

# CAUSES OF TEACHER CONFLICT IN THE TOWNSHIP SECONDARY SCHOOLS - A DOCTORAL REPORT

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to report the findings of the study that investigated the causes of conflict in the township secondary schools – as viewed by the deputy principals. A questionnaire was developed and six deputy principals from six secondary schools of the Lejweleputswa district completed it. Data analysis was mainly qualitative, with numbers and tables used to enhance the qualitative understanding. It was found that the shortage of resources, poor communication and taking care of learners of absent teachers were the major causes of conflict in the schools surveyed. The conclusion was that conflict existed in the township secondary schools, and that the shortage of resources and teacher absenteeism played a major role in teacher conflict. It was recommended that the use of available resources be properly monitored, and that stress and conflict management sessions be introduced for teachers.

**Keywords:** Teacher conflict, township schools, causes of conflict.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is overwhelming evidence to confirm that conflict among teachers creates problems for the smooth running of the academic programmes in schools, and threatens to compromise the unity and collegiality among teachers in many schools (Armstrong, 2000; Rahim 2002). In the township schools teacher conflict is prevalent mainly due to the historical past of these schools. The township schools experience serious shortages of staffing, resources and facilities (Simons & Peterson, 2000). These shortages may create tensions among teachers. In addition, teachers were trained to be harsh on learners, to use oppressive teaching methods, and to take full control of classroom situations (Maluleke, 2009). The high-handedness in handling learners may offend other colleagues and fuel tensions among teachers. The indication is that some effects of the apartheid past continue to negatively affect teachers and in many schools.

Jehn (1997) describes conflict as a result of differences of ideas and opinions among members of an organisation about the task being performed. Conflict is viewed as incompatibility of interests, and is often caused by a misalignment of goals, motivations and actions (Chen, Minson & Tormala, 2010). According to Chen, et al (2010) the incompatibility of interests, goals, motivations and actions may sometimes not be real, but only be perceived to exist. Therefore, conflict may results from such perceptions.

The school is usually a large organisation, with many operations and activities, and with many people involved in these activities. Consequently, conflict is likely to occur, due to differences in goals, strategies and approaches (Baker, 2005). Feelings such as anger, suspicion, fear and rejection are usually associated with conflict (Van der Westhuizen, 2002). Le Roux (2002) states that conflict between groups within an organisation results in increased personality clashes, decreased mutual understanding, poor communication and reduced performance. Conflict also negatively affects emotions and the self-concept (Robbins, 2000). Conflict among teachers may have a negative impact on the health and the lifestyle of teachers. Many teachers experience low morale; some complain about illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes, ulcers and heart attacks; while others plan to leave the profession, or go on early retirement because of continuous interpersonal conflict (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2004; Steyn, 2002). All the aforementioned issues are good recipes for lack of cooperation among workers, leading to poor production or poor results within an organisation or school.

Conflict is something that is usually considered to be a negative behaviour. However, conflict is part of life and it is inevitable in the school situation (Ivancevich & Matteson, 2002; Robbins, 2000). Conflict should not always be viewed as something bad, rather as something that could help the organisation to grow (Steyn, 2002). Robbins and De Cenzo (2004) observe that organisational conflict can best be understood as a dynamic process underlying organisational behaviour. Functional conflict may promote higher worker enthusiasm, the implementation of better decisions, and a search for new approaches that may resolve disagreements or long-standing problems; it may also energise the conflicting parties to be more creative and to experiment with new ideas (Gordon, 2002).

However, this study focussed on the negative aspects of conflict. The general trend suggests that the deputy principal is responsible for teachers, learners and academic activities in many countries, while the school principal is mainly responsible for administrative matters of the school (Li, Guohui, & Eppler, 2008; Ngidi & Sibaya, 2004; Steyn, 2002). This implies that deputy principals in many schools are the ones dealing with conflict among teachers. Marsella (2005) also noted that deputy principals, especially male deputy principals, enforce strict adherence to policies and regulations. Consequently, conflict is mainly considered in relationship to production and performance at work, and not in terms of how it hurts others' feelings (Marsella, 2005). It was also noted that female deputy principals consider feelings of individuals affected by the conflict, and find ways of addressing these concerns, while male deputy principals use more aggressive approaches to resolve conflict (Steyn, 2002; Thakadi & Lemmer, 2002). Although the gender of the deputy principals was not considered in this study, it is important for the deputy principals to be sensitive to the feelings of affected teachers when handling conflict.

For the purpose of this paper, the deputy principals were to report on what they observed as causes of conflict among teachers in their schools.

## **2. RESEARCH QUESTION**

*This study sought to answer the following question:*

- What are the causes of conflict in the township secondary schools as viewed by the deputy principals?

## **3. METHOD**

### **3.1 Design**

The study was a descriptive survey of teachers in one district of the Free State Province. Although the study was mainly qualitative, graphs, tables, numbers and percentages were used. This is in line with the views of Silverman (2001), who believes that simple counting techniques can offer a means to survey the whole corpus of data ordinarily lost in an intensive qualitative research. The numbers enhance understanding in a qualitative study (Babbie, 2007; Cresswell, 2001). Omoyemiju (2011) also believes that the qualitative approach consolidates and gives meaning to the quantitative data.

### **3.2 Sample**

Six deputy principals drawn from six secondary schools of the Lejweleputswa district participated in this study. Purposive sampling was employed to select deputy principals from different secondary schools in the district. Many secondary schools had two deputy principals, one dealing with administrative and financial matters, and the other dealing with non-administrative matters (particularly disciplinary, academic and teaching matters). The deputy principals dealing with non-administrative matters were selected for the study.

### **3.3 Instruments**

A questionnaire was developed, and the deputy principals had to indicate which factors they viewed as contributing to the stress situation of township secondary school teachers. Semi-structured interviews were also used as a supplementary source of data collection. Interviews were preferred to other forms of data collection as they enabled the researcher to enter into a two-way communication with the participants, and they also enabled probing and prompting on answers given – an excise which enabled the participants to express themselves freely and to provide more information.

### **3.4 Procedures**

The researcher personally delivered the questionnaires to the participants, and personally collected them after a week. This exercise ensured a 100% return of the questionnaires. The deputy principals cooperated with the researcher. The interviews were conducted with the participants during their free time. This was mainly after school or during the seventh hour of the school (during the seventh hour learners are released and only teachers remain at school). A tape-recorder was used, with the permission of the participants. Notes were also taken during the interviews.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

The permission to conduct the research was sought from the Department of Basic Education, as well as from the principals of participating schools. The necessary appointments were made with the deputy principals and teachers. It was ensured that the study did not interfere with teaching and learning in the school, as well as with the programmes or work schedules of the participating deputy principals.

The participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and that their information would not be used for any other purpose, except for the study. The confidentiality of information provided was also guaranteed.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Data was qualitatively analysed. The responses were recorded, codes were allocated to similar responses and patterns were established. An attempt was made to classify the responses into the following categories: frequency, causes, circumstances and roles. This implies that the number of responses per item was recorded; the causes of conflict were classified as resources-based or person-based; the circumstances under which conflict occurred were determined, and the roles of the teachers involved in conflict were also determined.

## 4. RESULTS

**Table 1. Causes of conflict as viewed by deputy principals**

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always	Total
Bad communication	0	50	0	50	100
Shortage of resources	17	50	33	0	100
Use of venues	50	50	0	0	100
Teaching load	0	17	33	50	100
Gossiping	0	50	17	33	100
Classes of absent colleagues	0	17	17	66	100
Mentoring and monitoring newly appointed teachers	33	50	17	0	100
Sharing of resources	0	0	83	17	100
Teachers' poor control of classes	0	17	50	33	100
Poor performance of learners	0	17	50	33	100

The sharing of resources was viewed by 83% of the participants as often causing conflict while the remaining 17% of the participants viewed it as always causing conflict among teachers. The taking care of classes of absent teachers was viewed by 66% of the participants as always causing conflict, and by 17% of the participants as often causing conflict. The teachers' poor control of classes, and the poor performance of learners were viewed by 50% of the participants as often causing conflict, and by 33% of the participants as always causing conflict among teachers. The mentoring and monitoring of newly appointed teachers was not rated as a serious cause of conflict since 33% of the participants indicated that it never caused conflict at all, while 50% of the participants reported that it sometimes caused conflict and only 17% said it often caused conflict. About 50% of the participants reported that bad communication often caused conflict; while another 50% of the participants reported that bad communication sometimes caused conflict. Gossip was reported by 33% of the participants as often causing conflict, and by 50% of the participants as sometimes causing conflict among teachers. The use of venues was viewed by 50% of the participants as never causing conflict, and another 50% as sometimes causing conflict.

The above figures indicate a clear relationship between resources and conflict. The shortage of resources, the sharing of resources, teacher overload and absent colleagues imply the over-use of existing resources, leading to higher levels of tension and conflict.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The shortages of resources seemed to be a serious cause of conflict among teachers in the township secondary schools. Five (83%) of the six respondents reported that the sharing of resources often caused conflict among teachers, while one respondent (17%) reported that the sharing of resources always caused conflict. The provision of educational resources during the apartheid government was racially based, with black schools receiving inadequate funds for their needs (Maluleke, 2009). Consequently, township schools consistently experienced serious shortages of staff and facilities. Although a lot of money is spent on education every year, the backlog created by the apartheid government has not yet been adequately addressed by the democratic government. Therefore, the negative impact of these shortages continues to cause problems for teachers in the township schools.

The supervision of classes of absent teachers also contributed enormously to conflict among teachers in the township secondary schools. Four (66%) of the six respondents reported that taking care of classes of absent teachers was always a cause of conflict among teachers, while one (17%) reported that it was often the case and another one (17%) reported that it was sometimes the case. The common practice in many secondary schools is that when a teacher is absent from school, one or more teachers are compelled to leave their work or sacrifice their free periods and keep order in the class of the absent teacher. Although this practice helps to maintain order in the school, it annoys teachers who have to keep order, and thus become angry with the absent teacher – as he/she is viewed as the cause of their irritation. This could cause tension or conflict among teachers. The figures could be indicative of the high rate of absenteeism among teachers in the surveyed schools. The teachers generally stay away from work due to reasons such as stress, sickness, family matters and workshops (Dumler & Skinner, 2008). Carlsen (2012) found that a high rate of absence negatively influences group norms and makes work more burdensome to others. Carlsen (2012) states that if such teacher absence is not effectively addressed by the school management, more and more teachers may stay away from school (spiralling effects), as they wish to avoid doing the work of absent teachers.

Bad communication and gossip were also viewed as causing conflict among teachers of the schools surveyed. All the participants agreed that bad communication and gossip contributed to conflict. Communication problems could be common in the township school due to lack of email and intercom systems. This implies that a word of mouth could be the only available means to deliver messages – a practice which may be open to distortion of information. Literature indicates that information may be distorted in order to disadvantage someone or another group (Collins, et al, 2011; Laidre, Lamb, Shultz, & Olsen, 2013). It was found that teachers who have attended workshops either did not want to share information with colleagues who did not attend the workshop, or deliberately gave them incomplete or wrong information (Mji & Makgato, 2006).

It is for this reason that many teachers want to go to the workshops themselves, and not expect one person to go and bring information for the others. Ellwardt, Labianca and Wittek (2012) found that being an object of negative gossip can cause consequences similar to victimization, such as limiting work-related success and thwarting the fundamental psychological need to belong.

The use of venues was viewed by 50% of the participants as sometimes causing conflict among teachers, while the other 50% reported that it never caused conflict among teachers. The use of venues in many schools is regulated by means of rosters, and in schools where these rosters are functional the clashes of activities may be effectively minimised or eradicated. However, in schools where rosters are not well-structured, or where these venues are too few, access to these venues may be restricted. This may raise tensions and lead to conflict among teachers. The common problem in the township schools is that venues may be available, but resources within the venues may be inadequate or non-available.

The mentoring of newly appointed teachers was reported by 50% of the participants as sometimes causing conflict, and by 17% as often causing conflict; while 33% of the participants reported that this never caused conflict. The mentors are more experienced individuals, willing to share their knowledge with someone less experienced in a relationship of mutual trust (Harrison, Dymoke & Pell, 2006). Due to constant changes taking place in education, teacher mentoring has become a complex process. The curriculum in South Africa has changed a number of times since 1994, making it difficult for teachers to become experts in their fields. The implication is that the experienced teachers may also be struggling with the new teaching approaches. They can, therefore, not act as mentors of the newly appointed teachers. This could be a source of conflict among teachers.

The shortage of resources and poor communication were reported as the main causes of conflict among teachers in the open-ended part of the questionnaire, as well as in the interviews. There were indications that some teachers wanted to monopolise the use of certain tools and facilities such as the (geography) globe, laptops, markers, sports fields and laboratories. The participants commonly made the following comments: 'we never get a chance to use it'; 'my team can't play on that field' and 'it is only his stuff in this venue'. Poor communication in the form of gossip and bad language were also reported as causes of conflict. Participants mentioned cliques as common in the schools surveyed. The participants reported that many teachers, when referring to fellow colleagues, used words such as 'gossip mongers' and 'ndabazabantu' (or shortened as 'ndabi') (meaning someone who is interested in others' affairs).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The study indicates that conflict is a serious problem in township secondary schools. The shortages of resources, teacher absenteeism and poor communication contribute a lot to teacher conflict in schools. The historical past of South Africa, especially the inadequate provision of resources for the township schools, plays an important role in teacher conflict. The township school teachers are compelled to compete for the scarce resources. The competition leads to teacher conflict. The bad communication, the gossip and the cliques that are prevalent in many schools are partly due to the existence of conflict among teachers. The existence of conflict in a school may contribute to poor performance and low morale – factors which may lead to poor results. The role of the deputy principals in handling teacher conflict is crucial, since any feelings of favouritism by one group could have a negative impact on teacher relationships within the school.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

*The following recommendations are made:*

*Proper control of available resources:*

The use of available resources and facilities is to properly controlled, to avoid any conflict resulting from such use. A roster could be drawn to control and monitor the utilisation of resources.

*Conflict management workshops:*

There is a need to help the township school teachers to manage conflict, or to acquire skills in conflict management. Such skills could help them to deal with both intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict. Indirectly, the workshops could also help them to deal with stress, which is also found to be prevalent among school teachers.

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