

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
 Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 399-429, April 2026
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.4.19>
 Received Jan 8, 2026; Revised Mar 20, 2026; Accepted Apr 10, 2026

The Management of Conflict Between Teachers and School Management Teams at The Primary Schools of OR Tambo Coastal District in South Africa

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Abstract. This study examined how the teachers and School Management Teams (SMTs) at elementary schools in the Oliver Reginald (O R) Tambo Coastal District handled conflicts. The objectives were to determine the reasons behind conflict, assess how they affect school operations, and to investigate the methods to enhance conflict resolution. Using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, data from 14 participants including ten teachers and four SMT members was gathered using a mixed-methods strategy. The results showed that interpersonal and organisational elements play a major role in conflict. The primary causes of conflict included but were not limited to ineffective interaction, opaque decision-making, perceived partiality, SMT members' leadership styles, ambiguous expectations, and unbalanced workload distribution. Task-related and organisational conflicts were also prevalent, but interpersonal conflict was shown to be the most prevalent. These disputes disrupted the teaching and learning procedures by having a detrimental impact on, staff morale, professional relationships, teamwork, and on the general school climate. The results, which were based on the transformational leadership theory, show that leadership techniques that prioritise openness, justice, cooperation, and shared decision-making can lessen conflict and promote a positive school climate. By putting these tactics into practice, staff relationships, the school environment, as well as the teaching and learning outcomes are all likely to improve. The study also found several successful conflict management techniques. Strengthening channels of communication, encouraging participatory decision-making, and putting in place formal mediation procedures to settle conflicts amicably are among the study's recommendations. Formal professional development programs that emphasise communication, negotiation, mediation, and conflict management are also crucial for both the teachers and SMT members. By highlighting the crucial role that structured interventions

Citation:
 Dlayiya, M., & Moila, O. (2026). The Management of Conflict Between Teachers and School Management Teams at The Primary Schools of OR Tambo Coastal District in South Africa. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 25(4), 399–429. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.4.19>

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and leadership play in effectively managing school conflict, this study adds to the body of literature on educational leadership.

Keywords: Conflict resolution; school management; workplace; conflict; mediation

1. Introduction

Conflict will always arise in organisations, especially in educational settings where a varied learner population engages in complex social and professional connections (Folger & Stutman, 2021). In the OR Tambo Coastal District schools, there are frequent conflicts between teachers and the School Management Teams (SMTs). These conflicts are typically caused by a lack of communication, leadership issues, and opposing expectations. Teacher morale, school climate, and learning outcomes are all negatively impacted by these confrontations. This study aimed to identify the root causes of conflicts, their impact on school dynamics, and the effective management strategies. Drawing on the transformational leadership theory, the research highlights the importance of leadership in promoting open communication, mutual respect, and collaborative problem-solving to foster a harmonious educational environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Causes of Conflict in Schools

Organisational life inevitably involves conflict, especially in educational institutions where people with different responsibilities, aspirations, and professional values interact inside intricate institutional systems. Organisational change, leadership styles, and resource allocation are frequently cited by academics as the main causes of workplace conflict in educational institutions. For example, Bailyn et al. (2025) contend that workplace tensions are frequently exacerbated by institutional transformation and growing workloads, particularly when teachers believe that changes are inefficient or imposed without adequate consultation. According to a recent systematic analysis of conflict management in educational institutions, the onset of conflict between the teachers and school administration teams is also greatly influenced by organisational culture, the leadership style, and power dynamics.

Some studies emphasise leadership practices as the primary predictor of conflict dynamics, while some experts focus on structural variables. According to Doyle (2025), staff conflicts may be made worse by the principals' ineffective leadership and communication. According to recent research on educational leadership in schools, principals are frequently ill-prepared to handle conflict in complex school environments, which may limit the ability to foster cooperative and peaceful school cultures (Nwisagbo, Eke & Bamson, 2025). However, other academics contend that the conflict in schools cannot be adequately addressed by the leadership alone. Organisational ambiguity, such as overlapping responsibilities or unclear accountability systems, can also lead to conflicts among employees (Hu, Chen & Hashim, 2025). Therefore, the workplace conflict in educational institutions is shaped by organisational and structural factors as well as by the leadership.

Conflict in schools is further exacerbated by the competition for limited resources. According to Mwewa (2022), conflicts frequently occur when teachers and school administration teams vie for resources such as instructional materials, funding, or administrative power. According to recent research, the school power struggles are frequently caused by institutional recognition and resource allocation, especially when teachers feel that opportunities or assistance are not distributed fairly (Mason-Williams et al., 2023). These results imply that organisational structures, institutional resource limitations, and leadership styles interact to produce conflict in schools.

2.2 Role Conflict and Organisational Expectations

Another significant aspect of workplace conflict in educational institutions is role conflict. According to Ertürk (2022), role conflict occurs when an individual's actual expectations within an organisation are different from the expected behaviour connected with a professional function. When professional teaching principles, leadership expectations, and institutional policies are out of sync, teachers may encounter role conflict in the educational setting. The causes and effects of role conflict, however, are interpreted differently by academics.

According to De Clercq, Haq and Azeem (2023), the perceptions of injustice in the implementation of institutional policies such as incentive schemes, disciplinary actions, or performance standards are the main source of role conflict. According to this viewpoint, perceived injustices in leadership behaviours are a major source of conflict. However, more recent studies show how role conflict is shaped by corporate culture. According to Murphy (2024), when teachers are left out of decision-making processes or when the leadership structures uphold hierarchical control, school culture, communication styles, and power dynamics can exacerbate role conflicts.

These divergent viewpoints show how leadership styles and larger institutional cultures can have an impact on role conflict in schools. Recent research increasingly acknowledges the significance of organisational climate and participatory governance in lowering role-related tensions inside schools, whereas prior studies mostly concentrated on managerial behaviour.

2.3 Types of Conflict in Educational Organisations

In educational organisations, conflict can arise at several organisational levels. It is frequently divided into four categories by academics: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intra-team, and inter-team conflicts. Grammatikopoulos (2022) asserts that intrapersonal conflict arises when people feel internal tension because of competing institutional standards and personal ideals. Despite occurring internally, this kind of dispute can affect professional behaviour and decision-making at work. Contrarily, interpersonal conflict happens between people and is commonly acknowledged as the most obvious type of conflict in educational settings.

According to Jalees et al. (2023), the differences in work ethics, professional values, or communication styles between teachers and leaders frequently lead to interpersonal conflicts. In a similar vein, Msangi (2025) highlights that the differences in institutional priorities, rule compliance, or leadership styles can lead to interpersonal conflict. When members of the same team disagree because of different viewpoints, personalities, or expectations, this is known as intra-team conflict at the group level. According to Wang and Duan (2025), these conflicts are more likely to occur in larger teams where individual differences are more noticeable. Nonetheless, other academics contend that when handled skilfully, diversity within teams can also enhance creativity and decision-making.

This viewpoint is consistent with recent research which suggests that variety may function as a "double-edged sword", raising the possibility of conflict while simultaneously fostering creativity and problem-solving when psychological safety and strong leadership are present (Li et al., 2026). When conflicting objectives, duties, or resource interests lead to tension, inter-team conflict arises between groups in organisations (Munawar, 2024). While some academics believe that inter-team conflict is generally harmful to organisational performance, others contend that when handled properly, team competition can spur creativity and institutional advancement.

2.4 Effects of Conflict in Schools

There is a lot of disagreement in the literature about the effects of conflict in organisations. Some academics highlight the detrimental effects of badly handled conflict. According to Albon and Cruz (2025), unresolved conflicts can lower productivity, worsen professional relationships, and raise employee stress. Jugmohan (2025) also contends that the conflict in schools can impair the administrators' capacity to effectively oversee institutional operations and may interfere with teaching and learning processes. On the other hand, some academics take a more impartial stance, contending that conflict can also result in favourable organisational outcomes, as indicated in Collins (2024) who argues that constructive conflict promotes critical thinking, creativity, and better decision-making in organisations.

According to current research, managing conflict through cooperative discussion and open communication can improve professional relationships and advance organisational development. Rahim (2023) makes a further distinction between conflict that is beneficial and that which is destructive. While destructive conflict occurs when individual interests take precedence over institutional objectives, constructive conflict entails the free exchange of ideas intended to improve organisational outcomes. These divergent viewpoints imply that the impact of conflict in schools is more dependent on how disagreements are handled than on the conflict itself.

2.5 Conflict Management Strategies in Schools

Scholars stress the significance of good conflict management techniques in educational institutions because of the possible repercussions of unresolved conflict. According to Uchendu, Omomo and Esiri (2024), cooperative strategies that foster win-win solutions can be the best way to settle conflicts at work. These

strategies promote candid communication and cooperative problem-solving between disputing parties. Another well-known method for handling disputes in schools is mediation. According to Sherman and Momani (2025), mediation is a planned procedure where a third impartial person helps disputing parties to come to a mutually agreeable resolution. In a similar vein, Rafiq-uz-Zaman, Bano and Naveed (2025) stress that mediation promotes cooperative decision-making as opposed to hierarchical solution enforcement.

The significance of communication techniques in resolving disputes in schools is further demonstrated by recent empirical research. According to the research done among principals and teachers, assertive and non-blaming communication strategies greatly enhance cooperation and decrease the conflict between school administrators and teaching staff. According to other research, school principals frequently favour cooperative and settlement-oriented conflict resolution techniques, whereas avoidance tactics are typically less successful in settling conflicts (Kalyan, Anandh & Nachiar, 2025).

Even while the value of conflict management techniques is becoming more widely acknowledged, there are still few options for teachers to receive training. Many South African teachers, according to Makola and Mulaudzi (2024), have very little official training in conflict mediation. According to Nwisagbo, Eke and Bamson (2025), recent study also highlights the necessity of professional development programs that give teachers the practical communication and negotiation skills they need to handle difficult workplace conflicts.

2.6 Research Gap

There are still several gaps in research, even though it offers insightful information about the types, causes, and handling of conflict in educational settings. Most of the research looks at leadership practices in more general educational contexts or concentrate on general conflict management techniques in schools. The management of teacher-school management team conflicts in elementary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District has not been thoroughly studied. Furthermore, there is currently a lack of empirical data about the application of communication tactics and collaborative conflict resolution approaches in South African school environments, despite recent research emphasising their significance. To identify the strategies that may support effective conflict management and enhance the general teaching and learning environment, this study aimed to investigate how the conflicts between teachers and SMTs are handled in a few primary schools within the OR Tambo Coastal District.

3. Problem Statement

Organisations frequently experience conflict, especially educational institutions where people with different roles, duties, and expectations regularly interact. The relationships between teachers and SMTs are essential for preserving a supportive learning environment and for guaranteeing efficient instruction and management in schools. However, ongoing disputes between teachers and SMTs have grown to be a major issue in the OR Tambo Coastal District's elementary schools.

Ineffective communication, leadership difficulties, unequal access to resources, ambiguous role expectations, and perceived injustice in the implementation of policies and decision-making procedures are frequently associated with these disputes. Schools should ideally function in a cooperative and encouraging setting where teachers and SMTs respect one another's professional duties, communicate honestly, and cooperate to accomplish common learning objectives. Transparency, respect for one another, equitable resources, and responsibility allocation, as well as constructive conflict resolution techniques are all important components of effective leadership, especially transformative leadership. In a perfect world, disputes would be resolved quickly through organised procedures such as professional discussions, mediations, and conflict-resolution training, which would eventually promote collaboration, job satisfaction, and better learning outcomes for learners.

However, there is a disconnect between this ideal setting and the actual circumstances in many of the OR Tambo Coastal District's schools. Due to ineffective management techniques, there is a lack of; organised communication channels, counselling or support services, and professional development in conflict management, because of this lack, conflicts frequently go unsolved or are badly handled. In addition, role conflict, unequal workloads, and perceptions of unjust treatment in the application of policies and reward systems are common experiences for teachers. These problems weaken the required collaborative culture for efficient school operations and exacerbate the tense professional relationships between teachers and SMTs.

The school and teachers may suffer serious repercussions if these issues are not appropriately resolved. Unresolved disagreement can result in lower staff morale, lower job satisfaction, higher absenteeism, and a breakdown in teamwork. Additionally, it could produce a bad school atmosphere that has an impact on the efficacy of instruction, the legitimacy of the leadership, and the general performance of the institution. The teaching and learning process can ultimately be disrupted by protracted disputes within the school administrative structures, which can have a detrimental impact on the learners' progress and the school's larger educational objectives.

Many schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District lack systematic techniques to handle the disagreements between teachers and SMTs, even though constructive conflict management has been shown to foster creativity, critical thinking, and organisational improvement. Structured conflict-resolution techniques, like mediation procedures and professional development courses that give teachers and school administrators the tools they need to resolve disputes amicably, are not often used. This disparity emphasises the necessity for studies that look at the origins, consequences, and handling of disputes in various educational institutions. Thus, the purpose of this study was to provide insight on how teachers and SMTs handle conflict in a few chosen primary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District. To foster a more peaceful and effective learning environment, the study attempted to pinpoint the root causes of these disputes,

investigating how they affect school dynamics, and it offers practical solutions for enhancing conflict resolution techniques.

4. Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to investigate the management of conflict between teachers and school management teams at the primary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District in South Africa. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the primary causes of conflict between teachers and SMTs,
2. Investigate how these conflicts affect daily school operations and relationships, and
3. Explore the possible strategies that can be implemented to manage and resolve conflicts effectively.

5. Theoretical framework

Any research effort needs a theoretical framework to be understood, supported, and grounded. This study was grounded upon the transformational leadership theory, in other words, it is the foundation on which this study was based (Asbari, 2020). It is argued that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in resolving disputes and in fostering a school culture, and that conflict resolution is attained when followers and leaders inspire one another to act more morally and with greater motivation (Siangchokyo, Klinger & Campion, 2020). Transformational leaders prioritise the higher-level demands of their workforce and inspire them to go above and beyond what is specified in their employment contracts.

They also encourage attending to personal growth, as well as education, and meeting the needs of staff members while serving as mentors and advisors (Jensen & Bro, 2018; Ogunfowora, Maerz & Varty, 2021). In addition to acting as role models for their staff, they help to foster a feeling of purpose, as well as encourage wider viewpoints, respect, and trust (ibid). Dedicated, passionate, and committed managers have a higher chance of persuading their team members to make fundamental adjustments to the organisation so that it is prepared to take on new challenges and achieve optimal performance levels, including conflict resolution (Eketu, 2019). The transformational leadership theory has the following components:

Individual consideration: In this phase, the leaders set an example for their followers, inspiring confidence, and respect. To reduce conflict among the employees, the employer attends to their wants, concerns and required assistance. The followers receive a strong sense of resolve, a desire for personal growth, and an intrinsic motivation to fulfil responsibilities in return (Cheng & Cao, 2023).

Intellectual stimulation: It is an illustration of transformational leadership as conflict is lessened when teachers receive rewards for inventiveness and a sense of achievement (Christfort & Vickberg, 2023).

Inspirational motivation: In this element, the team leader can articulate a unified vision that inspires employees to surpass objectives and cultivate a positive work

environment. Teachers are therefore urged to behave in a way that reduces conflict (Chin, 2024).

Idealised influence: Leaders are role models who exude confidence and gratitude. Moral behaviour ensures that teachers and SMTs have less conflict by earning essential respect and trust (Makirimani, 2023).

6. Research methods

6.1 Research design

The methodology used in this study included guidelines for gathering, evaluating, and analysing data to address the study questions (Kumar, 2018). The study's paradigm, methodology, design, demographic and sample tactics, the data collecting procedures, data analysis techniques, and the ethical considerations supporting are described in the subsequent paragraphs. The researchers ensured that this was done to guarantee the study's reliable, genuine, and authentic findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

6.2 Research paradigm

Pragmatism focuses on the practical uses of research and advocates for the application of methodologies that best suit a research problem (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Because it recognised the complexity of the research problem and the need for many viewpoints and techniques to solve it successfully, the pragmatic paradigm was ideally suitable for this study (Sim, Wong, Sin & Sivakumaran, 2024). To thoroughly understand conflict management in schools, this study utilised a pragmatic research paradigm that permitted the integration of quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Yardely & Bishop, 2017). The interpretivism technique was also used during the research under the qualitative methodology strand as it addresses idealistic philosophical stances such as social constructivism, phenomenological hermeneutics, and hermeneutics, as well as emphasises the context of any systematic information-gathering effort (DeRobertis, 2022).

6.3 Research techniques

A mixed method research strategy was adopted for this investigation. Researchers can also employ mixed methods approaches, which combine qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to get a meaningful knowledge of a study issue (Kim, Sefcik & Bradway, 2017). The purpose of this study was to investigate the causes, personality traits, outcomes, and strategies for controlling and resolving conflicts from various angles and analytical levels. To achieve its goal, the study adopted and applied both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Taherdoost, 2022).

This study also employed a mixed-method approach comprising of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to provide a deeper meaning to conflict management between the teachers and the school management teams of selected schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District (Kim, Sefcik & Bradway, 2017; Taherdoost, 2022). The approach provided a comprehensive analysis of the nature, causes and management of conflict between the teachers and the SMT

members in the selected schools. The purpose of this study was to investigate the causes, personality traits, outcomes, and strategies for controlling and resolving conflicts in the schools involved in this study.

6.4 Population, sampling, and sampling procedures

In the context of a research study, the term population denotes an aggregate number of individuals or instances (Maxwell, 2021). The researcher's target group consisted of the teachers who had been given leadership and conflict resolution responsibilities in schools. Teachers, department principals, and deputy principals were among the populace. The group's selection was predicated on the assumption that the participants possessed a wealth of information on the elements that shaped the evolution of their activities inside the respective schools. Based on the extensive amount of data the researcher was looking for, the population was representative.

Teachers, department heads, and deputy principals having first-hand knowledge of managing conflicts in schools made up the target audience (Maxwell, 2021). A total of ten teachers and four members of the SMTs made up the purposively sampled total of 14 participants in this study. Even though the sample size might seem tiny, it was suitable for a mixed-methods design in which acquiring rich, detailed data was more important than statistical generalisation.

To be able to gather comprehensive viewpoints, experiences, and insights about conflict management that can be meaningfully analysed even with a small sample, this study used mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative component of the study involved interviews with four SMT members. The study focused on people who were directly involved in conflict situations in educational settings. The data was extremely pertinent and valid for the research goals since the teachers and SMT members who were actively involved in the management and operations of the schools were chosen.

Field research in schools frequently encounters logistical challenges, including staff access issues, time limits, and ethical dilemmas. By concentrating on 14 subjects, the researchers were able to perform in-depth interviews and receive comprehensive questionnaire answers, guaranteeing accurate and high-quality data. Because the objective of qualitative research is to reach data saturation, the point at which more data does not produce new insights, the sample sizes are usually smaller, typically ranging from five to 20 people. The study achieved a thorough grasp of conflict dynamics among the chosen schools by involving ten teachers and four SMT members.

6.5 Data collection instruments

A total of ten teachers completed surveys as part of the quantitative component, which also supplied additional data to strengthen the trends found in the qualitative interviews. Despite the small sample size, this triangulation increased the validity of the results and was suitable for the mixed-methods research that places more emphasis on data quality and depth than statistical generalisation. While the quantitative component employed teacher questionnaires to gather more general perceptions and trends, the qualitative component involved in-

depth interviews with SMT members, offering detailed insights into the conflict dynamics. Data triangulation was made possible by this architecture which improved transferability, validity, and trustworthiness. This well selected sample allowed for data saturation in accordance with qualitative research norms (Bekmezci, 2025). While the SMT members were purposefully chosen for their proficiency in conflict resolution, random sampling was used for the teacher questionnaires to ensure equitable inclusion likelihood (Rahman, 2023). The selection of 14 participants was methodologically sound since it struck a compromise between the depth needed for qualitative insights and sufficient quantitative input to support emerging themes, guaranteeing the study's rich and reliable results.

Finding and establishing underlying reasons for the disputes in each of the listed schools was the goal of the interview questions. Many types of conflict were examined. The participants' responses were intended to determine the effects of any existing disagreements at the schools. Each interview was recorded to enable the researchers to accurately transcribe and analyse the qualitative data. Questionnaires: Both structured and open-ended questions were included in the researchers' surveys. Each of the initial open-ended questions had a general remark that was followed by a more focused query.

6.6 Quality assurance measures

Credibility of the interview schedule: A study's trustworthiness is dependent on its credibility. Kakar et al. (2023) indicate that a study is regarded as valid once it has selected participants who have pertinent experiences and viewpoints for in-depth interviews, and they also have yielded rich data in nature. **Transferability of the interview schedule:** The concept of transferability describes how a reader assesses how well a research project's results apply to different circumstances, environments, or contexts. In this study, the researchers presented detailed background information and explanations for transferability (Weise, et al., 2020).

Dependability of the interview schedule: This refers to the constant characteristic that necessitates the researcher to verify if the analytical process complied with the recognised norm for a particular design (Kortjiens & Moser, 2018). To ensure that the interview schedule was dependable, the researchers used a variety of data sources and techniques to cross-check findings, and they kept a record of all the research-related choices and actions.

Confirmability of interview schedule: It is the aspect of neutrality in which the researcher protects the inter-subjectivity data (Leslie, 2021). Apart from clearly describing the research process and methodology, the researchers kept a record of all the actions and decisions regarding the study.

Reliability of the survey questionnaire: Reliability expresses the consistency of the employed measures. According to Kalkbrenner (2023), the researchers test the stability of the interview schedule and the survey items over time.

Validity of the survey questionnaire: Validity is whether the study questions measured what they claimed to measure (Sürücü & Maslakci, 2020). The researchers made sure that the interview and research questions were relevant and clearly phrased.

6.7 Data analysis

6.7.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used on the qualitative data from the open-ended interviews. Thematic analysis, according to Shoufan (2023), is the skill of finding, analysing, and interpreting significant patterns to identify themes in qualitative data. The research questions served as the basis for the analysis of the data from the open-ended questions. The research questions were used to explore the participants' personal experiences with conflict, the strategies they use and the challenges they faced in resolving the conflicts. Rowlands (2021) recommends that data should be read and transcribed to look for a common concept. The data was presented with some verbatim quotes and narratives, and this technical technique improved correctness and intelligibility (Rowlands, 2021).

6.7.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

In this study, the positivist worldview was associated with the quantitative approach (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). It involved collecting information and enumerating it so that the statistical computations and inferences could be carried out. Microsoft Excel complemented this research methodology very well. The powerful spreadsheet had the facility of saving, arranging, and analysing data in a tabular manner by the users (Lindquist & Sulewski, 2020). The findings were presented in the form of charts, showing frequencies and their respective percentage to interpret them easily.

6.8 Ethical considerations

Ethics in research safeguard the participants and ensure the accuracy and legitimacy of outcomes yet these principles provide a foundation for research that upholds respect, integrity, and honesty (Xu et al., 2020). By following the ethical principles, the researchers boosted their scholarly authority, advanced knowledge, and truth, as well as prevented legal issues (Xu et al., 2020). Ethics are fundamental in human subjects because they prioritise dignity, rights, and well-being, thus establishing trust and responsibility throughout the study process (Davies, 2020). The following ethical aspects were adhered to in this study:

Permission: As ethical researchers, authorisation to carry out this study was requested from all the relevant authorities to demonstrate transparency and accountability. This stage required detailed communications or proposals to the relevant consultants, detailing the research's aims, methodologies, incentives, and hazards. Approval boosted the study's credibility and helped the researchers and schools to collaborate. It also protected privacy and safety. Requesting permission indicated respect for organisational systems, group freedom and authority, which promoted morality and mutual respect in academic work (Williamson et al., 2021).
Required consent: Research pertaining to ethics requires informed consent.

The participants in the study received comprehensive information regarding the objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were made aware that no strings were attached and were free to leave at any moment. The participants' autonomy and right to make decisions were guaranteed by that procedure (ibid). Participants' rights and anonymity: To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms are used instead of real names in the study's findings. This measure safeguards the individuals from potential negative repercussions, and it maintains personal privacy (Tally et al., 2021).

Confidentiality: Maintaining privacy is an essential part of ethical research because it helps to keep the participants' trust and also keeps private information safe (Bani Issa et al., 2020). All the gathered information was encrypted, and it was kept secure with strict data protection methods to stop anyone else from getting to it or from breaking the security (ibid). The records of the participants were kept separate from the data. To protect people's privacy, codes were used to make answers anonymous (Agbofa & Okyere, 2022). To further protect privacy, the talks with team members were private. To ensure the study stayed moral and to reassure the participants, these strict steps were necessary (Agbofa & Okyere, 2022).

7. Results and discussion of results

7.1 Results from the quantitative data

The sources of conflict between the teachers and the SMTs in the OR Tambo Coastal District elementary schools as depicted by the teachers are highlighted in Figure 1. The findings show that the conflict in schools is caused by several reasons. These include but are not limited to uneven workload distribution, the leadership styles of SMT members, poor communication between instructors and the SMT members, and a lack of consultation in decision-making processes. The percentage of respondents who identified each element as a source of conflict was calculated by entering the response frequencies into Microsoft Excel and converting them into percentages. Figure 1 shows the respondents' replies to the data, which indicate that management practices and communication difficulties were among the main causes of conflict in schools:

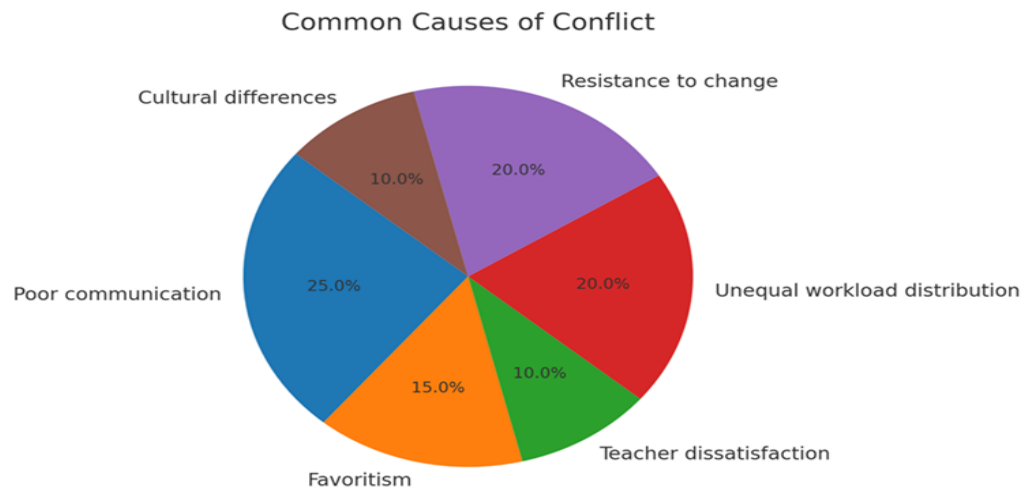


Figure 1: Causes of conflict

Figure 1 breaks out the six primary elements that frequently lead to conflict in educational settings. Ineffective or confusing communication is a common source of tension, as evidenced by the fact that poor communication accounted for 25% of all the causes. Resistance to change and unequal workload distribution accounted for 20% of the total, indicating that these were important areas of concern. A total of 15% of the disputes involved favouritism, indicating that actual or perceived prejudice was a significant problem. Cultural differences and teacher dissatisfaction were equally represented at 10%, indicating that although these factors are important, they occurred less frequently than the other factors. The teachers were asked to elucidate their views on the types of conflict that existed between the teachers and the school management teams at the primary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District, and Figure 2 below illustrates the responses:

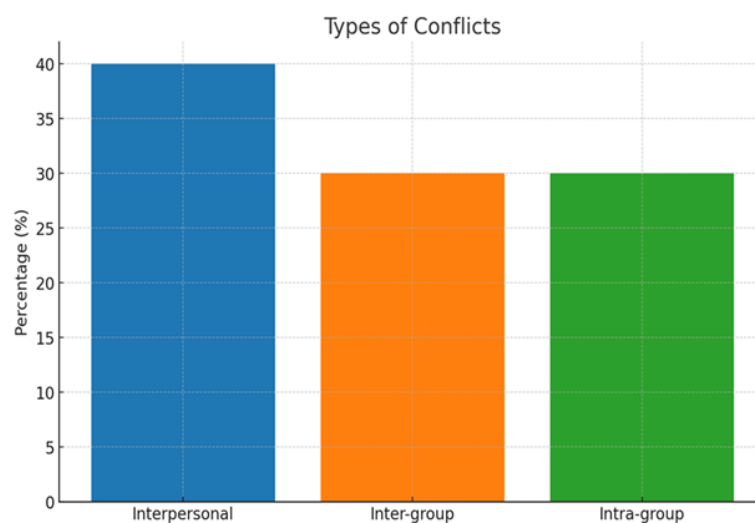


Figure 2: Types of conflict

Figure 2 illustrates the teachers' perceptions regarding the types of conflict that commonly occurred between the teachers and the SMTs. The results show that

different forms of conflict existed within the school environment. Interpersonal conflicts were the most common, accounting for 40% of all the reported disputes. This highlights the prominence of individual relationships as a critical area of tension within educational settings. Such conflicts often stemmed from differences in personality, communication styles, or professional disagreements.

Inter-group and intra-group conflicts were equal in prevalence, comprising of 30% each, respectively. Inter-group conflicts typically involve disputes between distinct groups, such as staff departments or management teams, often arising from competition, misaligned objectives, or resource allocation. On the other hand, intra-group conflicts occurred within a single group, reflecting challenges related to teamwork, leadership dynamics, or shared responsibilities. These findings indicate that the conflict in schools is multifaceted and can arise from both interpersonal relationships and organisational structures.

The teachers were asked to elucidate their views on the effects that conflict had on the teachers and school management teams at the primary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District, and Figure 3 illustrates the responses:

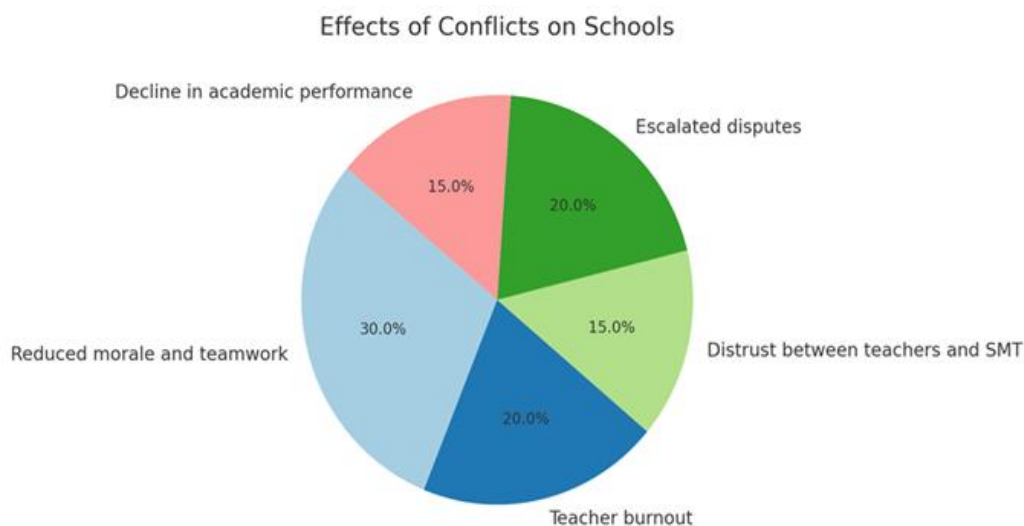


Figure 3: Effects of conflict

Figure 3 illustrates the diverse causes of conflicts within school environments, segmented into five categories and expressed as percentages. The most pronounced effect, accounting for 30% of the total, was reduced morale and teamwork among staff members. This finding underscored the detrimental influence of unresolved conflicts on collaborative efforts and overall motivation within the institution, which can adversely affect the operational climate.

There were two notable outcomes, escalated disputes, and teacher burnout, which represented 20% of the reported effects. Escalated disputes highlighted the potential for unresolved disagreements to intensify over time, thereby exacerbating the existing tensions within the school. Similarly, teacher burnout reflected the significant psychological and emotional toll conflicts imposed on the

educators, leading to diminished productivity and professional efficacy. Both declined in academic performance and distrust between teachers and the SMTs constituted of 15% of each of the identified impacts. The decline in academic performance emphasised the disruptive effect of conflicts on the teaching processes, ultimately compromising student outcomes. Distrust between teachers and SMTs indicated a breakdown in professional relationships, which can hinder effective communication, collaborative decision-making, and the execution of institutional policies.

The teachers were asked to elucidate their views on the possible conflict resolution strategies between the teachers and school management teams at the primary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District, and Figure 4 illustrates their responses:

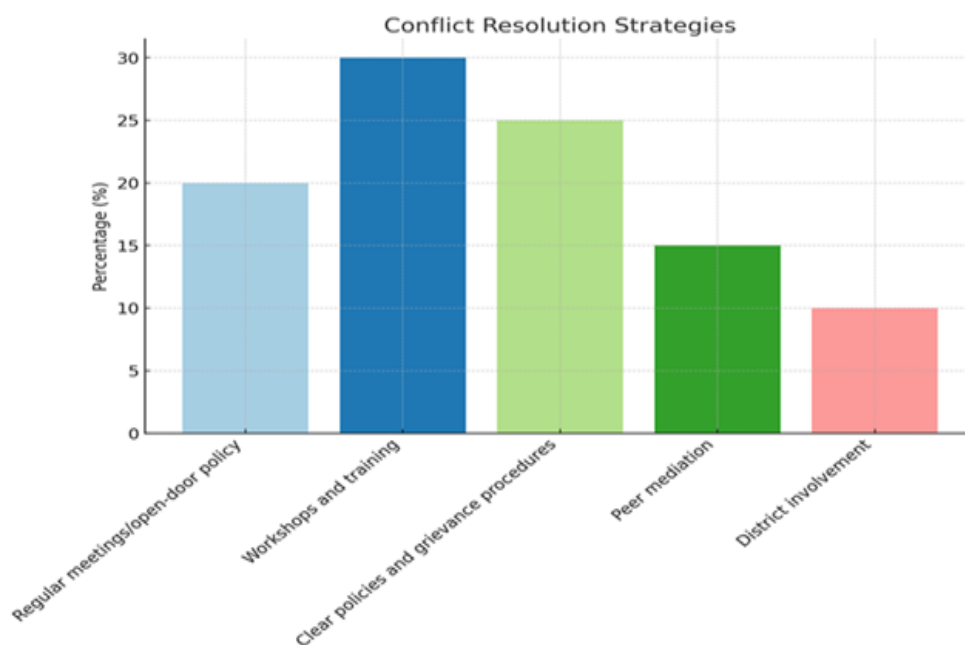


Figure 4: Conflict resolution strategies

Figure 4 illustrates the teachers' perceptions regarding the possible strategies for resolving conflict between the teachers and SMTs. Several strategies were suggested by the respondents as effective ways to manage and reduce conflict in schools. Among these, workshops and training emerged as the most frequently employed strategy, accounting for 30% of the total, signifying the widespread adoption of professional development initiatives to effectively manage conflicts. Closely following the training was the use of clear policies and grievance procedures at 25%, underscoring the critical role of structured and well-defined frameworks in facilitating conflict resolution.

Regular meetings/open-door policy, represented 20%, highlighting the significance of open communication channels and consistent engagement in mitigating and addressing disputes. Meanwhile, peer mediation at 15%, reflected a collaborative approach wherein colleagues acted as mediators, fostering mutual understanding and resolution. The least utilised strategy was district involvement, comprising of 10%, indicating a preference for internal mechanisms over external interventions in conflict management practices. According to these results, the teachers thought that better communication, inclusive leadership techniques, and organised conflict resolution techniques could effectively handle conflict.

7.2 Discussion of the quantitative results

These results show that inadequate communication techniques were a major source of conflict in educational settings. The interpersonal conflicts were made worse by unclear and inconsistent communication (Doyle, 2025; Nwisagbo, Eke & Bamson, 2025; Hu, Chen & Hashim, 2025). Additionally, systemic organisational injustices and a dislike of adaptive practices were shown in the prevalence of an unequal workload distribution and resistance to change, which had negative effects on institutional harmony, according to empirical investigations (Mwewa, 2022). Recent research has severely analysed favouritism, which accounted for a significant share of the school-based conflicts. According to Mason-Williams et al. (2023), it is thought to be an expression of perceived unfairness and bias that undermines the fundamental ethos of fairness in educational leadership. In the meantime, despite being less noticeable in quantitative measurements, cultural differences and teacher unhappiness require attention due to subtle contributions to conflict.

Misaligned expectations and a lack of institutional support often led to teacher unhappiness, while cultural misalignments which are typically overlooked in policy discourses, erode inclusivity, and intensify latent conflicts. Additionally, the dominance of training and workshops as the most common method of resolving conflicts is consistent with modern pedagogical frameworks that support proactive professional development. In a recent study, Nwisagbo, Eke and Bamson (2025) emphasise the need for professional development programs that provide teachers with the practical negotiating and communication skills necessary to manage challenging disputes at work. Makola and Mulaudzi (2024) contend that many teachers have very little formal training in conflict mediation, even though such programs give teachers the necessary skills for conflict moderation, preventing the escalation of disagreements.

Furthermore, Uchendu, Omomo and Esiri (2024) contend that cooperative techniques such as peer mediation promote win-win outcomes and are among the most effective means of resolving disputes at work. The authors affirmed their part in promoting an environment of transparency, trust, and reciprocal responsibility. Interestingly, a paradigm shift toward collaborative resolution approaches in which teachers' shared agency is utilised to resolve conflicts is shown in the growing use of peer mediation (Sherman & Momani, 2025). However, the importance of social dynamics in conflict origination is explained

by the prevalence of interpersonal disputes, which accounted for 40% of the reported occurrences.

According to Wang and Duan (2025), when individual differences are more apparent, these conflicts are more likely to arise in larger teams. However, other scholars argue that diversity in teams can also improve creativity and decision-making when managed well. This perspective is in line with recent research that indicates variation may act as a "double-edged sword", increasing the likelihood of conflict but also encouraging creativity and problem-solving in the presence of strong leadership and psychological safety (Li et al., 2026).

The conflicts between and inside groups, each making up 30%, highlighted the complexity of group strife. Inter-team conflict occurs between groups within the company when competing goals, responsibilities, or resource interests cause tension (Munawar, 2024). It follows that whereas intra-group disputes are a sign of poor leadership and misaligned team dynamics, inter-group conflicts frequently result from rivalry over few resources and conflicting goals. Recent empirical research further demonstrates the importance of communication strategies in settling conflicts in schools.

According to the research conducted among principals and teachers for example, assertive and non-blaming communication tactics significantly improved cooperation and reduced conflict between school administrators and teaching staff. Other research indicates that while avoidance tactics are generally less effective in resolving disagreements, school principals often support cooperative and settlement-oriented conflict resolution techniques (Kalyan, Anandh & Nachiar, 2025). Academic outcomes demonstrate the relationship between staff dynamics and student success, as demonstrated by a drop in academic performance (Banda & Mwale, 2022).

Additionally, a serious breakdown in professional relationships is indicated by the erosion of trust between teachers and SMTs, which threatens cooperative decision-making and the efficient implementation of institutional policies. The quantitative results indicate that the conflict between the teachers and the SMTs in the primary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District was influenced by several factors, including but not limited to communication challenges, leadership ideologies, and organisational procedures. The findings also demonstrate how conflict can negatively affect teacher morale, professional relationships, and the school climate. However, the respondents believed that strategies including improved communication, participative leadership, and conflict management training may help to reduce and manage conflict in schools.

7.3 Results from the qualitative data

The participants' perspectives on a few matters pertaining to the management of the conflict between the teachers and school management teams in the primary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District in South Africa were the focus of the interview data analysis. The four teachers were coded as T1 up to T4 for the themes that emerged from the responses.

Theme 1: Lack of training in conflict management

One specific concern noted by some of the interviewed teachers was the lack of formal training in managing conflict as indicated in the responses below:

T1: There have not been any training sessions for us.

T2: They expect us to work through conflict, but they do not teach us how.

T3: I just do it on a feel, trial, and error kind of way.

T3: If we had proper training, a lot of these things would not blow up.

Theme 2: Causes of conflict

The participants recognised several underlying causes of conflict such as task disparities, poor communication, and favouritism. Misaligned expectations between the SMTs and the teachers were frequently the cause of these problems.

T1: Some teachers believe others receive preferential treatment.

T2; We're frequently left guessing and there is no clear communication.

T3: Some of us carry more responsibilities than others, and it is not fair.

T4: Decisions are made without consulting us.

Theme 3: Escalation of conflicts

Unresolved conflict has far-reaching effects that impact learner outcomes and staff morale. Unresolved conflicts frequently turned into public arguments that strained business ties and disturbed peace in the classroom.

T1: It became a shouting match.

T2: It became toxic, people stopped talking to each other.

T3: Once it goes public, it is hard to come back from that.

T4: Even learners observed the tension, it permeated the classroom.

Theme 4: Effects of conflicts

Unresolved conflict has far-reaching effects that impact student outcomes and staff morale. The participants talked about diminished productivity, social disintegration, and emotional weariness.

T1: Meetings are ineffective – we just go around in circles.

T2: It is teachers versus SMT now as there are cliques.

T3: I hate going to work, it is emotionally taxing.

T4: Learners pick up on our moods; it affects their behaviour too.

7.4 Discussion of the Interview findings

The results of the interviews with Participants 1-4 show that the two schools had serious problems managing conflicts, especially when it came to building positive relationships between the teacher and the SMTs. Most of the participants reported no formal training in conflict management, which was in line with the research by Makola and Mulaudzi (2024), who contend that many South African schools lack organised professional development programs to give teachers the tools they need to resolve conflicts.

Given that maintaining a collaborative school requires competent conflict management, this difference is very troubling. The claim made by T1 that "there has not been any training sessions for us" reveals a structural flaw that restricts the educators' capacity to resolve conflicts amicably. A recent study by Nwisagbo, Eke and Bamson (2025) emphasises the importance of professional development

programs that equip educators with the practical communication and negotiation skills necessary to manage challenging disputes at work.

Favouritism, poor communication, and unequal workloads were highlighted by the participants as the main reasons of conflict, which is consistent with the findings by Bailyn et al. (2025), who highlight that these problems frequently result from misaligned expectations between the teachers and SMTs. The focus on favouritism was highlighted by T1, who stated that, "some teachers believe that others receive preferential treatment", while T2 stated that, "we are frequently left guessing and there is no clear communication". These opinions align with those of Doyle (2025) and Mason-Williams et al. (2023), who assert that clear and open lines of communication are essential for reducing miscommunication and averting confrontations.

The participants' instances of escalated disputes highlight the negative effects of unresolved grievances on school environments. While T2 said that "it became toxic people stopped talking to each other", T1 claimed that "even learners observed the tension". These reports support the findings by Albon and Cruz (2025) who claim that unresolved confrontations might increase employee stress, impair professional relationships, and reduce productivity as well as marginalisation, thus intensifying hostilities.

The participants' reports of the negative impacts of conflicts on day-to-day school operations have been extensively documented in the literature. Jugmohan (2025) for instance, supports T3's assertion that, "I hate going to work, it is emotionally taxing" by arguing that the conflict in schools might hinder the administrators' ability to properly manage institutional operations and interfere with teaching and learning processes. The schools in this study had not experienced this, despite recent research suggesting that handling conflict through cooperative conversation and open communication might enhance professional relationships and progress organisational development.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

8.1 Conclusion

This study examined how the teachers and SMTs handled conflict in the elementary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District. Organisational and interpersonal variables were the main causes of conflict in the schools according to the results of both the quantitative and qualitative data. The results of the questionnaire showed that among the most cited reasons for conflict were poor communication, a lack of transparency in decision-making, the leadership styles of the SMT members, and an unequal workload distribution.

The results of the interviews also supported similar findings, with participants pointing out problems such as inadequate communication, partiality, ambiguous expectations, and little consultation during decision-making processes. The results also showed that the most common type of conflict between the teachers and the SMT members was interpersonal conflict. Conflicts pertaining to tasks and organisational or structural issues were also noted as important elements. It

was discovered that these disputes had a major impact on how well the schools operated. According to the teachers, unresolved conflict had a detrimental impact on staff morale, professional relationships, and teamwork in the classroom. Persistent conflict can also interfere with the teaching and learning process and create a negative school climate.

Crucially, the study also found several viable methods for enhancing conflict resolution in classrooms. The teachers stressed the value of enhanced communication, collaborative decision-making, and mediation techniques. Additionally, the results of the survey and interviews showed a large deficiency in formal conflict management training. The teachers and SMT members were frequently forced to use informal or trial-and-error methods to resolve conflicts because many participants reported that they had not received sufficient professional development in conflict management. From a theoretical standpoint, the results validated the applicability of the transformational leadership theory in comprehending school conflict dynamics. Open communication, collaborative decision-making, equity, and employee empowerment are all key components of transformational leadership. The study's findings show that the conflict between the teachers and the SMT members is more likely to be noted when these principles are lacking, especially when it comes to communication, consultation, and fair workload sharing.

On the other hand, the tactics that the participants recommended such as transparent communication and participatory leadership reflect fundamental ideas of transformative leadership. This implies that using transformational leadership techniques in schools could have a major impact on lowering conflict and enhancing the professional connections between the teachers and school leadership. By applying the transformational leadership theory to the setting of conflict management in South African primary schools, specifically in the OR Tambo Coastal District, the study thereby adds to the body of current work. This study offers empirical data demonstrating how leadership practices directly impact conflict dynamics within school environments, whereas other research has looked at leadership and conflict management in general organisational contexts.

8.2 Practical Contributions

This study offers a variety of useful insights for educational management and school leadership. Firstly, the results emphasise how crucial it is to enhance teacher-SMT member contact. Staff members' trust can be increased, and misunderstandings can be decreased by establishing open, transparent, and consistent communication mechanisms. The study also highlights the necessity of increased teacher involvement in decision-making. In schools, inclusive leadership techniques may strengthen a sense of teamwork and lessen perceptions of injustice. Thirdly, the study shows how important it is for teachers and SMT members to have organised conflict management training.

Programs for professional development that emphasise negotiating tactics, mediation approaches, and communication skills could greatly enhance the teachers' capacity to resolve disputes amicably. Lastly, the study suggests an

organised conflict resolution procedure for OR Tambo Coastal District schools. Identifying disputes, comprehending their causes, evaluating their effects, investigating potential solutions, putting those ideas into practice, keeping an eye on results, and fostering a positive school climate are all part of this process. School leaders may be able to handle disputes proactively and stop them from getting worse by putting such planned procedures into practice.

8.3 Theoretical Contribution

By illustrating how leadership practices affect the conflict dynamics in educational settings, this study adds to the body of knowledge on educational leadership and conflict management. In particular, the study broadens the application of the transformational leadership theory by demonstrating how its fundamental tenets, transparency, equity, cooperation, and shared decision-making can function as useful tools for lowering the tensions between educators and school administration teams. The study also emphasises the connection between the organisational climate in schools and leadership behaviour. The study offers empirical support for the claim that a leadership style is crucial in determining workplace relationships and institutional success in educational contexts by connecting teachers' perceptions of conflict with leadership practices.

8.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Even though this study offers insightful information about conflict resolution in the elementary schools in the OR Tambo Coastal District, several limitations present prospects for further investigation. Firstly, just a small number of schools in a single district were included in the study's sample. Larger samples from several districts or provinces could be used in future studies to improve the findings' generalisability. Secondly, the cross-sectional research design used in this study recorded the participants' opinions at a specific moment in time. Longitudinal research designs could be used in future studies to look at how conflict dynamics change over time and how leadership interventions affect long-term conflict resolution.

Thirdly, to ascertain whether the conflict management techniques vary among educational settings, comparative research between various school districts or school contexts, such as urban and rural schools, could be carried out. Lastly, future studies could examine the efficacy of certain conflict management training programs or leadership development programs for teachers and SMT members. Assessing such interventions may offer more in-depth understanding of workable methods for enhancing leadership and conflict resolution in educational institutions.

8.5 Final Reflection

In conclusion, a major issue in many schools is still teacher-school management team friction. The study's conclusions show that organisational structures, leadership styles, and communication difficulties all have a significant impact on how conflicts arise in educational settings. However, the study also shows that when schools embrace inclusive leadership methods, encourage open communication, and offer sufficient conflict resolution training, those issues may be handled constructively. SMT members may establish more cooperative and

encouraging school settings that foster strong connections among educators and ultimately raise the standard of teaching and learning by incorporating the concepts of transformational leadership into school management practices.

9. Acknowledgments

Firstly, the researchers would like to acknowledge that this study's report was prepared with the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools like Quill Bot and ChatGPT. Their function was restricted to helping with editing chores, such as strengthening overall language quality, improving clarity, and fine-tuning phrase structure. The authors independently generated all substantial content, including the research design, data analysis, interpretations, and conclusions.

To guarantee accuracy and dependability, the results produced by these tools were carefully examined, adjusted as needed, and cross-checked against reliable academic sources. No AI-generated content was used without careful review in accordance with ethical research norms, and all sources were properly cited. As a result, the application of AI in this study was open, accountable, and in line with the values of academic integrity and honesty. Secondly, we would like to express our gratitude to all the teachers and SMTs at the schools for giving us their time so they could give their best responses to the interviews and survey questions. We also thank the IJLTER team for helping us to satisfy their high standards for academic writing in this work.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire for SMT and teachers

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. **Role in school:**
 - Teacher
 - Administrator
 - Support Staff
 - Other (Please specify): _____
2. **Years of experience in education:**
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - More than 10 years
3. **Highest level of education:**
 - High School
 - Diploma
 - Bachelor's Degree
 - Master's Degree
 - Doctorate or Higher
4. **Have you received formal training in conflict management?**
 - Yes
 - No
5. **Length of current position:**
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - More than 10 years

Section 2: Identification of Causes of Conflicts

1. **The lack of communication significantly contributes to conflicts in schools.**
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
2. **Student behavioural issues are a primary cause of conflicts in schools.**
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
3. **Differences in cultural backgrounds lead to conflicts among students.**
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral

- Disagree
 Strongly Disagree
4. **Conflicts between staff are often caused by workplace stress and pressures.**
 Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly Disagree
5. **Parental involvement and expectations can lead to conflicts in schools.**
 Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly Disagree

Section 3: Types of Conflicts in Schools

1. **Interpersonal conflicts between students are the most common type of conflict.**
 Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly Disagree
2. **Conflicts between teachers and students are frequent.**
 Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly Disagree
3. **Administrative decisions often lead to conflicts within the staff.**
 Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly Disagree
4. **Conflicts over school policies are common among parents.**
 Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly Disagree
5. **Resource allocation conflicts occur frequently between departments.**
 Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Neutral

- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Section 4: Effects of Conflicts on School Management

1. Conflicts negatively impact the academic performance of students.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

2. Frequent conflicts reduce the morale of the staff.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

3. Conflicts lead to a high turnover rate among teachers.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

4. Conflicts disrupt the administrative operations of the school.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

5. Ongoing conflicts can damage the reputation of the school.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Section 5: Conflict Resolution Strategies

1. The school has effective mechanisms in place for resolving student conflicts.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

2. Staff conflicts are resolved in a timely and effective manner.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral

- Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
3. **There are sufficient resources available for conflict resolution training for staff.**
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
4. **Mediation is a regularly used strategy for handling conflicts in our school.**
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
5. **Conflict resolution strategies are regularly reviewed and updated.**
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

Appendix 2: Interview schedule for SMTs and teachers

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. What is your role at the school? (e.g., teacher, administrator, support staff)
2. How long have you been working in this school?
3. What is your educational background?
4. Can you describe your training in conflict management or resolution, if any?
5. How long have you been in your current position at the school?

Section 2: Identification and Analysis of Underlying Causes of Conflicts

1. From your experience, what are the most common causes of conflicts among students in your school?
2. Can you describe any recent conflict situations and what you believe led to them?
3. How do conflicts between staff members typically arise? Are there common themes?
4. In your opinion, how do external factors such as community or family backgrounds influence conflicts in the school?
5. What role does communication play in the development of conflicts within the school?

Section 3: Exploration of Types of Conflicts

1. What types of conflicts are most frequent in your school? (Interpersonal, intra-group, inter-group, etc.)
2. Could you give examples of conflicts that have escalated more significantly than others?
3. How are conflicts involving parents or guardians handled differently from those just involving students?
4. What measures are in place to manage conflicts that involve teachers or other staff members?
5. Are there specific periods or situations during the school year when conflicts are more likely to occur?

Section 4: Effects of Conflicts on School Management

1. How do conflicts affect the day-to-day operations of the school?
2. What impact do frequent conflicts have on the morale and mental health of staff and students?
3. Can you describe any long-term effects that unresolved conflicts have had on the school environment?
4. How does conflict affect teacher-student and student-student relationships?

Section 5: Conflict Resolution Strategies

1. What formal or informal procedures does your school have in place for resolving conflicts?
2. Can you describe a situation where a conflict was resolved effectively? What methods were used?
3. What role do mediation and negotiation play in conflict resolution in your school?
4. Are there training or resources available to staff for handling conflicts? How adequate are these resources?
5. What improvements or changes would you suggest enhancing conflict management strategies in the school?