many participants viewed the LAO as an urban entity. This perception contributed to the intractability of the conflict by invalidating the LAO as credible body for representing rural education concerns. Issues related to rural culture such as isolation and difficult access to education service were often raised as contributing to the conflict. The fact that rural area across the country are having difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers because of conditions that are specific to rural areas was known by many of the participants. School A wanted its rural uniqueness acknowledged by the LAO. The desire to have rural uniqueness recognized so that programs and services can be based on people needs was one of the guiding principles recommended to the central government. A look at rural culture will help in understanding of some of the social and cultural aspects of this conflict.

7.0 Conclusions

The goal of this project was to develop a conflict management model that LAO might choose to use when implementing education policy in a rural community school. At the same time it was hoped that the stakeholders involved in this project would have an opportunity to see both the positive and negative aspects of conflict in the development of that model. Participants did envision a model the would have stakeholders sitting around a common goal for education, however, the focus for the project participants remained on the issues of the conflict rather than the underlying identity needs and values. Positive outcomes for the stakeholders in this conflict included: sharing of opinions, problem-solving, increased awareness and knowledge, increased empathy for the LAO, dispelling rumours and assumptions, and an increased sense of community.

7.1 Why an Identity Conflict?

An identity-based conflict occurs when there is a threat or frustration to our system of beliefs in interaction with another person or group. When the conflict involves two groups, identity is characterized by the group membership characteristics that have emotional significance for each person in that social grouping (Rothman, 1997 ; Northrup, 1989) School A has identified itself as a unique rural community school with certain characteristics such as self-sufficiency. It views the LAO as posing a threat to the school's autonomy over education services. When local decision-making was taken away from School A and given to the LAO this was perceived as a frustration to the school's sense of itself in terms of remaining independent and self-sufficient.

School A members and administrator did not want to accept the LAO as its education governance body from the very beginning, and as a result waited for the LAO to

stumble in its decision-making. With the lengthy recruitment for a contract teachers, and the School A had its confirmation that the LAO could not do the governing job as well as the provincial educational service area 5 had done. The LAO decisions were perceived as threatening the school's safety, economy, and independence.

The LAO's decision to put contract teachers into the school at a time when the teacher supply was diminishing across the country did not produce empathy from School A. The problem therefore, in the school's mind, was the LAO's insistence on contracted teachers. The anger and frustration this produced was very high, causing the conflict to escalated and become more intractable. There was a need to transform the conflict so that the dynamics of the relationship between the LAO and school could be moved into a more positive realm. Simply supplying the missing resource was not going to change this relationship because the underlying attitudes, beliefs, and values of each "side" would not be addressed. The principal investigator thus offered the ARIA model as a possible process for transforming the conflict.

7.2 The ARIA Model

The project demonstrated the complexities of school/LAO conflict, and gave the principal investigator an appreciation for the skill and time that would be required to apply the ARIA model to the conflict. The ARIA model, while not embraced by the participants, was the motivation for applying an identity framework to the conflict with the result being the exploration of the historical, cultural, social, and political factors that contributed to the conflict. The underpinnings of the conflict that demonstrated the threat to identity needs became more evident to the principal investigator through the collection of data and reflection on the information with the research participants, and management. The ARIA model was not well supported by the participants for a number of reasons. The ARIA model represents a departure from more traditional models that try to get the parties to some kind of resolution. With ARIA the intent is to get stakeholders talking about why the interests and issues of the conflict are so important to them. For stakeholders who need to see some resolution because the conflict has the potential to affect their lives detrimentally, talking about the "why" of the conflict may not be entirely satisfactory. A new approach, unfamiliar to the participants, would require the willingness and time to learn with someone knowledgeable and time to learn with someone knowledgeable and experienced with the model. Since there was a concern the stakeholders could get stuck at the "antagonism' stage of the process, trust in the skills of the facilitator would be paramount.

7.3 The Stakeholders' Model

When the participants started talking about sending a message to the LAO, that is when their model, based on the familiar round-table, started to develop. While the development of a model was just at a beginning stage for this project, the discussion that led up to this point demonstrated the potential this process had for improving

school/LAO relations. Just by talking about the conflict, participants were able to share history, points of view, and approaches for resolving the issues. The focus groups, especially, were an opportunity for participants to consider the role of the LAO, the immensity of the task before it, and an unproven structure that saw the LAO caught between the provincial government and the rural community school it served.

7.4 The Principal Investigator's Role

As school member and administrator in School A I often felt conflicted in my role throughout this project. I had empathy for the teachers as they struggled to work with a new system of education. I shared the anger and frustration of school members as they experienced education system that was not working very well for them. At the same time I was aware of the good intentions of the LAO to provide a system of education that had the potential to be an improvement over the old method. I questioned whether my increasing empathy for School A was jeopardizing my loyalty to my faculty, the LAO. For these reasons, I never saw myself as a potential or credible facilitator to implement any kind of conflict management model for this particular conflict. Instead, I viewed my role as a gatherer and disseminator of information. I saw this research as and opportunity to understand this conflict, and possibly identify some process for addressing the problems.

7.5 Sending a Message to the LAO

One of the primary identity needs that emerged from this project was the need for school to be part of education decision-making. Because the school felt it had lost this responsibility to the LAO as a result of amalgamation, there was a strong desire to send a message to the LAO. The message for the LAO from school, in its shortest form, came through *as listen, acknowledge*, and *evaluate*. This would suggest that the school did not perceive the LAO as doing those things. The participants, for the most part, focused on the LAO's responsibility for this conflict, but also acknowledged that unrealistic expectations, false assumptions, resistance to change, and political agendas on the part of the school were contributors to the conflict.

7.6 Having Hope

School A has reacted to the change in education governance by resisting and protesting, actions that are encouraged and augmented by local political leaders. In this climate of anger and hostility, it is encouraging that participants still had a willingness to try and problem-solve the conflict at a common table. Whether the ARIA model is used or another third-party facilitation model is chosen, the process should be expertly facilitated so that the human needs of each party are explored as well as the issues and interests of the conflict. Without a deeper dialogue that allows stakeholders to understand the identity needs of each group, then the conflict is likely to continue of reoccur over different issues.

While this school/LAO conflict continues to evolve and escalate, it is hoped that the results of this research will assist both the LAO and the study school in the development of a positive relationship by embracing a facilitated dialogue process. In allowing dialogue to happen it is hoped the each "side" will begin to see each other a human beings with common interests regardless of their points of view. It is only through this building of a positive relationship that this conflict and any future conflict will have the potential for resolution.

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