

TEACHING UNDER TENSION: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF WORKPLACE CONFLICT ON TEACHERS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21737638>

Received	Accepted	Published
02 November 2024	16 December 2024	30 December 2024

ABSTRACT

Workplace conflict at educational institutions has become an emerging problem in relation to the psycho-social well-being of teachers in the modern environment. This paper discusses the psychological effects of long-term workplace conflict in the teaching profession in particular teacher-head teacher disputes in schools. Underpinned by the framework of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, the current study adopted qualitative research methodology based on semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, field notes, and document analysis. The results showed that long-term workplace conflict had been found to contribute significantly to stress, emotional discomfort, frustration, emotional fatigue, low morale, and job dissatisfaction among teachers. In addition, the findings showed that poisonous work environment, ineffective communication practices, and unhelpful leadership behaviors were aggravating factors contributing significantly to the psychological disturbance of teachers and undermining their occupational motivation and engagement in the classroom. This paper concluded that it is important to consider workplace conflict not only as an organizational phenomenon but also as an important psychological stressor in the lives of teachers.

Keywords: Workplace Conflict, Teacher Well-being, Emotional Exhaustion, Psychological Distress, School Climate, Educational Leadership

Introduction

Interaction among individuals in workplaces plays a crucial role in organizational functioning, teaching effectiveness, professional collaboration, and psychological well-being of teachers. At educational organizations, teachers and heads work together towards the accomplishment of organizational goals and maintenance of discipline within schools to help students in their academic and psycho-social development. Unfortunately, discrepancies in communication styles, managerial skills, and professional

expectations often lead to workplace conflicts. Today's research recognizes workplace conflict as a critical organizational and psychological problem because of its detrimental consequences on school climate, psychological well-being of teachers, and professional activities.

Teaching requires constant emotional involvement, organizational interaction, personal communication, and classroom management skills making this profession emotionally demanding. Poor working relations between professionals often cause stress, frustration,

psychological tension, and emotional exhaustion among teachers. Recent studies show that unresolved workplace conflicts substantially increase the rate of emotional exhaustion and occupational burnout among educators (Wu et al., 2024; Portelada et al., 2025). Similar adverse effects can be produced by toxic leadership, hostile communication style, and workplace aggression (Barros et al., 2025; Ghasemi, 2026).

Current educational research pays much attention to the effects of organizational climate and leadership style on teachers' psychological well-being. Supportive and emotionally intelligent leadership usually reduces occupational stress while inflexible and conflict-oriented managers worsen psychological state of teachers (Dishari & AlAfnan, 2024; Tian & Guo, 2024). Transformational leadership style helps to decrease the rates of teacher burnout and improve organizational support through increased emotional resistance (Karacabey et al., 2025; Yong & Zhang, 2025).

Prolonged workplace conflict led to significant stress, psychological tension, frustrations, sadness, difficulties in communication, and reduced professional motivation according to results of the original research upon which this paper is based. Teachers suffering from prolonged workplace conflict found it difficult to concentrate on their work and showed reduced motivational level. The results prove the necessity of researching workplace conflict from a psychological point of view.

In this regard, the Job Demands – Resources (JD-R) theory can serve as an appropriate theoretical framework. According to the theory, excess job demands in combination with scarcity of organizational resources lead to psychological stress and exhaustion among employees. In educational environment, workplace conflict appears to be a psychological job demand, which takes teachers' emotional resources and negatively impacts their professional well-being.

Statement of the Problem

Workplace conflict has become a significant challenge in educational institutions, driven by ineffective communication, rigid organizational practices, and unsupportive leadership.

Prolonged conflict adversely affects teachers' psychological well-being, contributing to stress, emotional exhaustion, frustration, reduced motivation, and lower organizational commitment (Wang et al., 2024; Portelada et al., 2025; Dishari & AlAfnan, 2024; Ghasemi, 2026). Despite growing interest in teacher well-being, limited qualitative research has explored teachers' lived psychological experiences of workplace conflict. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how prolonged workplace conflict influences teachers' psychological well-being, emotional experiences, and professional functioning.

Research Questions

How does workplace conflict psychologically affect teachers?

What forms of emotional distress emerge from prolonged teacher-head teacher conflict?

How does ongoing workplace conflict influence teachers' professional well-being and motivation?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature on educational psychology, organizational behavior, and educational leadership by conceptualizing workplace conflict as a psychological stressor rather than merely an administrative issue. Guided by the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory, it provides qualitative evidence on how prolonged workplace conflict affects teachers' psychological well-being, emotional functioning, and professional motivation. The findings offer practical insights for educational leaders, policymakers, and school administrators to develop supportive leadership practices, strengthen conflict management strategies, and promote healthier school environments. Furthermore, this study addresses a gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence on the psychological consequences of workplace conflict in educational settings, thereby establishing a foundation for future qualitative and quantitative research on teacher well-being and occupational mental health.

Literature Review

Workplace conflict has emerged as a significant organizational challenge in educational institutions, affecting not only administrative processes but also teachers' psychological well-being. While constructive conflict may encourage organizational learning and innovation, persistent interpersonal conflict, ineffective communication, and unsupportive leadership create psychologically unsafe work environments that undermine teachers' emotional health and professional functioning. Contemporary evidence increasingly conceptualizes workplace conflict as a psychosocial stressor that depletes employees' emotional resources and contributes to adverse occupational outcomes, including stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and diminished job satisfaction (Ghasemi, 2026; Portelada et al., 2025). Rather than occurring in isolation, these outcomes reflect the cumulative impact of dysfunctional organizational relationships and inadequate institutional support.

Teaching is inherently demanding because it requires sustained emotional labour, interpersonal interaction, and continuous cognitive engagement. When these professional demands are compounded by unresolved workplace conflict, teachers become increasingly vulnerable to psychological distress. Research consistently demonstrates that occupational stress, limited autonomy, strained professional relationships, and inadequate emotional regulation are associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and reduced occupational well-being (Wang et al., 2024; Qiu et al., 2025). Similarly, workplace bullying, hostile communication, and persistent interpersonal tensions have been identified as important antecedents of burnout and declining professional engagement (Portelada et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings suggest that teachers' psychological well-being is shaped not only by instructional responsibilities but also by the quality of their organizational environment.

Leadership represents a critical organizational resource that can either mitigate or intensify the psychological consequences of workplace conflict. Evidence indicates that emotionally intelligent and transformational leadership promotes trust,

organizational support, and psychological safety, thereby reducing burnout and strengthening teachers' resilience, job satisfaction, and affective commitment (Dishari & AlAfnan, 2024; Karacabey et al., 2025; Yong & Zhang, 2025). Conversely, authoritarian leadership, ineffective communication, and hostile organizational climates exacerbate interpersonal conflict and increase teachers' emotional burden, suggesting that leadership quality plays a central role in shaping both organizational climate and employee well-being.

These relationships are well explained by the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory, which posits that excessive job demands lead to strain when organizational resources are insufficient (Bakker & Demerouti). Within educational settings, workplace conflict, communication breakdowns, and interpersonal hostility function as psychological job demands that consume teachers' emotional resources, whereas supportive leadership, collegial relationships, and effective conflict-management practices serve as protective job resources that buffer stress and enhance well-being. Recent empirical evidence supports this perspective by demonstrating that organizational support and positive workplace relationships reduce emotional exhaustion and improve teachers' occupational functioning (Karacabey et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

Although previous research has established links between teacher burnout, leadership, organizational climate, and occupational stress, workplace conflict has largely been examined as a managerial or organizational issue rather than as a distinct psychological stressor. Furthermore, the predominance of quantitative research has provided limited insight into how teachers interpret, experience, and cope with prolonged workplace conflict in their everyday professional lives. This lack of qualitative evidence restricts a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which workplace conflict affects teachers' well-being. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach, guided by the Job Demands–Resources theory, to explore teachers' lived experiences of workplace conflict and its psychological consequences.

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative case study design was used in this study for examining the psychological implications of workplace conflicts on teachers in educational institutions. Qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate in view of the fact that this research study would deal with teachers' emotions, perceptions, psychological distress, and experiences as a result of workplace conflict and their association with their superiors.

Research Paradigm

Interpretivism formed the basis of the research as this particular paradigm emphasized the role of subjectivity in the construction of social realities and human experiences. It was therefore relevant in the context of this research because it would enable researchers to understand how teachers would emotionally perceive and interpret workplace conflict.

Research Setting

This research was undertaken at a public educational institution that had been experiencing prolonged workplace conflicts involving its teachers and head teachers. It was the appropriate setting for conducting research on how interpersonal tensions impact teachers' emotional well-being, communication ability, and professional functioning in general.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected among those teachers and head teachers who had been facing workplace conflicts within the organization. For instance, purposive sampling technique was used for selecting participants having appropriate experience of workplace conflicts within schools or organizations. Participants were thus comprised of two groups, namely teachers and their head teachers.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, field notes, and document analysis were used to collect data for this research study. Interviews were the primary source for obtaining data and mainly concerned with participants' emotional experiences, psychological distress, barriers to effective communication, and workplace-related challenges. Classroom observations would help to observe teachers' professional and behavioral conduct inside classroom environments under the influence of conflicts. Data collection through other sources was also planned accordingly.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data collected would follow Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. The process of analyzing data would begin with becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying categories, developing themes, and interpreting findings related to the topic of workplace conflicts and their psycho-social consequences.

Table 1

Sample Coding and Theme Development

Initial Codes	Categories	Themes
Stress, anxiety, tension	Emotional strain	Psychological distress
Burnout, frustration, fatigue	Emotional depletion	Emotional exhaustion
Poor communication, hostility	Organizational conflict	Toxic school climate
Withdrawal, low morale	Professional dissatisfaction	Reduced wellbeing

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility of the study was ensured by using triangulation of the interviews, observations, field notes, and document analysis. The reliability of the research was maintained through proper

documentation of research procedures and analysis. Confirmability was guaranteed by basing the interpretations on participants' stories, and transferability through providing sufficient

information regarding the context of the research environment and participants' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to during the conduct of this study. All participants were made aware of the purposes of the research and their right to withdraw from participation at any stage during the research. They gave an informed consent before their participation. Information collected during the research remained confidential and anonymous through the use of codes and pseudonyms. This was because of the emotional sensitivity involved in this area of research.

Results

Overview of Findings

In this study, the psychological effects of conflict in the workplace on teachers were examined. Results showed that protracted conflicts between

teachers and headteachers had a major effect on teachers' emotional well-being, work motivation, mental stability, and overall organizational experience. Interviewees reported that workplace conflict was a constant source of stress that produced emotional strain, frustration, anxiety, disappointment, emotional exhaustion, and dissatisfaction with one's job. It was found out that unresolvable tensions led to low levels of morale, communication problems, enthusiasm for teaching, and interest in class activities.

Thematic analysis of interviews, class observation, field notes, and organizational interactions produced four themes that became evident during the process of data interpretation. Those included workplace conflict as a source of psychological distress, emotional exhaustion and professional fatigue, toxic leadership and organizational climate, and diminished professional well-being and motivation.

Table 2

Major Themes and Sub-themes

Major Themes	Sub-themes
Workplace Conflict as a Source of Psychological Distress	Anxiety, stress, frustration, emotional tension
Emotional Exhaustion and Professional Fatigue	Burnout, emotional depletion, mental fatigue
Toxic Leadership and School Climate	Communication barriers, hostility, power imbalance
Decline in Professional Well-being and Motivation	Reduced morale, professional dissatisfaction, withdrawal

Theme 1: Workplace Conflict as a Source of Psychological Distress

Among the most predominant findings of this study is the fact that workplace conflict served as a major cause of psychological stress among teachers. The participants consistently identified the existence of prolonged inter-personal disputes between them and head teachers as psychologically tiring experiences that negatively impacted their mental and emotional well-being. The participants explained that unresolved conflict situations produced continuous psychological pressures that were mentally tiring even when at home.

Several participants complained about feeling stressed, tense, frustrated, anxious, sad and

psychologically uncomfortable due to prolonged workplace conflict. According to the participants, conflicts caused insecurities and emotional instabilities that gradually impacted their confidence, emotional regulation and professional enthusiasm. Prolonged workplace conflict was identified as being emotionally tiring since the participants were always mentally preparing for unfavorable encounters, criticisms, and communication challenges in the schools.

As one participant explained:

"Every time conflict arose with the head teacher, I used to be mentally disturbed throughout the day. Even when I returned home, I kept thinking about the issue."

Another participant added:

"The tension made me unable to have peace of mind. I felt emotionally disturbed and couldn't pay attention to teaching."

Participants further revealed that the emotional stress produced by workplace conflict had a negative impact on their psychological concentration and emotional stability within classroom sessions. The participants explained that unresolved tensions often distracted them mentally, emotionally frustrated them, and left them helpless. The experiences were said to have impacted their professional confidence and limited their abilities to remain emotionally stable while teaching.

Similar conclusions were drawn from the findings in the original research paper, where participants identified prolonged negative conflicts as sources of psycho-social problems including disappointments, stress, sorrow, unease, and emotional tension. Teachers under conflict conditions were mentally preoccupied with unresolved interpersonal issues and unable to focus professionally.

Field observations further confirmed these conclusions. Teachers under conflict conditions displayed emotional distress, little verbal interaction, hesitations in class, and emotional fatigue. The field notes indicate that emotionally distressed teachers displayed signs of being withdrawn and mentally burdened during professional interactions.

The findings of the study, therefore, suggest that prolonged workplace conflicts produce emotional distress and stressful working environments characterized by frustration, psychological tensions, emotional insecurities, and mental tiredness among teachers.

Theme 2: Emotional Exhaustion and Professional Fatigue

One other key discovery in this particular study was emotional exhaustion and professional fatigue amongst teachers suffering from workplace conflicts for prolonged periods of time. In this regard, participants claimed that continuous workplace conflict resulted in their emotional exhaustion, where they felt mentally drained and psychologically depleted due to

constant interpersonal conflict, communication breakdowns, and unfulfilled emotional tensions.

Teachers claimed that continuous mental strain in their working environment led to frequent mental fatigue, emotional exhaustion, lack of enthusiasm, and exhaustion in general. The participants admitted that constant emotional strain gradually drained them emotionally and psychologically, thus leaving them less motivated about their teaching assignments. Emotional exhaustion did not seem to be a fleeting problem but rather a psychological one that caused teachers emotional strain and affected their professional functioning.

As one participant said,

"I became emotionally tired because every day there was some tension or misunderstanding. It felt mentally exhausting."

Verbatim of another are as,

"The conflict reduced my interest in teaching. I was physically present in class, but emotionally I felt exhausted."

In addition, emotional exhaustion affected teachers' interpersonal relations at work. Some teachers admitted emotional detachment, unwillingness to communicate, and avoidance of organizational interactions to avoid further emotional strain. Emotional fatigue resulted in feelings of hopelessness and dissatisfaction with their profession in several cases.

Similarly, the original study findings showed that teachers involved in unresolved conflict situations suffered from lower levels of enthusiasm, poor morale, frustration, and professional demotivation. Teachers became psychologically troubled and emotionally stressed due to workplace conflict.

Also, teachers who exhibited symptoms of emotional exhaustion seemed to display low energy, little involvement in organizational discussions, and emotionally exhausted appearance during classroom activities. These teachers became less enthusiastic about instructional activities and emotionally less engaged with students.

It is clearly evident that workplace conflict leads to significant emotional exhaustion and professional fatigue on the part of teachers. Interpersonal conflict drains their emotional

energies and negatively affects their occupational

life and professionalism.

Table 3
Psychological Consequences Reported by Participants

Psychological Experiences	Observed Effects
Stress and anxiety	Mental preoccupation
Emotional exhaustion	Reduced enthusiasm
Frustration	Communication withdrawal
Sadness and disappointment	Decline in morale
Emotional fatigue	Professional dissatisfaction

Theme 3: Toxic Leadership and School Climate

The findings also found that the combination of toxic leaders and unhealthy organizational climates created increased conflict and mental stress for teachers. Participants noted that poor communication, administrative inflexibility, aggressive interactions, and a lack of emotional support created significant problems that made schools psychologically unsafe.

Some participants cited examples of conflict scenarios created by the actions of the leadership that generated a fear-based atmosphere, emotional insecurity, and professional discomfort. Some participants believed that the behavior of their leaders was emotionally insensitive, authoritarian, and psychologically stressful. Participants argued that the lack of healthy communications and negative interpersonal dynamics resulted in increased emotional tension and decreased trust in their organizations.

As one participant noted:

"Leaders' attitude created fear in the hearts of the employees. People feared saying or doing something wrong."

The next said:

"There was no healthy communication. Even the smallest problems were blown out of proportion because nobody wanted to hear other people out."

Participants also discussed how communication difficulties significantly worsened their interactions with others. It was stated that misunderstanding, absence of dialogue, and emotionally aggressive communication made it

difficult to solve simple disputes and caused interpersonal conflict. As participants suggested, poor communication resulted in increased emotional strain and psychologically stressful workplaces.

As it was already mentioned, the findings of the original thesis showed that communication breakdowns, emotional stress, hostile interactions, and emotionally strained relationships were significant factors influencing teachers' performance and well-being. Those who experienced constant conflict were reportedly psychologically disturbed and negatively affected by such workplace conditions.

The field observations made it clear that there were many organizations in which emotionally uncomfortable environments were formed due to minimal interaction between colleagues, apparent discomfort during meetings, and emotionally tense communication among teachers. Participants admitted being wary of discussing any professional topics for fear of conflict.

Theme 4: Decline in Professional Well-being and Motivation

Finally, it was found that persistent workplace conflict negatively impacted the teachers' professional well-being, morale, and motivation. The participants reported that emotional strain gradually undermined their commitment to education and passion about teaching.

As noted by the respondents, the impact included low morale, loss of professional confidence, emotional isolation, and reduced enthusiasm about the tasks involved in the

process of education. It was reported by some participants that prolonged workplace conflict had a negative effect on their emotional attitude to teaching and their professional satisfaction. In addition, the respondents noted that the constant conflict made them less engaged with organizational objectives and less interested in participating actively in school activities.

A teacher reported:

"I became less motivated because of the unfavorable emotional atmosphere in the workplace. Teaching was no longer exciting."

"I experienced a decline in confidence and a decrease in professional interest. I stopped volunteering for extra responsibilities."

Furthermore, participants reported that the conflict had a detrimental effect on classroom performance of teachers. Emotional tension is believed to affect teachers' concentration at work and reduce their enthusiasm to engage actively with students. Psychological distress reportedly made many teachers emotionally unavailable during educational processes.

Similarly, the results of the original research have indicated that persistent conflicts negatively affected teachers' morale, enthusiasm, communication, and professional motivation. Prolonged interpersonal tensions reportedly decreased teachers' psychological and professional engagement at classes.

Classroom observations confirmed that teachers who experience interpersonal conflicts demonstrate low level of enthusiasm and high levels of psychological fatigue. In addition, it was observed that teachers appear emotionally isolated during educational interactions.

Overall, it can be concluded that prolonged workplace conflict significantly affects teacher's professional well-being and demotivates teachers at their job.

Summary of Findings

The results from this study suggest that workplace conflict among teachers in educational organizations is an important source of psychological stress that affects the emotional well-being, motivation, and work experiences of teachers. Teachers with prolonged conflicts expressed high levels of emotional distress

characterized by stress, anxiety, frustration, depression, emotional exhaustion, and professional dissatisfaction. Toxic leadership styles, poor communication skills, and toxic organizational climate were additional sources of emotional stress for teachers.

From another perspective, the results from this study suggest that workplace conflict among teachers had negative impacts on their professional morale, engagement, enthusiasm, and emotional stability. Teachers with prolonged conflicts became emotionally preoccupied and professionally demotivated. Overall, the results from this study clearly supported the argument that workplace conflict among teachers should not only be considered as an organizational matter but also a psycho-social one.

Discussion

In this study, the psychological effects of workplace conflict were examined among teachers and it was observed that prolonged teacher-head teacher conflict largely contributes to stress, emotional exhaustion, low morale, and professional well-being deterioration. Teacher participants in this study experiencing conflicts at work stated that they feel distressed, frustrated, anxious, and preoccupied psychologically and this hinders their engagement and motivation at work.

Findings from this study have proven consistent with previous literature on the effect of workplace conflict, which is known to be a psycho-social stressor at educational institutions. Like Ghasemi (2026), it was found in this study that workplace conflict leads to increased stress levels and hence emotional exhaustion, while according to Portelada et al. (2025), a hostile organizational atmosphere greatly causes teacher burnout and psychological distress. It was also discovered in this study that emotionally unhealthy organizational environments reduce teachers' emotional resilience and dedication to work.

Another factor identified as contributing to teacher distress and lack of professional well-being is the absence of adequate communication, unresponsive leadership, and organizational hostility. These findings are consistent with

literature where Dishari and AlAfnan (2024) and Karacabey et al. (2025) noted that emotionally intelligent and supportive leadership helps reduce burnout among teachers and improves working conditions.

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory is very strong in supporting this study's findings since it is evident in it that emotional job demands arising from workplace conflicts drain teachers' emotional resources and affect their well-being and performance adversely.

Implications of the Study

Educational institutions should adopt proper conflict management and counseling processes among educators.

Administrators should undergo training in emotionally intelligent leadership and conflict management.

Educator wellness programs should be adopted as part of institutional and educational policies.

Schools should foster psychologically healthy organizational climate characterized by cooperation and respectful communication.

This research contributes theoretically in that it extends the applicability of the JD-R model to issues of workplace conflict and teacher well-being.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to a specific educational setting, reducing broader generalizability.

The qualitative case study design involved a limited number of participants.

Findings were based on participants' subjective emotional experiences and perceptions.

Additional organizational variables such as workload and institutional policies were not extensively examined.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order to get more reliable results, researchers can use quantitative and mixed methods involving larger samples.

It is suggested to conduct longitudinal research on the psychological impact of conflict in the workplace on teachers.

Future researchers should explore how resilience, coping mechanisms, and emotional intelligence mediate the effects of conflict.

Comparative studies across various educational systems and cultures are needed.

Researchers could focus on intervention studies concerning leadership and mental well-being of teachers.

Conclusion

This study found out that chronic workplace conflict had negative influence on teachers' psychological state, emotional condition, and motivation. Teachers who face interpersonal conflicts at work suffer from stress, emotional exhaustion, irritation, lack of morale, and job dissatisfaction. A hostile atmosphere in an organization and ineffective management practices increase emotional tension and undermine teachers' occupational resilience.

Thus, the findings indicate that the problem of conflict in the workplace should be treated by the organization as a psych-social issue rather than a purely administrative one. Moreover, this study revealed that the emotional climate at school, effective leadership, and constructive communication between staff members play crucial role in preserving teachers' well-being and professionalism.

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