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ANALYSING THE VARIABLES THAT CAUSE CONFLICT AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS: AN INTERPRETIVISTS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is an unavoidable human phenomenon as where there is interaction there is a possibility of conflict arising. Conflicts are neither wholly constructive nor entirely disparaging, but the ways they are managed make them either beneficial or detrimental. Schools, like other workplaces, are not immune to conflicts. The goal of this exploratory work was to look at the elements that contribute to teacher conflict in selected secondary schools in an Eastern Cape educational province in South Africa. The researcher employed an interpretivist technique. An interview was conducted to collect data from ten teachers and five principals who were sampled for the study. The findings of this study demonstrate that conflicts are caused by unhealthy and unmanaged competition, poor communication in the schools amongst the teachers and school management teams, teacher workload and the leadership styles of principals. Finally, a synopsis of recommendations was made to assist the policy makers, departmental officials, the school Governing Bodies (SGBs) together with the School Management Teams (SMTs), principals, teachers, and parents in the proper management of conflict in secondary schools.

Keywords: Conflict, Resistance, Cliques, Interpersonal Relations, and Leadership Styles.

INTRODUCTION

This empirical study explores the latent forces that trigger conflicts among teachers at selected secondary schools in the Eastern Cape South Africa and their impact on Secondary Schools atmosphere. Conflict is common in all organizations and presents several opportunities and difficulties (McNally, 2020). The term “conflict” can be defined in several ways, especially if each is based on the conditions that lead to its occurrence. It is inevitable in workplace settings and can arise between managers and subordinates or among secondary school teachers at the same level. Given its negative ramifications and consequences, managing it is regarded as a key management competency. Considering this, this study examines the factors contributing to conflict among secondary school teachers and how it can be managed. The study also recommends strategies to bridle the crisis that existed in the education district. As much as conflict can be destructive, it can also be constructive by altering wrong decision- making and implementation of activities that are ineffective for quality teaching and learning. Furthermore, conflict can be beneficial, if it orchestrates measures capable of improving practices that ascertain a harmonious environment for learning business.

The aim of this research includes the need to understand the factors that contribute to conflict among secondary school teachers, the need to address the ongoing conflicts, and the need to fill a research gap related to the factors that contribute to conflict at secondary schools.

Frontrunners in the educational sector, frequently spend excessive time preventing or mitigating conflict (Adeyemi & Aigbavboa, 2020). Most often than not, this fallout result in diminished performance in other domains. Keeping this in mind, research in this arena is envisaged to enhance quality and output in a school setting and it can also help to reduce conflict among stakeholders in other sectors. The role to be played by managers in handling conflict cannot be disvalued. Raines, (2019) opined that conflict is at the core of many leaders' best ideas, as well as at the root of their worst failures. When it is poorly managed, it can cost organizations greatly in terms of wasted management time, income, lawsuits, and, in certain cases, violence and sabotage.

Some researchers (Peter, 2010; Ahmad & Nawaz 2010; Makaye and Ndofirepi, 2012; Park, Lee & Shin, 2015, Wagude, 2015; Harmsen, R., Helms-Lorenz, M., Maulana, R., van Veen, K. & van Veldhoven, M., 2019 and Adeyemi & Aigbayboa 2020) contend that unhealthy competition, leadership style, gender differences and tribalism contribute to conflict. This research explores the major forces that cause conflict among the teachers at secondary schools, like poor communication, jealousy, cliques, excessive workload, resistance to policies, and their impacts on the selected secondary schools.

A New York based study conducted by Morton, (2006) shows that the impact of cliques and informal groups among teachers has a negative impact on the culture of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the findings clearly showed that the leadership style adopted by a school management immensely contributes to a harmonious school environment or disorganized school atmosphere. a study conducted by Makaye and Ndofirepi, (2012) in Zimbabwe revealed that conflicts exist in most schools between the principal and the teachers over unequal distribution and allocation of resources. The finding revealed that teachers were dissatisfied with the ways in which problems were handled and resolved in schools.

In many work-settings, conflict can be a repercussion of poor communication and a lack of trust among stakeholders. Ensuring effective communication among teachers in schools can greatly contribute to resolving conflict primarily at all levels of the institution (Oyewobi, Djouani, & Kurien, 2020). In a related study, Chan, and Lau, 2014 allude to the fact that cconflict occurs when two or more people do not agree on an issue or course of action. And conflict escalate when it is not effectively managed by the relevant managers in an organization. In this regard, managers play a crucial role in identifying and managing workplace disputes at an early stage. consequently, school managers can be the cause and the solution to disagreements occurring in schools, as well the management style of managers could contribute to conflict in a school setting (Makaye & Ndofirepi, 2012). Several studies had been conducted in field of conflict management and conflict resolution, however a few of these circumvent their locust on senior secondary schools. Therefore, beside the theoretical benefits of this studies, its practical benefits are that it will enable transformational leaders, specifically education regulation bodies, to appreciate and be able to

better manage the dominant forces that give rise to conflict among teachers in secondary schools and thus counteract the negative effects on the culture of teaching and learning.

According to Volkan et al, (1990) humans have a propensity to discriminate against each other which leads to hostility and creation of enemies. This phenomenon occurs both at individual and group levels. This would explain the complications of group behaviors particularly related to incompatible group relationships that exist among cliques in a working environment.

Cunningham, (1998) in the 1970s and 1980s developed a Human Needs Theory (HNT) of human behaviour. It is based on the hypothesis that humans have basic needs that must be satisfied to maintain stable societies. Humans struggles to fulfill their unmet wants on an individual, social, and societal level, is in this case one of the fundamental reasons of the persistent of intractable conflict in organizations.

Schools, like any other employer, may indulge in conflict. School environments are also marked by a variety of confrontations that in most cases cannot always be averted.

Consequently, this study will investigate the major forces contributing to conflict among teachers at secondary schools as well as review the kind of leadership styles used in schools, the causes of poor interpersonal relations among teachers, the causes of teacher's resistance to policy implementation in schools, and the impact of cliques and informal teachers' groupings on the culture of teaching and learning. The study will suggest possible strategies helpful to minimize the occurrence of conflicts.

METHOD

The researchers used the case study and the interpretive approach both in collecting and analysing the data. The case study design was suitable for this study because it allows the researcher to comprehend the subject or situation reduces the potentials of bias (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019). Robert (2009) stipulates that case study helps to provide understanding of a complex phenomenon. and. The case study design also offers an opportunity for one facet of a problem to be studied in-depth within a limited time scale. this was why the current researchers adopted a case study to explore the major driving forces influencing conflict among teachers at selected schools.

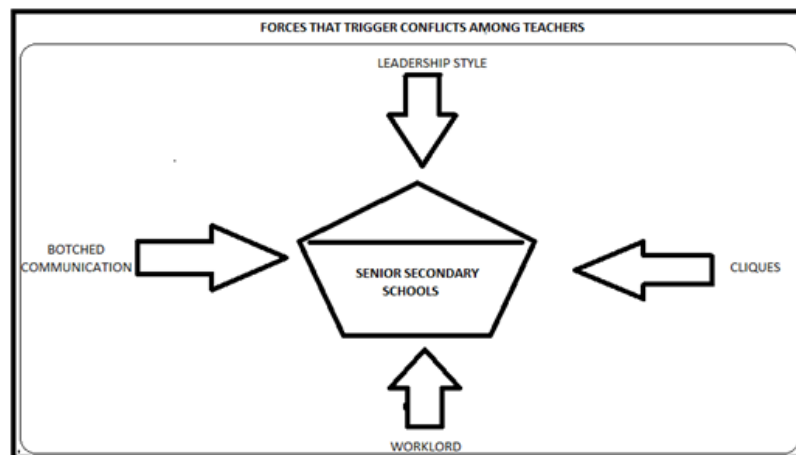
The qualitative method provides multifaceted verbatim descriptions of how the participants experienced the forces that contribute to conflict among teachers in the secondary schools. The effectiveness of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue (Tracy, 2019). This study applied an interpretive paradigm because a qualitative research approach was used in the collection and analysis of the data. The rationale was to establish each participants' assessments of the major forces that contribute to conflict among teachers at the secondary schools where they worked. each individual participant thus constructed his/her own reality about the driving forces behind the conflict in his/her school.

Data Collection

For collecting the data in this study, a convenience sampling method was used to select the sampled teachers and principals. Ten teachers and five principals were selected from five different secondary schools in an education district in South Africa's Eastern cape. To collect the data from the participants, the researchers employed face-to-face in-depth individual interviews to gather in-depth information about their experiences and opinions on the subject matter. The data were analysed by capturing the words and direct word patterns of the participants who were interviewed using audio recordings. Subsequently, the researchers categorized and coded the data and then grouped them into themes. The research followed all ethical requirements. The research study was explained in detail to the participants, including benefits, procedures, and confidentiality. The participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research study at any time. Besides, a permission to conduct this study was granted by the department of education Eastern Cape.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

Although there are several factors that give rise to conflict among teachers at secondary schools, the findings of this study revealed that the causes explained below were the dominant causes of conflict in the selected schools in the Eastern Cape. The conceptual framework for this study is represented with the diagram below which illustrates the four forces that contribute to conflict in the sampled schools.



Botched Communication

At the top of the driving forces for conflict in senior schools, this study identified lack of proper communication channels among secondary school teachers and botched communication. For instance, a respondent complained,

Despite her early age, our School principal needs to be taught communication skill. To me, there is no respect and courtesy in the way she addresses everyone [in] this School. she cannot communicate let alone solving conflict among her subordinates.”

Consequently, the lack of ability to correctly communicate and resolve conflict may harm behaviour by devastating the ability to develop and maintain good relationships among staff.

Failure to communicate efficiently could lead to conflict which can harm an organization such as a school.

Poor communication between teachers and managers results in teachers being unaware of new policies or circulars which need to be implemented. A teacher research participant noted,

Some teachers within the school are privy to information given to them by the principal about administrative decisions. Sometimes they do not share this information with other teachers until they have used it to secure more reputation for themselves. I think this is one of the major things that causes disunity among us in the school.

Moreover, lack of communication can lead to misinterpretation where an employee could believe that his/her approach of carrying out the organisational task is accurate when it is actually incorrect. As acknowledged by one of the teachers who took part in the study, “*poor communication has some ramifications in schools.*” he stressed that “*Less communication between teachers and managers cause fallouts (between the parties).and when they are becoming unaware of new policies or circulars.*” Communication-based barriers may be the result of differences in speaking styles, writing styles, and non-verbal communication styles (Forbat & Barclay, 2019). Botched communication is found to be a contributing factor leading to misperceptions and misunderstandings among staff and as a result it can lead to long-standing conflict.

Workload Allocation

In the study, another element that triggers friction and conflict was workload related; problems concerning duties and obligations. Workload relates, among others, to the number of teaching subjects or learning areas that are assigned to an educator, and how well he/she can accomplish the required work timely. Some teachers in the research area were dissatisfied because subjects were assigned to them that they were not well equipped to teach. One of our research participants stated that,

...when a teacher has been given certain [subject] areas he/she is not really acquainted with, that can create a lot of tension because he/she has to learn it properly before he/she can teach the students. It becomes time consuming to perfectly master what to teach amid other mandatory responsibilities.

To address this cause of dissatisfaction, a system must be in place that allows educators to teach areas of their specialties. This will promote productivity at all levels in affected schools. Another research participant pointed at inequitable allocation of teaching duties as a cause of conflict:

Our school has an extremely limited number of math and science teachers, therefore the few of us have to be overloaded with extra classes. In fact, we have to organize class even on Saturdays to cover up, especially at the time [when] we prepare our grade six learners for matriculation Exams.

Teachers failing to meet deadlines because of heavy workload creates pressure and lead to shifting of burden on to other teachers. The research participants who had this experience explained that it causes frustration. Many participants perceived that excessive workload creates dissatisfaction and culminates in conflict between the authorities and the subordinate staff in schools. High learner enrolment in a classroom and much paperwork impact on the instructional practices, administrative duties, and on time during examination paper or assignment marking sessions. A teacher noted,

Workload is one of the things that causes conflict in my school. Some teachers fail to submit their work because it is ridiculously huge for them to accomplish before the deadline.”

Another asserted that the workload was important and that:

staff members must be treated with equity and fairness in distributing the work to teachers. This is one of the reasons my school is considered among the best among other competitors. Staff members are productive, and it is their [sic] diligence is observed through the outcome of our product.

A respondent Principal puts it in this way...

I think the best way is to avoid implementing things that lead to unnecessary workload for teachers.”

These assertions have support of the respondent teachers, one of who says “...if the school managers will consider that teachers are human beings, they supposed not to be overloaded with responsibilities that they cannot fulfil at a prescribed time.” These suggestions are apt to address problems caused by workload in senior secondary Schools.

All this support the position in the literature, that “principals and teachers may experience conflict owing to overload of tasks” (Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana, van Veen, and van Veldhoven 2019). This implies that workload for teachers and principals has some impact on their professional duties and could result in stress which could generate conflict if it is not properly handled.

Effects of Cliques on Schools

Teacher responses in this research show that, among the major causes of conflict is the existence of cliques and informal in-groups among teachers. Some teachers associate with select staff members in the staffroom and in the school vicinity and neglect others. As a result, they would share their views and problems with only those with whom they relate well. In some cases, they would engage in positive healthy competition among each other in ways that promote the business of teaching and learning. On the other hand, negative behaviour of cliques among teachers in the schools promotes tribalism, prejudice, bigotry, and stereotypes which were exceedingly difficult to control. A principal observed,

“Wherever people come together, there is the possibility of division to occur. In my school, conflicts are often caused by unauthorised groups and gossip found within the school among teachers.”

Another respondent, a teacher, explained,

“In our school, we experience teachers grouping based on educational status, social class, sex, age, and work experience. The conflict stemmed from this grouping because some teachers discriminate other teachers which eventually culminate to poor relationships among teachers.”

Yet another principal of a government school also explained,

in our school, teachers often group themselves according to their interests, age, gender, and denominations, and in certain cases, nationality.....”

All these statements and experiences about cliques have support in Wagude, (2015) who stressed that informal groups in a school develop without advance preparation, that they develop because

of individual, and group needs and that have several advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, one of the participants stated that,

informal groups could initiate communication networks, which can facilitate speedier decision making, it can ease the flow of information, circumventing lines of authority, and can improve the cooperation between departments.

Informal groups may also be formed because of the need to establish a shield of defence against the school management. The negative aspect of this situation is that the goals of the informal group could conflict with those of the school, leading to conflict with the management.

The findings in this study shows that the existence of cliques may ensure teacher motivation in the schools when it encourages healthy competition among teachers. In certain instances, cliques help in resolving each other's problems and anxiety linked issues in the schools. On the other hand, cliques and informal groups may operate in ways that prevent crucial information from been shared with rival groups in the school, and this situation can lead to unhealthy competition and fight among teachers. As Ford, (2019) noted, informal groups in schools could intensify envy and mistrust among teachers and it could stimulate grounds for unprofessional behaviour from rival groups

Mechanisms to deal with the negative effects of cliques in the schools include treating all teachers equally; not practicing prejudice in the school; enacting and publicizing to all stakeholders' policies against animosity, hatred prejudice and racism; monitoring the activities of informal groups in in a way that ensures that teachers put forth the goals of the school before the goals of their informal groups.

Effects of Leadership Styles Adopted by School Management Teams in Schools

The leadership style adopted by a school principal and by school managers can have a positive or negative effect on the smooth running of the school. A teacher state that.

Some principals make all decisions, all planning and only one- way communication takes place in their school and there is total or partial absence of staff participation in running the school affairs.

Negative results can be expected from such predominantly autocratic leaders. Syukri, and Heryanto (2019) also conclude that poor leadership can bolster conflict and increase friction between subordinates and their managers in work environments. It was manifest in this study that poor leadership style results in limited teamwork and disorganized environment in schools. managers who possess a strong democratic leadership approach with a limited autocratic approach created improved working conditions in their schools.

A teacher ascribes the conflict happening in their school to the principal's leadership style.

Our new Principal's style is very dictatorial. Her decisions are very much powerful over us. She made several changes in the school before completing her first year in the school. This happens before she takes her time to deliberate and see what is working and what is not going to work.

Autocratic leaders are the "do as I say" types. Autocratic leaders can cause an institution irreversible damage as they force their subordinates to implement strategies and services in a very narrow way, based upon their subjective or naïve ideas to the detriment of the institution. (Syukri,

& Heryanto, 2019). A considerable number of the participants in this study express dissatisfaction with their principals' management styles. In some of the narratives, teachers criticize behaviours of their principals that could be labeled as authoritarian:

The principal makes changes without consulting those affected by the changes. . . When differences of opinion arise, the principal insists that his or her opinion or solution be followed (i.e., is not open to discussion or compromise)

A school principal who is responsible for the implementation of change in the school must, therefore, be conversant with ways to manage teacher conflict. According to a participant.

More often than not, change places extraordinary pressure on staff. Most staff members are not prepared for the demands made on them by renewal and change because they were not involved at the early stage of the decision making

The participant stressed that conflict could be minimized in schools by involving stakeholders at the initial stage of policy formation. Democratic leadership as a form of governance suggests that leaders can include staff in major decision-making rather than treat them simply as followers (Woods, 2020). Thus, democratic leaders not only offer guidance to their group members, but they also consent to contributions from other group members. With democratic leadership, members of the group participate in the decision-making process.

How does one curb the effects of poor leadership style? Some of the participants suggested strategies for this:

All principals must acquire ample knowledge of leadership, school managers must undergo training which would capacitate and prepare them to lead” Another participant highlighted that, Teachers’ opinions must be considered when a decision is to be taken, and Principals and people with extra responsibilities must not force or coerce teachers to do what is voluntary.

Many relevant literatures confirm that subordinates' satisfaction increases when superiors adopt collaborative, accommodative and all-inclusive management strategies, (Lucia-Palacios, Pérez-López, & Polo-Redondo, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focuses on the prevailing causes of conflict in selected secondary schools in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. These range from autocratic style of leadership by school managers, poor communication, unprofessional ill- treatment of staff by managers, unclear policies in the schools, cliques and informal groups formed by teachers, to tribalism, poor communication, and excessive workload.

The findings of this study show that harmony and success within the educational institutions mostly depend on the quality and the style of the leadership. To ensure good democratic leadership and effective management in secondary schools, this study suggests that the Department of Education should organize management and leadership training workshops for all secondary school principals where they will be capacitated with the appropriate leadership skillset to be used in schools.

Recommendations

The authors recommend that the DoE and other stakeholders like SMTs and Teacher unions, should organize and coordinate change management and awareness training for all secondary school principals. School principals should be trained on how to implement change in their schools in ways that will eliminate resistance from teachers. Also, principals must be educated on the necessity for them to be receptive to plural views and contributions from staff when a change is to be implemented in the schools. It is also recommended that school management teams should conduct proper consultation and awareness training with their teachers when new policies or decisions are to be implemented. Planning sessions should be organized as outings or retreats for schools' staff and principals. It is also recommended that recognition and appreciation events where prizes are awarded for good performances and demonstrated commitment should be organized in schools for teachers.

NB: This paper was drawn from a dissertation by Yusuf Lukman.

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