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Leadership in Crisis: Conflict Dynamics Between Teachers and Head Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Workplace conflict between teachers and head teachers has recently become a pressing organizational issue that affects organizational culture, professional relationships, and psychological well-being of educators. In this regard, the current research aimed at investigating workplace conflict and its possible causes among teachers and head teachers as well as examining the effects of organizational interactions on workplace relations and organizational performance based on LMX Theory. Using the qualitative methodology, the researcher used semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analyses to collect data. Results of the thematic analysis revealed that communication gaps, leadership inflexibility, organizational inequality, and organizational miscommunication played an important role in developing workplace conflict in organizations. In turn, workplace tensions and conflicts led to such consequences as emotional strain, dissatisfaction with one's job, loss of trust, decreased cooperation, and organizational dissatisfaction among teachers. It was concluded that in addition to being an interpersonal problem, workplace conflict is an organizational problem that has a considerable impact on organizational performance. In particular, positive leadership and communication can play an important role in managing conflict.

K E Y W O R D S: Workplace Conflict, School Leadership, Organizational Climate, Teacher–Head Teacher Conflict, Professional Relationships, Educational Management

Introduction

Educational institutions are complex organizational environments in which leadership, communication, interpersonal relationships, and organizational climate jointly shape teachers' professional experiences and institutional functioning. Within schools, teachers and head teachers interact continuously around instructional responsibilities, administrative decisions, resource allocation, discipline, and professional expectations. These interactions are not always harmonious. Differences in leadership approaches, communication patterns, decision-making authority, and perceptions of fairness can generate interpersonal and organizational conflict. Consequently, workplace conflict in schools should not be understood merely as an individual disagreement but as a relational and organizational phenomenon embedded within patterns of leadership and institutional functioning.

Workplace conflict is particularly important in educational settings because teachers depend substantially on their relationships with school leaders for professional support, instructional resources, feedback, participation in decision-making, and recognition. Evidence indicates that conflict and the manner in which it is managed are associated with the quality of the organizational climate in schools. For example, Kalai and Njiro (2022) found that principals'

conflict-management styles were significantly related to teachers' and students' perceptions of school climate. Similarly, research conducted in Pakistan identified personal antagonism, incivility, intolerance, misinterpreted communication, incompatible goals, and stressful working conditions among important sources of interpersonal conflict involving teachers and head teachers (Khan et al., 2021). These findings suggest that conflict may emerge when organizational demands and interpersonal expectations are poorly aligned.

Leadership therefore represents a central mechanism through which workplace conflict can either intensify or be contained. Supportive and constructive leadership can promote communication, trust, collaboration, and psychological safety, whereas ineffective leadership may increase teachers' perceptions of stress, inadequate support, and organizational tension. Lambert et al. (2023), using a mixed-methods design involving 1,850 teachers across 47 schools, found that the quality and stability of school leadership were associated with teachers' perceptions of occupational demands and resources, job satisfaction, and instructional support. Likewise, Tian and Guo (2024) reported that transformational leadership was negatively associated with teacher burnout, with teacher self-efficacy partly explaining this relationship. A systematic review of leadership practices further indicates that school leadership plays an important role in teacher well-being and the attractiveness and sustainability of the teaching profession (Harris et al., 2024). Thus, leadership practices are consequential not only for institutional performance but also for teachers' psychological and professional experiences.

The organizational climate in which teacher–leader interactions occur is equally important. A positive climate characterized by cooperation, communication, support, and constructive interpersonal relationships can provide resources for managing disagreement, whereas an unfavorable climate may facilitate the escalation and persistence of conflict. Recent research has demonstrated that organizational climate is related to teachers' social-emotional competencies and conflict-management capacities (Aldrup et al., 2022). In addition, a systematic review of teacher well-being research found increasing scholarly attention to teachers' occupational well-being while highlighting the continuing need to understand the organizational conditions under which teachers experience stress and reduced well-being (Aziku & Zhang, 2024). A meta-analysis of 173 studies involving nearly 90,000 participants similarly demonstrated that teacher well-being is closely connected with occupational commitment, burnout, and work engagement, emphasizing the importance of organizational and leadership resources in teachers' professional lives (Zhou et al., 2024).

The relationship between teachers and head teachers can be further understood through Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory. LMX conceptualizes leadership as a process of relationship development between leaders and individual members rather than simply as a set of leader behaviors. From this perspective, high-quality exchanges are characterized by trust, respect, support, communication, and mutual obligation, whereas low-quality exchanges involve limited support and weaker relational bonds. Recent educational research supports the relevance of this perspective. For example, Rehman et al. (2021) demonstrated the relevance of LMX to secondary-school teachers' job performance and workplace relationships in Pakistan. Duyan (2022) further found that LMX was associated with teacher burnout through job satisfaction, while Erdoğan (2023) reported positive relationships between LMX, organizational and supervisor support, and teachers' job satisfaction. Research on teacher-leader relationships has likewise shown that LMX quality is connected with relational structures and professional influence within schools (Moolenaar et al., 2021). These

findings indicate that the quality of the teacher–leader relationship may provide an important lens through which conflict, trust, support, and professional cooperation can be understood. Despite this growing literature, an important gap remains. Existing research has extensively examined school leadership, teacher well-being, organizational climate, burnout, and conflict-management practices, but comparatively less attention has been given to how teachers themselves experience and interpret prolonged conflict with head teachers, particularly how such conflicts develop, escalate, affect professional relationships, and influence perceptions of organizational functioning. Quantitative studies can establish associations among leadership, climate, conflict, and well-being, but qualitative inquiry is particularly valuable for examining the meanings, experiences, communication patterns, and relational processes underlying these associations. This gap is especially important in contexts where hierarchical relationships and administrative authority strongly shape teachers' everyday professional experiences.

Research Questions

1. How do workplace conflicts emerge between teachers and head teachers?
2. How do leadership practices influence conflict dynamics within schools?
3. What organizational and professional consequences result from prolonged workplace conflict?

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative case study research design was adopted in order to conduct an examination of the dynamics of conflicts between teachers and head teachers within educational organizations. Qualitative research design was deemed fit for the research as the research sought to investigate the lived experiences of the participants in relation to conflicts within their work environments.

Research Paradigm

The research adopted the interpretive approach because it focuses on the meaning attached to an individual's subjective experience of society. This approach was ideal because it sought to examine the perceptions and experiences of the participants regarding workplace conflicts.

Research Setting

The research was undertaken at a public educational establishment characterized by long-standing workplace conflict among the teaching staff and head teachers. This was the ideal environment to study issues relating to organizational communication, leadership and the relationship between professions.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were made up of teachers and head teachers who were directly affected by workplace conflicts within the organization. The purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants who have experience with conflicts involving teachers and head teachers.

Data Collection Methods

The research involved conducting data using semi-structured interviews, class observation, field notes, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews acted as the major technique for collecting information and emphasized the experience of the participants about issues of communication difficulties, leadership styles, organization tension, and professional relations. Class observations were done to observe the organization interaction and communication issues that occur naturally within the schools' environment.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the gathered data was done using Thematic Analysis based on the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke. This entailed becoming familiarized with the data, generating codes, identifying categories, creating themes, and interpreting patterns associated with rigid leadership, failed communication, tension in organizations, and job dissatisfaction.

Table 1

Sample Coding and Theme Development

Initial Codes	Categories	Themes
Poor communication	Organizational tension	Communication breakdown
Administrative pressure	Leadership rigidity	Power imbalance
Stress, frustration	Emotional strain	Workplace stress
Distrust, withdrawal	Professional dissatisfaction	Reduced cooperation

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility was obtained through triangulation using interviews, observations, fieldnotes, and document analysis. Dependability was established through rigorous documentation of the methodology and the decision-making process during analysis. Confirmability was accomplished through reliance on participant narratives, while transferability was attained through thorough documentation of the research context.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were followed in the research. The participants were made aware of the objectives of the study and their ability to terminate participation at any point. Prior to the collection of data, the researcher sought informed consent from the subjects. Confidentially and anonymously, the identities of the subjects were safeguarded using codes. This was due to the sensitivity of the subject being workplace conflicts within an organization.

Results

Overview of Findings

In this research, conflict dynamics in relation to teachers and head teachers in learning institutions were assessed together with the effect of leadership style, communication styles, and organizational behavior on work relationships. The findings of thematic analysis of interviews, observation, field notes, and document review led to the emergence of four main themes: communication and organizational friction, inflexible leadership and power imbalance, emotional distress, and professional frustration, and erosion of professional trust and cooperation.

Table 2

Major Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Subthemes
Communication Breakdown and Organizational Tension	Misunderstanding, poor communication, hostility
Leadership Rigidity and Power Imbalance	Administrative pressure, authoritarian behavior
Emotional Stress and Professional Frustration	Anxiety, frustration, emotional exhaustion
Decline in Professional Trust and Cooperation	Distrust, withdrawal, reduced collaboration

Theme 1: Communication Breakdown and Organizational Tension

One of the key findings from the analysis of the results is that communication inadequacy played a major role in increasing workplace conflicts between teachers and head teachers in

educational institutions. Participants noted that the factors such as misunderstanding, lack of communication, emotional reactions, and other factors associated with inadequate communication increased organizational tensions and impacted professional relationships. In particular, participants noted that they faced various situations when professional questions were not taken into account or poorly addressed by the leadership of schools; therefore, there were many problems that led to communication barriers. As one participant mentioned:

"Conflicts arose mostly due to poor communication. The teacher's voice was not properly heard, and misunderstandings grew more."

Another participant stated that:

"There was no proper discussion process; therefore, small issues turned into organizational tensions."

Moreover, classroom observation showed that participants had poor communication skills and professionalism during meetings and institutional processes. Furthermore, field notes suggested the existence of organizational discomfort among teachers while working with the management of educational institutions.

Based on these results, it becomes obvious that communication plays a major role in the development of professional relations and organizational harmony.

Theme 2: Leadership Rigidity and Power Imbalance

In addition to these findings, it became evident that rigid leadership style and imbalance of authority played an important role in creating workplace conflict within educational organizations. Participants felt that leadership's inability to consider others' opinions during decision-making process was one of the main reasons for dissatisfaction with professional activities.

According to participants, rigidity in leadership style and lack of collaboration resulted in mistrust and dissatisfaction at work. The following statement is one of many similar examples found in the collected data.

"Leadership was very rigid. Teachers didn't have any chance to discuss their worries."

Another participant mentioned the following:

"Imbalance of authority led to anxiety and discomfort among teachers."

Additionally, participants pointed out that rigidity in leadership adversely influenced cooperation and trust within organization. Those teachers who had been working under the conditions of constant pressure from administration experienced emotional discomfort and lack of trust within organizational system.

It can be seen from observations that there were also problems with collaboration and interaction among teachers and school leadership. Meetings among teachers showed formal and distant relationships among employees.

All these observations show that leadership style and authority play an important role in shaping workplace relationships.

Theme 3: Emotional Stress and Professional Frustration

Further, another significant observation of the study was that long-lasting workplace conflict resulted in considerable emotional stress and professional frustration amongst the participants. Feelings of anxiety, emotional stress, frustration, disappointment, and psychological fatigue resulting from the continual organizational conflict were observed.

Participants argued that the work environment was emotionally stressful and caused negative implications on their moral well-being and professional motivation. Many participants argued

that organizational conflict remained emotionally stressful even outside organizational premises.

One participant commented:

"This situation affected me psychologically; it always made me feel mentally distressed due to ongoing tension at school."

Another participant mentioned:

"Organizational conflict created professional frustration as there was always constant pressure and little emotional support."

Participants indicated that the workplace conflict had an effect on their professional enthusiasm and engagement in the learning process. Teachers suffering from organizational conflict appeared emotionally isolated and less communicative and enthusiastic about their job responsibilities.

Field observations indicated similar behaviors such as emotional fatigue, lack of interaction, and stress in the teachers suffering from workplace conflict.

The findings suggest that organizational conflict is a significant source of emotional distress and professional dissatisfaction among teachers.

Theme 4: Decline in Professional Trust and Cooperation

Furthermore, the findings suggested that the conflict that existed between teachers and head teachers had a negative effect on organizational trust and professional cooperation in the organization. According to participants, workplace conflict had a negative influence on organizational relationship, collaboration, and interactions.

The participants noted that teachers developed a sense of distrust towards their administrators in terms of communication, unresolved issues, and administrative inflexibility. Moreover, participants also mentioned that teachers were not willing to collaborate or engage in professional discussions.

For example, one of the participants said:

"Professional cooperation was declining because conflicts were not being resolved."

Another participant noted:

"There was no more cooperation because people stopped communicating and collaborating with each other."

It is also worth noting that organizational conflict had a negative influence on professional isolation of employees, and teachers in situations of long-term conflict prefer minimum organizational activity to prevent further conflict.

Finally, observational data confirmed a decline in collegial interaction and cooperation among organizational members.

Staff members seemed emotionally detached from organizational activities.

Overall, it can be stated that workplace conflict negatively influences organizational trust and collaboration.

Summary of Findings

The findings indicate that workplace conflict between teachers and head teachers is one of the crucial factors influencing organizational climate, communication quality, and professional relations in educational institutions. Communication breakdown, leadership rigidity, authority imbalance, and organizational tension proved to be significant causes of workplace conflicts. Furthermore, organizational tension was found to affect negatively emotional well-being, professional relations, teachers' trust, and collaboration.

Discussion

The findings indicate that communication was central to the development and escalation of conflict between teachers and head teachers. Participants described inadequate dialogue, misunderstandings, limited emotional responsiveness, and ineffective communication as important sources of organizational tension and deteriorating professional relationships. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that the quality of interpersonal and organizational relationships is closely associated with teachers' professional experiences and well-being. In particular, the LMX perspective suggests that effective leader–member relationships depend on communication, trust, respect, and mutual support; when these relational resources are weak, dissatisfaction and conflict may become more likely. Evidence from Pakistani secondary schools similarly indicates that LMX is positively associated with teachers' job performance and negatively associated with perceptions of organizational politics (Rehman et al., 2021).

Participants further identified leadership rigidity, administrative pressure, and limited participation in decision-making as factors that intensified workplace conflict. These findings suggest that conflict was not simply interpersonal but was partly embedded in the way authority was exercised within the school. This interpretation is supported by Tian and Guo (2024), who found that transformational leadership was negatively associated with teacher burnout, with self-efficacy partly explaining this relationship.

Prolonged conflict was also associated with emotional and professional strain. Participants reported anxiety, psychological fatigue, reduced motivation, and diminished professional enthusiasm. These findings correspond with the broader evidence that teacher well-being is associated with burnout, work engagement, job satisfaction, and occupational commitment (Zhou et al., 2024). Their meta-analysis of 173 studies involving 89,876 participants provides particularly strong evidence for the importance of interpersonal and work-related conditions in teacher well-being.

Finally, reduced trust and professional cooperation emerged as important consequences of prolonged conflict. Viewed through LMX Theory, these findings indicate a deterioration in the quality of leader–member exchange. Thus, teacher–head teacher conflict should be understood not merely as an interpersonal disagreement but as a relational and organizational problem involving communication, leadership, trust, and professional cooperation.

Implications of the Study

The study has important practical and theoretical implications for educational organizations. Schools should establish effective conflict-management and communication mechanisms to address disagreements constructively. Educational leaders should receive professional training in transformational leadership, emotional intelligence, participatory decision-making, and conflict resolution. Policies should promote psychologically safe environments where teachers can communicate concerns openly and respectfully. Strengthening communication and participatory leadership may improve trust and cooperation between teachers and administration. The study also contributes theoretically by applying LMX Theory to understand leadership relationships and workplace conflict.

Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research was conducted in only one school, which limits the transferability of findings to other educational settings. Second, the qualitative case study involved a relatively small number of participants. Third, the findings were based on participants' subjective

experiences and perceptions, which may reflect individual interpretations of workplace conflict. Finally, organizational factors such as workload, institutional policies, resource limitations, and administrative structures were not explored comprehensively.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should use mixed-methods and quantitative approaches with larger and more diverse samples to examine whether the present findings are consistent across educational contexts. Comparative studies across different schools, regions, and education systems could provide broader understanding of teacher–head teacher conflict. Future researchers should also examine the roles of emotional intelligence and organizational support in reducing workplace conflict. Leadership intervention studies focusing on communication and conflict resolution are recommended. Finally, longitudinal research could examine how prolonged teacher–head teacher conflict develops and affects teachers over time.

Conclusion

This study examined conflict dynamics between teachers and head teachers and found that poor communication, rigid leadership, authority imbalances, and ineffective organizational interactions contribute to workplace conflict. Prolonged conflict was associated with stress, frustration, mistrust, reduced professional cooperation, and withdrawal from organizational activities. The findings support Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory by demonstrating that low-quality leader–member relationships characterized by weak communication and limited trust can undermine organizational functioning. Overall, teacher–head teacher conflict should be understood as both a leadership and organizational issue. Schools should therefore promote effective communication, supportive leadership, mutual trust, and constructive conflict-management practices to strengthen professional relationships and organizational harmony.

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