

Exploring the Role of Principals in Managing Conflicts at Secondary School Level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstracts

Organizational life is full of conflicts and the presence of conflicts in school has direct influence on mutual relations, the motivation of teachers and students' learning. This research is aimed at exploring the role of principals in managing conflicts at secondary school in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. To achieve the objectives of research, narrative research design was adopted. Total of 10-principals from districts Khyber and Orakzai were selected through purposive sampling techniques. Data was collected through the conduction of semi-structured interviews and was analyzed thematically. The findings of the study revealed that conflicts at secondary schools' level are caused by gaps in communication, imbalance in work distribution and leadership styles of principals. This study has also revealed that conflicts at secondary school level are resolved through the adoption of participatory, transparent and empathetic leadership approaches by principals. This research concluded that the conflict management skills of principals based on cultural norms and traditions are vital for the enhancement of harmony in schools. This study recommended that informal and traditional Jirga systems may be adopted for improving conflict management and decision-making skills of principals.

Keywords: Leadership Skills, Conflict, Conflict Management Skills, Principals

1. Introduction

The system of education is based on social interactions and schools are social organizations that represent social integration of diverse individuals (Yuliani & Hoerudin, 2022). Each individual carries different goals and expectations that becomes the foundation for generating conflicts in work place (Folger et al., 2024). A school represents a social space that combines various indicators for supporting the teaching-learning process through the application of managerial skills of principals (Riani & Ain, 2022).

Principal, being a leader, is playing a vital role in the smooth operation of school (Corrigan & Merry, 2022). The role of principal is not limited to daily operations of schools. He has to prepare academic plans as per the vision of school and coordinate and communicate with staff. He is also responsible for the organization, guidance, training, mentorship and supervision of staff and students for the achievement of academic goals. The principal is also responsible for the provision of supportive and conducive environment for learning (Kumar & Suhail, 2021). In Pakistan in general and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular, principals are occupying key role in leading a school in right direction through the proper implementation of administrative policies and effective utilization of human and non-human resources (Samrat et al., 2021).

A school is a social and dynamic organization in which different stakeholders are involved that includes teachers, students, parents, community members, civil society, educational administration and principals

(Organization, 2021). Each person has different perception, behavior, interest, personal and social background that are the cause of disagreement, disengagement, disruption and academic conflicts in the matters of schools (Foster et al., 2022). School leaders face challenges on daily basis as part of their management responsibilities along with other academic, curricular and co-curricular activities (Tintoré et al., 2022). Principals resolve conflicts by following the process of conflict management and using conflict management skills. The core aim of principals' job is the promotion of students' and teachers' performance through encouragement, motivation and facilitation by providing facilities. The ultimate role of school's principal is the establishment of an effective and conducive school culture (Edo & Omunakwe, 2021).

The recent era is full of dynamism, innovation and change, the system of education is subject to substantial reforms and policies for decentralizing teaching-learning process along with ensuring managerial and academic accountability (Saidova, 2021). This dynamism and change is improving the system of education (Wang et al., 2023) in one hand while intensifying the interpersonal and administrative conflicts on the other hand due to increased responsibilities for generating desired output for all stakeholders (Wang et al., 2023). Principal as manager faces conflicts, issues and challenges between teachers, students and management on daily basis along with occasional conflicts with community members on academic and non-academic issues (Bush, 2022). The lack of leadership skills and scarcity of resources are the core indicators for the intensification and complication of conflicts (Folorunsho & Samuel, 2025).

Conflict is the disagreement between two rival parties due to difference of opinion, perceptions and behavior (Ertürk, 2022). It is the process in which one side perceives that the other side is affecting their interests negatively. In the domain of education, conflicts are rooted in the formal structure of schools, interpersonal relationship and personal desires, goals and endeavors (Grammatikopoulos, 2022). Conflicts in institutions are the results of centralization of decision making and strong structure of top-down hierarchy (Shi et al., 2024). Inadequate and one-way communication is also a vital factor in creating conflicts in schools (Ertürk, 2022). The unequal distribution of work and resources in schools is the lead cause of conflicts at all level of education (Jomuad et al., 2021).

At secondary school level in Pakistan, the causes of conflicts are multiple (Ertürk, 2022). Political interventions in the matter of schools such as posting and transfer of teaching and ministerial staff, land ownership and political favoritism are the root cause of conflicts (Kenei, 2021). The lack of leadership skills and ambiguity in the assigned role to staff are also contributing factors in creating conflicts in secondary schools in Pakistan (Grammatikopoulos, 2022). The educational institutions in Pakistan are also facing severe issues of infrastructure that is further positively associated with conflicts in schools (Ayoko et al., 2023). Favoritism on the part of principals while dividing work, assigning subjects to teaching staff and delegating co-curricular responsibilities, is regarded as prime factor for disruption of smooth operation of school (Mahlaba, 2023).

The management of conflicts is the prime responsibility of all stakeholders. For conflict management, variety of strategies is used globally in open communication, shared decision making, community involvement and mediations are included (Vacas & Rodríguez-Ruiz, 2023). But there is a lack of specific literature on the dynamic role of principals in managing conflicts at secondary school level in culturally rich and traditional strong geographies of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that justifies the conduction of this study.

The purpose of current study is the exploration of the role principals in managing and resolving conflicts at secondary school level in districts Khyber and Orakzai. This study seeks to identify various types of conflicts prevailing at secondary school level and identification of the strategies and interventions followed by principals for the resolution of conflicts within the umbrella of cultural, traditional and religious norms, values and customs. The understanding of prevailing conflicts and effective strategies used by principals for their resolution at secondary school level bears great significance for the formulation of policies and promotion of collaborative culture in schools.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the nature and causes of conflicts at secondary school level.
2. To examine the strategies used by principals in managing conflicts at secondary school level.
3. To assess the level of effectiveness of the adopted strategies in the resolution of conflicts at secondary school level.

Research Questions

1. What are the nature and causes of conflicts at secondary school level?
2. What are the strategies used by principals in managing conflicts at secondary school level?
3. What is the level of effectiveness of the adopted strategies in the resolution of conflicts at secondary school level?

Research Methodology

This research study is qualitative in nature and qualitative narrative research design is adopted in the conduction of this research. All the principals and administrators of government secondary schools of districts Khyber and Orakzai Khyber Pakhtunkhwa constituted the population of the study. Total of 10- principals were selected through purposive sampling for the collection of data as sample. The collection of data was made through the conduction of semi-structured interviews for which the interview guide was validated by panel of educationalists. The collected data was analyzed thematically for getting findings.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of data was made thematically by working on data in generating codes, themes and sub-themes. From the data two major themes were generated namely sources of conflicts and leadership approaches for conflict resolution. These themes were further divided into three sub-themes respectively. The thematic analysis is presented in the following manner:

Sources of Conflicts in Secondary Schools

The collected data has revealed that the government secondary schools of merged districts of Khyber and Orakzai of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are not free of conflicts. Various types of conflicts were highlighted through the deeper roots of gaps in communication, unequal, unjust and biased work distribution of work and leadership induced conflicts. These deeper roots of conflict creation are presented in the sub-themes in the following manner:

Communication Gaps

The thematic analysis of the collected data revealed that conflicts at secondary schools in the target districts were caused by gaps in communication between school administrators, teachers, students and parents. As one of the principal remarked that the ineffective way of communication between principals, teachers and students are the major issue that creates conflicts in schools. Ah he remarked:

“In most of the schools, the channels of communication between principals, teachers and students are ineffective that creates misunderstandings and ultimately lead to conflicts.” (P-1)

Similarly two respondents shared that disagreements among teachers are due to unclear verbal communication and lack of follow-up. (P-7, P-10)

Another principal articulated that school-based activities are conducted through the following of informal communication mood that generates conflicts. As he remarked:

“Conflicts in schools are mainly caused by the dissemination of information informally.” (P-2)

Another principal revealed that teachers’ negligence of official orders as the major cause of issues and

conflicts in schools. As he remarked:

“The major cause of conflicts in our schools is the negligence of teachers in following official orders. This negligence results in the form of low performance of schools.” (P-3)

Three respondents were of the views that the miscommunication among school staff converts minor issues into bigger and severe conflicts. (P-4, P-5, P-9)

Social issues become more severe conflicts due to misunderstanding and lack of communication with parents and community members. One of the principal shared that lack of parental involvement and communication with teachers causes social issues in schools. As he remarked:

“Parents do not take ownership of school matters. They do not come to school when there is some social issues in school. This lack of communication and involvement causes real and severe conflicts in our schools.” (P-3)

Another respondent shared similar remarks that social issues are the results of lack of communication of parents regarding their children’s behavior. As he remarked:

“Students behavioral issues lead to social conflicts in schools and that are the results of their parental lack of involvement in their schools.” (P-6)

So in short, the presence of conflicts in schools is directly linked with the lack of communication among staff of schools and lack of involvement of parents in school matters. These findings are similar to the findings of Agbofa and Okyere, (2022) that reflected that school-based conflicts are rooted in lack of communication and un-involvement of parents in their children education.

Imbalance in Work Distribution

The thematic analysis of collected data has also revealed that the prime cause of conflicts in school is the imbalance, unjust and biased work distribution among school-staff. As one of the principals revealed that teachers’ create conflicts due to their work burden and assignment of new tasks. As he remarked:

“Teachers in my school are often unsatisfied with the work distribution and make issues in school. Work distribution is also a hard task for principals as no one can be made happy with any sort of work arrangement.” (P-4)

Four respondents have shared that work distribution, course division and subject allotment is the main concern of teaching staff. Allotment of subject without their consent causes academic distress and conflicts in school. (P-1, P-3, P-5, P-9)

Another set of two respondents have expressed their views that unjust approach and biasedness in academic and co-curricular tasks create academic and co-curricular hurdles for principals. (P-2, P-6)

Another set of three respondents has shared that favoritism on the part of school management for giving easy subjects to most near and dear while tough subjects to those teachers who are not their favorite is the cause of conflicts in most of the schools. (P-7, P-8, P-10).

In short, conflicts in schools have deep roots in the distribution of work based on favoritism, injustice and biasedness. These findings are similar to the findings of Mariyadas and Saravanakumar, (2021) that stated that school-based issues and conflicts are teacher-centered in which work distribution and injustice in task assignment has a great role.

Leadership Approaches for Conflict Resolution

The thematic analysis of collected data revealed that principals of secondary schools of district Khyber and district Orakzai are using variety of techniques in dealing with conflicts in their schools. From the thematic analysis, these strategies are divided into two sub-themes in the following manner:

Informal Conflict Resolution

From the thematic analysis, it is clear that principals are using informal and traditional strategies in dealing with conflicts in their schools. As one of the principal has articulated that he usually deal conflicts in informal way by holding jirgas. As he remarked:

“Conflicts and social issues are normally resolved through the tradition, norms and culture of our tribes. We hold jirgas for the resolution of any conflict and issue.” (P-10)

Two respondents has shared similar insights that holding Jirga is the mechanism of dialogue for the resolution of conflicts. The holdings of Jirga and its decisions are warmly respected and are accepted by all. (P-6, P-7)

Another principal revealed that they follow traditions while taking any decision regarding school issues. As he remarked:

“I follow our tradition that is set by our elders before taking any decision regarding the issues in my school.” (P-1)

Another respondent has articulated that he holds informal discussions with all parties that are involved in the mess. As he remarked:

“I use to approach each and every member of the conflicting parties informally so that their individual views are properly recorded. This informal approach enabled me for knowing the root cause of the problem and arriving at the best possible solution.” (P-3)

Another principals has recorded similar views in this manner:

“The informality in dealing with each individual who is involved in the conflict is not only giving me all the required information but is also leading me to build consensus in resolution of the conflict.” (P-2)

A set of two respondents have shared that they are informal in their approach of dealing with conflicts in the form of talking with teachers, students and parents regarding the prevailing issues and seeking their support in their resolution. (P-8, P-9)

Another set of two respondents have shared informality and traditions are the core elements through conflicts are resolved and schools are run smoothly in district Khyber. (P-4, P-5)

From the above thematic analysis, it is clear that principals are using traditional and informal strategies of conflicts resolution in the merged districts Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These findings are similar to the findings of Yousaf, (2021) that conflicts in schools are easily resolved in traditional way rather than applying standard procedures.

Participatory Leadership

The thematic analysis of the collected data from semi-structured interviews of principals of districts Khyber and Orakzai has revealed that principals are using participatory leadership for the resolution of conflicts in their schools. As one of the principals revealed that he ensures participation of each and every in dealing with school-based problems. As he remarked:

“I ensure the participation of teachers, students and parents in the resolution of conflicts. Their participation not only promotes dialogue and building consensus for better solutions.” (P-1)

Three principals were of the view that conflicts are created by people and their resolution is only possible when all parties are involved. (P-3, P-5, P-10)

Similarly another set of three respondents have shared that they invite community elders for resolution of social and behavioral issues of students through mutually shared insights and norms of the locality. (P-6, P-7, P-9)

Another respondent has shared that the involvement of parents and their communication with teachers is the strategy for resolution of social issues in schools. As he remarked:

“The strategy he used for the resolution of conflicts is the direct involvement of parents and their

communication with teachers for shaping the behavior of students in positive way.” (P-2)

Another respondent has shared that students’ generated conflicts are resolved through the interventions of students only. As he remarked:

“The behavioral issues are directly resolved through the mutual involvement of students and proctor board of my school.” (P-4)

Another respondent has shared similar remarks as:

“Students are responsible for resolving their conflicts in my school.” (P-8)

From the above thematic analysis, it is clear that principals are using participatory leadership approaches for conflicts resolution in the merged districts Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These findings are similar to the findings of Fatimah, (2022) that conflicts in schools are easily by principals through participatory leadership approaches.

Discussions

The current study is aimed at exploring the role of principals in managing conflicts at secondary school level in districts Khyber and Orakzai. For this purpose data from ten principals was collected through the conduction of semi-structured interviews. The analysis of data was made through thematic analysis. The analysis of data reflected several findings. The findings reveal that conflicts in schools are cause by the gap in communication between principals, teachers, students, parents and community members. These findings are similar to the findings of Agbofa and Okyere, (2022) that reflected that school-based conflicts are rooted in lack of communication and un-involvement of parents in their children education. The thematic analysis has also revealed that conflicts in schools have deep roots in the distribution of work based on favoritism, injustice and biasedness. These findings are similar to the findings of Mariyadas and Saravanakumar, (2021) that stated that school-based issues and conflicts are teacher-centered in which work distribution and injustice in task assignment has a great role. The thematic analysis has also revealed that principals are using traditional and informal strategies of conflicts resolution in the merged districts Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These findings are similar to the findings of Yousaf, (2021) that conflicts in schools are easily resolved in traditional way rather than applying standard procedures. The thematic analysis has also articulated that principals are using participatory leadership approaches for conflicts resolution in the merged districts Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These findings are similar to the findings of Fatimah, (2022) that conflicts in schools are easily by principals through participatory leadership approaches.

Conclusion

The current study is aimed to explore the role of principals in managing conflicts at secondary schools in districts Khyber and Orakzai. The narrative research design was used in this study. Data was collected from ten principals through the conduction of semi-structured interviews which was analyzed thematically. The thematic analysis revealed that conflicts in schools were due to lack of communication, unjust, biased work distribution and favoritism by principals. From these findings it is concluded that the root causes of conflicts in schools are the one-way and lack of communication and unjust work distribution. Thematic analysis and discussion have revealed that conflicts in schools are resolved by principals through the use of informal and participatory leadership approaches. So from these findings, it is concluded that informal, traditional and participatory leadership approaches are forces behind the conflict resolution in secondary schools.

Recommendations

From the conclusion of this study it may be recommended that participatory, traditional and informal ways of conflicts resolution such as Jirga System may be included as proactive approach of conflict resolution at secondary school level.

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