Opportunities Taken, Lost or Avoided: The Use of Difference of Opinion in School Decision Making

Bridget M. Leggett
Edith Cowan University

Glenda Campbell-Evans
Edith Cowan University, g.campbell_evans@ecu.edu.au

Jan Gray
Edith Cowan University

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Abstract: In this paper the authors report on an exploratory investigation into the use of disequilibrium and difference of opinion in decision-making in schools, based on the experiences of Master of Education students in their own university. From examples provided by the participants the authors identify the factors that contribute to the positive use of difference of opinion, and those that limit or constrain its use. They then discuss the implications of the findings for the curriculum of the degree in which the participants are enrolled.

Introduction

Teacher education formally starts when pre-service teachers commence their education degrees. But it does not conclude at graduation. Rather, teachers continue to learn informally and formally throughout their careers: from their students, their peers and super-ordinates, from workshops, seminars, conferences, and from postgraduate courses. It is this latter context that provides the data reported in this paper.

Teachers in schools need to be able to cope with all manner of different types of change: from curricular change to changes in the structure of schools and the student population. For example, in Western Australia (WA), the introduction of the national curriculum is in full swing, requiring anything from minor adjustment to major rethinking of teaching, learning and assessment programs. At the same time, Government schools are being given the opportunity to take on Independent Public School status, offering more local flexibility and increased school governance responsibility (Department of Education WA, 2010). In addition, from 2015 year 7 will no longer be the last year of primary schooling in WA; it will be the first year of secondary schooling, so primary schools lose students and staff and secondary schools have to modify their pastoral care programs, their curriculum and potentially their structures to cater for the younger students.

Heifetz and his collaborators provide a useful model for capitalising on changing contexts to achieve an adaptive change, a response that enables the organisation to thrive in the new context and to change in meaningful and lasting ways (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009). A key element of this model is the idea of productive disequilibrium. For Heifetz, some disequilibrium is essential if an organization is to move beyond the status quo, to respond to the adaptive challenge, to thrive (Heifetz, Kania & Kramer, 2004). Part of the role of the leader is to regulate the level of disequilibrium, so that the people and the organisation are able to adapt and move forward, not retreat into past practices or become dysfunctional (Heifetz, 1998).

In this paper we report on an exploratory investigation into the use of disequilibrium and difference of opinion in decision-making in schools. The research emerged from a

broader study on governance in Independent Public Schools in Australia (Gray, Campbell-Evans & Leggett, 2013) and the applicability of Heifetz' (1994) framework for adaptive leadership (Campbell-Evans, Gray & Leggett, forthcoming). During that research, it became obvious that the use of disequilibrium in educational decision-making was under researched, and that there was interest from educators in this topic. For the exploratory study reported in this paper, we chose a convenience sample of students in the Master of Education (MEd) at our own university as a way of getting participants who were experienced educators from a range of different contexts. The data collection strategy was designed to contribute to the students' learning so that there were reciprocal benefits from involvement. As past and current lecturers in the MEd program, we were sensitive to the ethical issues associated with collecting data from students, and considered reciprocity to be important.

Our findings suggest that the productive use of disequilibrium is unusual; that where it is used, it may take many forms. Disequilibrium may also be counter-productive or it may be actively avoided. The culture of the group is pivotal to the outcome, and the affective domain is crucial: communication and interpersonal skills are paramount. Whilst this points to the need to ensure that appropriate skill development is incorporated into postgraduate programs for education professionals, a desktop audit of unit outlines in the MEd program highlights the lack of attention paid to these elements in the specified curriculum.

The paper starts with a brief overview of the literature on the productive use of disequilibrium as part of the decision-making process in contexts of change. The section on research introduces the research questions and the approach taken to answer these questions. A discussion of the data follows, organised according to the extent of the disequilibrium and the acceptability of difference of opinion. We conclude with a discussion on the implications of these findings for those responsible for postgraduate programs in education, particularly those programs which profess to prepare teachers for leadership roles.

The Literature

Heifetz and his collaborators (see for example: Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz, 2007; Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Heifetz & Sinder, 1990) have developed a framework and set of operating principles for adaptive leadership, that is, leadership that will achieve transformative change in complex and problematic circumstances where even the nature of the issue may not be clear. The essential elements of this framework are: the importance of diagnosing and defining the problem at the centre of the adaptive challenge; the expectation that the outcome will change the cultural DNA of the organisation; the importance of capitalising on multiple perspectives; the need to orchestrate learning amongst the decision-makers and those instrumental in the change process; and the productive use of disequilibrium. We have written elsewhere about the importance of capitalizing on multiple perspectives and of orchestrating learning (Gray, Campbell-Evans & Leggett, 2013; Campbell-Evans, Gray & Leggett, forthcoming). In this paper we focus on the element of productive disequilibrium.

The Importance of Disequilibrium in Responding to Adaptive Challenges

Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009) define disequilibrium as, "The absence of a steady state, typically characterized in a social system by increasing levels of urgency, conflict, dissonance, and tension" (p. 304).

Heifetz (n.d.) considers disequilibrium to be intrinsic to an adaptive challenge and essential if change is to be achieved. An adaptive challenge is one requiring second order change, where the DNA of the organisation changes so that it is not, and will not be the same as it was previously (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009). The stress associated with disequilibrium is necessary to generate the energy to move beyond the current situation, to have the courage to face the unknown, to think creatively about alternative ways of doing things, and to embrace alternatives. It is necessary for the change to occur and also for it to be sustained. Leaders need to be able to regulate the disequilibrium so that the people they lead can operate in the range of *productive* stress, where they have to keep learning, but are still within their limits of tolerance of disequilibrium (Heifetz, n.d.).

But stress in itself is not necessarily good – it can be positive or negative, productive or destructive, depending not only on the level of stress, but also on the type of stressor. New Zealand researchers Hollebeek and Haar (2012) refer to productive stress as *eustress,* using Selye's definition for this: "stress resulting from perceived challenge and feelings of fulfillment or achievement" (p. 59). They found that challenge stressors were positively perceived and linked to higher job satisfaction and performance, whereas hindrance stressors, including internal politics, had a negative impact. Given that stress is a subjective construct (Hollebeek and Haar, 2012), this is both relevant and tricky in the context of this research. Participation in decision-making is likely to be challenging, hence have a positive effect, but also brings the participant closer to the internal politics, which Hollebeek and Haar (2012) suggest is likely to have a negative effect. Checkland and Poulter (2006) identify the culture and politics of an organisation as fundamental to the change process. They consider the politics of the situation needs to be explicitly analysed and provide a framework for doing so, based around the interaction of the roles, norms and values. Given that each of these is relevant to decision-making in schools, those involved in decision-making will be involved in the internal politics of the situation.

To achieve a productive level of disequilibrium, leaders may need to orchestrate conflict, sometimes fuelling it, sometimes reducing it, sometimes mediating it (Heifetz, 1998; Heifetz, Kania & Kramer, 2004). They will need an appropriate range of interpersonal skills to achieve this, including the capacity to capitalise on diversity (Heifetz, 1998). Heifetz notes that the tendency to suppress conflict also suppresses the differences in people's passionately held perspectives and beliefs and so limits what can be achieved (Heifetz, 1998). The energy of passion is needed, and needs to be harnessed.

Difference of Opinion

Heifetz and his associates (see for example Heifetz, 1998; Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009; Heifetz, Kania & Kramer, 2004) write about productive disequilibrium in the context of adaptive challenges, because that is their specific area of interest. In this study we took a broader perspective, investigating the use of disequilibrium and of difference of opinion in educational decision-making, irrespective of whether or not the context was one of an adaptive challenge. We looked for situations where difference of opinion occurred and explored the role it played in the final decision. Given our interest in teacher education, and knowing that teachers' involvement in decision-making is career and experience related, it seemed appropriate to consider a diverse range of examples, not just those associated with major change and significant power.

The Research

The research reported in this study takes a qualitative approach to explore participants' views of decision-making in education (Guba and Lincoln, 2013). Data were collected from a convenience sample (Sullivan, 2001) of aspirant leaders and those with middle level leadership responsibilities, all of whom were undertaking a compulsory unit within the MEd program at our university, designed specifically for education professionals. In the unit, staff and postgraduate student research is presented, and students form into groups to discuss a range of issues relating to the specific research, to research methods and ethical issues. Consistent with this format, students were first introduced to the research undertaken by the authors, to Heifetz' model of adaptive leadership and specifically to the concept of productive disequilibrium. They then participated in focus group discussions that were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The students were also invited to complete an individual questionnaire, and/or a follow up interview. Fifteen students completed the questionnaire and four volunteered to be interviewed. One student did both, giving a sample of 18 participants. This represents 72% of the students enrolled in the on-campus version of the unit. The examples provided came from small and large primary and secondary schools in rural and metropolitan (Western) Australia and three other countries.

In the focus groups and interviews, participants were asked to give an example, from their experience, of an important educational decision-making situation where there were differing views of how best to proceed, and to describe how the decision was made. They were then asked how the difference of opinion affected the decision-making process and the quality of the outcome, and if this was negative, how they thought the difference of opinion could have been used in a productive way.

Data were analysed for examples of the presence and the use of disequilibrium and difference of opinion, and of avoidance of disequilibrium. Each of these categories was further explored for recurring themes. From these data we sought to answer two research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What do the examples of differences of opinion given by participants reveal about its productive use?

RQ2: What factors limit or constrain its use?

The final component of the research was a desktop audit of the unit outlines for each of the units in the MEd program. This audit sought to find evidence that the program contributed to participants' ongoing professional development in areas identified as critical for the constructive use of difference of opinion in school decision-making. It sought to answer the third research question:

RQ3: Does the curriculum of the MEd program provide participants with the knowledge and skills needed for the productive use of difference of opinion?

As with any exploratory study of this nature, the findings cannot be generalised beyond the context of the research. Each of the participants came from a different educational context, which has the advantage of sampling a broader range of contexts. However it has the disadvantage that their experiences of disequilibrium have to be treated as personal viewpoints, not as validated analyses of their situations. Nevertheless, the findings point to recurring themes that may be worthy of consideration in the broader context, both for individuals in leadership positions and for designers of postgraduate education programs for teachers and school leaders.

The Findings

Eleven (61%) of the participants described situations where differences of opinion were intrinsic to the decision-making process and were accepted, or at least tolerated. Of the remaining seven (39%), four (22%) provided examples of avoidance or suppression of disequilibrium and three (17%) indicated that decisions were made by those at the top of the organisational hierarchy and therefore were unable to give examples. So, in all, 15 examples of difference of opinion were collected. Generally, participants in the study were also participants in, rather than leaders of, the decision-making process; only one person appeared to have played a pivotal role in making sure different views were heard.

Only one participant gave an example of the use of disequilibrium, *per se*. This was a situation involving an adaptive challenge, where the structure and DNA of the organisation was to change. To our participant, this was a case of lost opportunity. This situation is discussed first. The remaining 14 examples related to situations where there were differences of opinion that fell short of disequilibrium, where the challenges fell short of being adaptive challenges although they were of significance to participants. These have been clustered according to whether the opportunities provided by diversity of opinion were taken or avoided.

Disequilibrium Associated with an Adaptive Challenge: A Case of Lost Opportunity

Out of all of the participants, only one described a situation akin to that of an adaptive challenge. This was the impending change to the structure of a secondary school, away from that of having a middle school structure based around year groups to one based around subject departments. The move was contentious: the staff were split 50:50. It created the sort of serious disequilibrium described in the definition quoted earlier that is associated with conflicts of values: in this case pastoral care versus curriculum knowledge. We do not know the principal's intentions for the consultations with stakeholders, nor her assessment of the outcome. However, from the participant's perspective, this was a lost opportunity that had negative consequences:

> The principal did a presentation about it, then she invited us to attend
> meetings at lunchtime or after school to raise concerns. She asked our
> opinions, and we came up with lots of concerns, talked about it a lot – a lot
> of grief…. For myself I can say I felt a real lot of grief about the decision.
> There was some tweaking, but not a lot of room for dissent. They didn't
> want to work in the creative space of creating something different.
> The canteen ladies remarked that the school was a very unhappy place, and
> there were some people who left the school. In the administration there's
> been quite a lot of changeover, only one of the three deputies is left.
> The difference of opinion didn't really make a difference on the decision-
> making. In a way people felt they couldn't change the decision, this is what
> we were going to do, it was about how. The only thing that changed as a
> result of the discussion was the level of student support….
> The admin weren't interested in creating the zone of productive
> disequilibrium…There could have been other solutions. So even if they [the
> staff] got the opportunity to have that disequilibrium, they could have had a
> much better discussion, we could have got a better solution. (FG4B)

Subsequently, in interview, the participant noted of the disequilibrium:

> It didn't seem to get to a productive place where you could actually make
> changes to things…If people think it is about creating something together,
> there's a possibility of different voices. (Int1)

Towards the end of the interview, the participant acknowledged that the principal probably had different expectations as to what needed to be achieved by the consultation, and it may be that she considered it to be productive. Certainly, changes were made to the level of student support in the implementation phase. However, the participant had expected the consultation to have an impact on decision about school structure, and had wanted to influence the bigger decision, not just the details of implementation. She was clearly frustrated by the more limited opportunity.

The Productive Use of Difference of Opinion: Opportunities Taken

Five participants described situations where difference of opinion was used constructively. Two were about issues of relevance to the whole school: the choice of curriculum, and a staff dress code. Three were relevant to specific year groups within the school: two of these were early childhood examples and the third an upper school example. A range of strategies and communication styles were evident. Two examples are discussed to highlight very different communication styles.

One participant described a situation characterised by *robust and respectful debate*. Here, difference of opinion was expected, accepted and valued. The participant felt that, at his school, decision-making was enhanced by this openness, that better outcomes were achieved. He also commented on the communication skills of some of the more experienced staff in contributing to this decision-making.

> We have got some staff who have been there a very long time and been to many
> meetings and it has fine tuned them into this sort of robust model. 'If we beat
> about the bush it's a waste of everyone's time.' They actively disagree, but they do
> it respectfully, and we get good outcomes, and it's SO good. I'm learning from
> these gentlemen and older people and what I am discovering is that they have
> honed their skills like that and it is so much more effective. (FG2B)

This example spanned two years, allowing for initial decision, implementation, review, and modification in the second year. It related to the Year 12 program.

> It was a heated debate. It ended up going to a vote and they ended up
> compromising.
> There was a democratic process, people were allowed to have their say, no
> one was shut down, and in the end we got a result that people were happy
> with. (FG2B)

Clearly this was an established pattern of behaviour: difference of opinion was seen as productive, its use was embedded into the culture of the school.

A second example where disequilibrium was productive was epitomised by *considerate, caring, courageous discussion*. The situation occurred over a matter of weeks, but it was specifically noted in the interview that it reflected a pattern of problem solving, a way of working adopted by the team in question, although not typical of the school. Here, disequilibrium was allowed to exist in the short term, and discomfort acknowledged in ways that allowed new solutions to be suggested, new ways of looking at things to evolve. A key aspect of this situation was recognition that the way people are feeling is an important element of this way of dealing with disequilibrium.

> Then the teaching staff took the lead and said, this is what was the reasoning behind it, however we've got the impression this is how people are feeling. And once we acknowledged that 'we are aware that you are feeling unhappy about it', then the EAs [Education Assistants] were more inclined to speak up and say yes, this is an issue. And between us we could discuss what was working and what wasn't and we've actually made an agreement to change the format and make it a bit more informal, less rigid, and try and include more ideas from everyone. So by acknowledging that it was a bit awkward, it actually came to a better solution than if we had said 'this is how it is going to be'. And it has actually made for a more relaxed working environment because it had been a source of awkwardness between everyone. (Int2)

In discussing the place of disequilibrium in decision-making, the participant reiterated its value, stating that she thought there was a better chance of coming to a good and fair decision if differences were acknowledged and valued.

In both of these examples the participants focussed on the style and manner of communication, and the effectiveness of that style for their particular context. These were not isolated examples: each of the focus groups discussed the importance of communication and/or the problems associated with inappropriate or inadequate communication.

Opportunities Avoided: Deflecting or Silencing Difference of Opinion

Some leaders actively avoid situations where disequilibrium can occur. Four participants gave examples where open difference of opinion was not acceptable. Again, a range of strategies were evident: these included deflecting the issue, and the use of power to silence opposition.

In one case the principal ignored and avoided any discussion of perceived problems:

> It seems to be it's more like: 'Here's a problem, let's not talk about it because it will make it more real.' We pretend it's not happening, we just won't talk about it, and we'll solve it on our own. One of the principal's greatest weaknesses is – my perception – is lack of communication – it's devoid… In the main people play ostrich and head in the sand and pretend that something that is an issue isn't an issue and either ignore it and it will go away. Sometimes things do go away, and sometimes they blow up! (Int4)

The participant agreed with the interviewer's summary:

> And what you have described is a situation where this disequilibrium or discomfort or potential conflict is ignored as long as possible and really acts against decisions being made in a timely manner and also against the best decisions being made.

The participant responded:

> Without a doubt. It's got to do with the fact that he very much avoids decisions and conflict at all costs. This can have serious negative consequences when you ignore something for too long." (Int4)

The more common strategy, described by three of the participants, was that of top-down decision-making, either by the principal or the school board. In two of the situations there was no possibility of input from staff or other stakeholder groups, no opportunity to voice an opinion or contribute a perspective. Staff responded with passive compliance or covert resistance.

The bottom line is nobody talks because they don't want to be fired. (FG3C)

In the third situation, the opportunity to air an alternative position was, in theory, present, but:

Those who disagreed did not say so… It was kind of like a top down decision because no one from the bottom said anything. (FG3B)

There were a further three participants who had not been involved in decision-making and who did not elaborate with examples. On their questionnaires they wrote:

Sorry, no examples as these have all been top down. (Q1A)

Sorry. I don't have any example. Teachers do not have any 'say' in the decisions made. (Q1B)

Unfortunately I have not been present in a meeting when an important educational decision was made - only minor "dance floor decisions". (Q1C)

When added to the four cases described in this section, this makes a total of 39% of participants who were not getting 'on the job' professional development in the area of participative decision-making. This highlights the importance of including opportunities for appropriate skill development in university courses.

The Curriculum of the MEd Program

Thirty five MEd units were identified as being available to the participants of the study. These included core units, and units in specialisations such as *Behaviour management* and *Special education*. The unit outline for each unit was examined for specific reference to the processes and dynamics of decision-making and three elements identified in this study as key to the constructive use of difference of opinion in decision-making (see *Discussion* section, following). These elements are: school culture and politics (specific reference to the culture of the individual classroom, only, were not counted); face-to-face communication skills; and interpersonal skills/the affective domain. Table 1 summarises the data for specific reference to each of these elements in the unit outlines. These references occurred in only five units.

Element	No of units	% of units	Specialisations
Dynamics of decision-making	0	0	
School culture and politics	2	6%	Behaviour management, Leadership
Face-to-face communication skills	3	9%	Behaviour management, Leadership
Affective domain	2	6%	Behaviour management, Leadership

Table 1. Analysis of unit outlines for four elements

It is clear from these statistics that, overall, the MEd program does not deliberately seek to develop in its students those skills that are necessary for proactive and positive use of disequilibrium and difference of opinion in decision-making. Even in the *Leadership* specialisations, which feature most strongly in the statistics, the references to these areas are minimal. None of the units included a significant focus on any of the elements.

Two graduate attributes overlap with these areas: *Ability to communicate* and *Ability to work in teams*; 74% of unit outlines included reference to graduate attributes. Of those that did make reference to graduate attributes, 92% included the ability to communicate and 50% included the ability to work in teams. These offer the potential to develop face-to-face communication and the affective domain, so the analysis in the preceding paragraphs may be conservative.

Discussion

At the outset we posed two questions to be addressed within the context of decision-making: *What do the experiences of participants of difference of opinion reveal about its productive use?* and *What factors limit or constrain its use?* The answers are mutually reinforcing. Three issues emerge: school culture; the need for good face-to-face communication; and interpersonal skills, the affective domain. These map readily to the *Inclusive framework for professional development* developed by Owen and Dunmill (2013), which uses three interacting dimensions: the political, the professional and the personal.

In each of the examples where difference of opinion was used productively, teaching staff had the opportunity to have an input. In each case the culture of the school was such that staff opinion was valued and respected. In three of the examples of productive use, the decision appeared to be made in the forum where the discussion occurred, although, presumably, the principal had power of veto. In the other two examples, advice was provided to the principal, and the recommended position was adopted. In each of these five cases, the participants spoke positively about their experiences.

Participants whose experience of difference of opinion was positive highlighted the importance of the affective domain, of good communication and interpersonal skills. In the example of *Robust and respectful debate*, the participant highlighted discussion and difference of opinion amongst teaching staff. In contrast, in the case of *Considerate, caring, courageous discussion*, the points of difference were between teachers and educational assistants, where status had to be carefully negotiated. In both situations, individual staff participating in the decision-making clearly had adequate levels of interpersonal and communication skills and the schools were thus able to capitalise on alternative viewpoints to achieve better outcomes.

Participants who provided examples where difference of opinion was avoided or suppressed also identified school culture as an issue. For example, in the case of FG3B, the school culture was such that those who disagreed did not feel able to voice their views. This inhibited the productive use of difference of opinion.

Communication and interpersonal skills are crucial. Int4 noted of the principal, "...he's lacking leadership and management skills…. One of the principal's greatest weaknesses is lack of communication… he very much avoids decisions and conflict at all costs" (Int4).

McCormick, Barnett, Alavi & Newcombe (2006), writing in the context of governance in independent schools, emphasise the importance of group process in decision-making, and include communication and interpersonal relationships as key elements. Participants in this study came from government and independent schools, but placed similar importance on these elements.

Irrespective of whether their experiences had been positive or negative, participants in this study wanted to be more involved in decision-making. This is consistent with the findings of Sarafidou and Chatziioannidis (2013), who suggest that, not only do teachers want more involvement in decision-making, but also that the "strongest predictor of both teachers' sense of efficacy and job satisfaction was their participation in decisions concerning teacher issues" (p. 170).

There are implications here for ongoing teacher education. At the pre-service level, the development of communication and interpersonal skills is overtly considered in relation to the teaching of children. In our own university, at least, attention is also given to the development of appropriate professional relationships between the pre-service teacher and the mentor teachers. However, it is too early to attend to issues such as ways of influencing school decision-making.

In the case of postgraduate programs designed for qualified, experienced teachers, the situation is different. Findings in this research suggest that the affective domain needs ongoing attention, as do issues of communication and decision-making, and frameworks for understanding the culture and politics of the school. If the unit outlines accurately reflect the situation, this is not occurring in our own MEd program at present. However lecturing staff have flexibility within the unit outlines. They can include a focus on face-to-face communication and affective skill development within the commitment to meeting the graduate attributes. They can incorporate learning activities such as the one associated with this research. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the participants in this study appreciated the focus on the use of disequilibrium – they continued discussing the impact of school culture on decision-making in the weeks that followed the session. Given that program review has recently occurred, encouraging this informal approach may be what is needed in the short term.

Heifetz and his associates suggest that adaptive change is dependent on the productive use of disequilibrium and the energy that is associated with this. The participants in this study want more opportunities for participation in decision-making, and are interested in the productive use of difference of opinion, but only five have experienced it. Opportunities to develop the necessary skills 'on-the-job' are limited, and are not prescribed in the MEd course in which they are enrolled. Given these findings it is not surprising that change in education is extremely difficult to achieve.

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