

# **Work-place conflicts: A case study on coping strategies of VET teachers**

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EECER 2005, Dublin

## *Abstract*

*The paper you are about to read is based on the following statements:*

*Dealing with conflicts in the work place is a necessary part of the training of VET teachers. These processes are essential to acquire the problem solving competences that are essential when working with trainees later on.*

*One of the fundamental prerequisites for this is one's ability to reflect one's very own ways of dealing with conflicts in the workplace. This can be supported e.g. through analysing a simulation of a set conflict. A case study used this approach with students of a teaching course.*

*This paper presents the conception that underpins this case study as well as its results. The study is not representative due to its limited scale; yet the results clearly highlight the knowledge and strategies the students draw upon when solving conflicts.*

## **1. Introduction**

Dealing with conflicts in the work place is a necessary part of the training of VET teachers and it can be very stressful. The daily interactions with students and the incessant demands of teaching often lead to overwhelming pressures and challenges, which may lead to stress and some negative physiological, psychological, and behavioural consequences may result. (DEROBBIO/ IWANICKI 1996: 1). Especially novice teachers are often reluctant to ask for help, they may be afraid to let any-one know that they are having problems in the classroom. To handle these processes, it is essential to acquire the problem solving competences that are necessary when working with trainees later on.

Thus, one of the fundamental prerequisites for VET teachers is one's ability to reflect one's very own ways of dealing with conflicts in the workplace. This can be supported e.g. through analysing a simulation of a set conflict. A case study used this approach with students of a teaching course.

In the following, I will present the conception that underpins this case study as well as its results. The study is not representative due to its limited scale; yet the results clearly highlight the knowledge and strategies the students draw upon when solving conflicts.

Thus, the purpose of this presentation is

- to present an overview of the effects of work-place conflicts caused by teacher stress
- describe coping strategies for reducing these effects,
- present the results of a case study on workplace conflicts and coping strategies and
- draw the findings that can be learnt from the study.

## 2. Background of the study

Pedagogues and sociologists working on the issue of conflicts during a vocational training very often look at youths who are in the first phase of their training. Pedagogues and sociologists usually neglect the VET teachers who deliver an essential part of the training. Studies on drop-outs nearly exclusively focus on the role of the trainees (cp. HENSGE 1987; HUTH 2000; WEIß 1982). The studies looking at other agents and factors like hands-on trainers, VET teachers, parents or the size of the samples are little in their numbers and small in their extent (cp. BRÜGGEMANN 1975; HAHN/TWARDY 1996).

Not only are the view points of economic sciences and sociology important when we look at how conflicts in the work place and professional every day life are dealt with (cp. Glasl 1992; Coser 1965): The perspective of pedagogy is crucial as we try to find ways to design a constructive and peaceful interaction between humans. This interaction needs to be free of emotional or physical violence and ideally needs to lead to a compromise which is acceptable to all involved.

Conflicts in the work place have several particularities that distinguish them from other e.g. political conflicts:

- They happen in different settings
- under a power imbalance and
- at different levels of interaction.

Sadly enough, the pedagogy of vocations and the pedagogy of economic sciences perceive the way these conflicts are dealt with as a mere side issue. The same can be said on the training of youths, the training of the instructors and the training of VET teachers.

This article addresses exactly this issue: which strategies do students of a teaching course use to deal with conflicts in the work place. We set up a case study to investigate the question amongst students aiming for a qualification in teaching at commercial-technical schools. The students used role play to analyse and assess a concrete and extensive conflict. Although we cannot claim representativeness for the results of the case study it still provides an impulse to consider an issue that is simply neglected during the training of teachers. This issue is a part of the day-to-day business of the future teachers and even those currently studying towards a qualification as a VET teacher state that this issue is not paid enough attention during the course.

We will now take a closer look at sociological, psychological and pedagogical aspects of conflicts and put two batteries of questions in the main focus of our considerations:

Which aspects of conflicts are significant in the environment of students of a teaching course and the environment between VET teachers, trainers and trainees, respectively?

Which causal explanations, diagnostic steps and options for actions can be found in the relevant literature in the field of practise in work place training?

Using this as our foundation we then can deduct theses on the ways that Lab-students deal with conflicts in the work place. These theses together with the chosen research design form the methodical framework of the case study.

### 3. Conflicts

I will now concentrate on social conflicts as they are natural elements of human life. They are

“interactions between agents (individuals, groups, organisations etc) where at least one actor experiences contradictoriness in his thinking/imagination/perception and/or feeling and/or in-tentions with another actor (other actors) in a way that an implementation and realisation would result in a curtailing by another actor (other actors)” (Glasl 1992, 14f.).

The main feature of a social conflict are the emotional implications which differ in their relevance and intensity. In line with this we distinguish between conflicts that are only seem to be conflicts, side conflicts, central conflicts and extreme conflicts. These can be differentiated by the degree of personal involvement and the curtailing they may cause.

This basis can be used to formulate a concept of conflicts in the context of students of a teaching course (also referred to as VET teacher students). As a first step we can state: “Conflicts only come into existence when incompatible action tendencies clash” (Deutsch 1976, 18) . This means: conflicts emerge, when (seemingly) incompatible or unfulfilled interests, different expectations, intentions and attitudes collide and all involved agents believe their position is right yet they are dependent of each other or have to use the same resources. (cp. Dahrendorf 1961; Kriesberg 1973, 17; Lakemann 1999, 191ff.; Rosenstiel 1980, 165).

In school, incompatible interests collide on a daily basis. Not only is this true for the relationship of teachers and students but especially for the teachers who are subject to most different and seemingly contradictory expectations in order to successfully guide the students through their vocational training:

“The task of a teacher is guiding group of hiker on a tour through adverse countryside in the fog in a way that all people arrive in a cheerful mood and at the same time : The group consists of top athletes and less able participants [...]” (GUDJONS 1990, 6).

Whilst conflicts in the work place and the training of VET teachers find themselves under great separate scientific interest, researchers continue to not combine the two issues. The low number of studies dealing with such issues serves as an indicator for this (cp. e.g. BOHLINGER 2002; GINDER 1978; SCHOTTMAYER 1997; WAHL 1976). These

studies show that teachers tend to access their psychological common sense knowledge rather than their scientific competences when suddenly confronted with a critical situation. Common sense knowledge is based on experiences and therefore quick at hand whereas scientific theories that have been acquired through scientific studies often lack the connection to practise.

All these studies have two results in common:

- Firstly, there is a shortfall of professional training opportunities, practise-oriented teaching and learning units/modules to facilitate for communication and practice of constructive ways when dealing with conflicts.
- Secondly, dealing with conflicts very often lacks a change of perspective. This would include to respect the view points of all involved agents. All involved agents need to try and understand the view points of the others.

Thus, a systemic approach allows us to investigate the role of each party and to differentiate different kinds of conflicts.

This forms the basis for an appropriate coping with conflicts. The most important approaches are namely:

- To prevent conflicts.
- To create a distance to the conflict, i.e. an inner (and if needed: spacial) separation of all parties and especially the intervening agents,
- To analyse the conflict as far as possible by including all known parameters of the conflict. Possible means to achieve this are e.g. self observation, observation by others or mediation.

Solution of the conflict under the target to do so constructively whilst aiming for maximum satisfaction of the wishes of all involved parties.

Incongruity may arise in the case of a conflict not being resolved in a sustainable way. A quick and satisfying resolution is likely to be hindered if one attempts to resolve a conflict without prior analysis. (cp. BITZER/ LIEBSCH/ BEHNERT 2002: 77).

#### **4. What is stress?**

If conflicts are not being solved in time stress may result. Stress is one of the most often phenomena in teachers' daily life.

There is no single definition of the term "stress". A frequently cited definition of stress has been provided by SELYE (1974: 27): "The nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it". Teacher stress is defined as "the experience by a teacher of unpleasant emotions, such as tension, frustration, anxiety, anger, and depression, resulting from aspects of work as a teacher" (KYRIACOU 1987: 146).

Stress can cause teachers to leave the profession. Results of several studies indicate that in seven of the ten cases, teachers who said they might leave teaching within the next two years experienced higher degrees of stress and burnout than their non-leaving peers (e.g. HAMMOND/ ONIKAMA 1997; MASLACH/ JACKSON/ SCHWAB

1986). These “potential leavers” experience more emotional exhaustion and less personal accomplishment in their jobs.

These findings are corroborated by research conducted by KYRIACOU and SUTCLIFFE (1979), who acknowledged that the intention to leave teaching is associated with teacher stress. Moreover, high teacher turnover has a negative effect on student achievement (WALBERG 1974). Stress is one of the many reasons teachers leave their jobs. Furthermore, stress can lead to problems in the workplace, such as poor morale, job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, lowered productivity, and high medical care costs (KEDJIDJIAN 1995). Job satisfaction is negatively related to teacher absenteeism (PELLICER 1984; SCOTT/ WINBUSH 1991). Thus, preventing teacher stress and offer training on coping strategies is an educational and economic necessity.

## **5. Coping with workplace stress**

I will now focus on the interconnection of stress and conflicts.

Studies have examined various sources and consequences of workplace stress. To a lesser extent, they have covered strategies for coping with it. While many studies have evaluated worksite stress-reduction programs, few examine stress management specifically for educational staff.

Several key strategies can be identified as successful in coping with stress and dealing with conflicts: awareness of stress and conflicts, physiological training, environment adjustment, mind control, and conflict coping strategies such as supervision and mediation.

Stress-management research conducted by BUNCE and WEST (1996) and REYNOLDS, TAYLOR and SHAPIRO (1993) found that many successful intervention programs begin by building participants’ knowledge and awareness of stress. Awareness sessions presented in a non-threatening environment provide participants with updated information about the nature, signs, causes, and symptoms of stress.

Following an initial awareness presentation, a more active and participatory component of stress management is often provided to help participants determine, identify, and understand the origins of stress.

Once causes of stress have been recognized and identified, preventative measures can be taken. BUNCE and WEST (1996) demonstrated that participants can become empowered through various stress-management activities. After helping employees identify primary stressors, employers can provide training in counselling skills so that staff members are able to offer support and guidance to colleagues who are facing conflicts at work.

### **5.1. *Changing a stressful situation***

There is a wide range of coping strategies to handle stress and conflicts. Work-related stress can be reduced by discussing the stressors, developing proposals and action plans to reduce stress and to provide feedback to other employees (cp. LANDSBERGIS/ VIVONA-VAUGHN 1995). Moreover, teachers and administrators can clarify specific stress related issues at school, establish specific goals, develop and

implement strategies to alleviate or modify structures, processes, and behaviours to reduce stress and solve conflicts (MILSTEIN/ GOLASZEWSKI 1985).

In addition to training participants in physiological and/or situational coping strategies, the experiments of REYNOLDS, TAYLOR, and SHAPIRO (1993) and COOLEY and YOVANOFF (1996) emphasized the importance of cognitive appraisal and re-appraisal. Strategies for changing how one thinks about stressful or stress-producing situations, i.e., cognitive coping strategies, are an important component that leads to the reduction or prevention of stress.

Here, training focuses on several mental techniques such as replacing self-defeating, self-limiting beliefs by identifying barriers and by examining personal values, both work- and non-work related, and setting goals.

Identifying stress often means identifying conflicts. thus, another key strategy to handle stress is to learn how to handle conflicts. This is what I will focus on next.

## **6. A case study on work-place conflicts: Research Design**

Considering what is stated above we deduced two questions:

How can we convey the competence to constructively deal with conflicts and how can we improve the process of doing so?

However, prior to this we needed establish how students on teaching courses are actually dealing with social conflicts in the work place.

The latter question can be followed up by observing and dealing with a concrete conflict.

Case studies are often used in problem-based learning. The case study method originated in the teaching of law and medicine and host most often been extended to the teaching of business, including business ethics, leadership, and project management. Students are presented with a reallife problem. "A good case study presents a realistic situation and includes the relevant background, facts, conflicts, and sequences of events – up to the point requiring a decision or action. As students analyse and discuss the case, they retrace and critique the steps taken by the key characters and try to deduce the outcome" (Davis 2001: 19). In workplace training, the case study is a simple descriptive scenario of employees, managers, customers, or projects that are in crisis. A specific set of question is often asked to help generate some solutions for the real life situation. These type of case studies can be real stories obtained during a needs assessment of an organization, borrowed from other instructional designs, created by the instructor or designer to best reflect the course objectives and learners, or created by the students themselves during the facilitation of the course.

To serve this purpose we drafted a study that aimed at dealing with an exemplary case. We selected a conflict that we found in the relevant literature; it was well documented and appropriately elaborated. It describes a conflict within a company that was to be solved using a variety of set responses. For each step two out of the four responses had to be selected. These then lead the way to further set responses. An individual way through the conflict was created by each participant. I quote parts of

the first step to give an example for the following steps; it describes the beginning of the conflict:

“You are the manager of a research department with 12 members of staff. Most of the work undertaken is based on work benches needing skills and experience; therefore you have selected first-class workers.

Eleven of the men in your group are rather young adult at an average age of 30 years. They usually are in good spirits and come up with lots of harmless mischief.

The way you currently view the situation is that the work load is not suffering from this. Therefore you don't feel a need to intervene. Most of the men grew up in the town and they often socialise outside working hours.

Jörg Adams is the informal leader of the group and the youngest. Up until the last year he was an active football player and the supporting pillar of his club. A new worker joined the department two weeks ago . Andreas Kluge, aged 52, arrived with excellent references as a highly qualified worker and he proved himself in this.

Herr Kluge is a resettler of the former Soviet Union and moved into town many years ago. He joined the company at the age of 33. Andreas Kluge keeps his distance and usually does not join the others when they are joking and messing about. He works quickly and precisely on his tasks. Apart from the tools that the company provides he brings his own tool box and takes special pride in it. Herr Kluge keeps his work bench very clean at all times – rather unlike his colleagues.

Herr Kluge did not leave after finishing his work this afternoon but asked to have a word with you once the others had left. He said: ‘I don't want to moan and nag you or tell you how you should be doing your manager's job but now my colleagues simply have crossed the line. This is something that is not to happen in the work place and apart from that it's rather dangerous. If they keep on doing it, on day somebody will be hurt. I only need to recall the day they messed about with the compressed-air hose.’

How would you respond?

- a) You thank him for informing you but chose not to further investigate the issue. [continue at number 9]
- b) You ask him for more details. [continue at number 5]
- c) You tell Herr Kluge that it is your job to manage the department and that you would intervene should you feel the need. [continue at number 8]
- d) You thank him for informing you and tell him that you would stop this immediately [continue at number 10]“ (Sahm 1979).

The study was conducted at the University Darmstadt. 17 students participated. They are on a course for prospective teachers at vocational schools. They were presented with the case quoted above and 26 statements printed on index cards. The cards' numbers were ascending, the front featured information regarding the progress of the conflict whilst the back read four options to continue the way the conflict was dealt with. The students had to select two options. Each option directed the student to the according next card. A grand total of 50 options was available. Each participant followed his very own path through the conflict.

The individual steps taken towards a resolution of the conflict were anonymised for the analysis, documented on a form and evaluated.

The results showed that only 35 of the total 50 options were used at all. The participant needed an average of seven steps to resolve the conflict – it must be noted that there was no “right” or “wrong” solution.

## 7. Results of the case study

The documented steps and measures must be differentiated for a more detailed analysis of the case study. Two aspects are of special significance:

Is it possible to determine a view point within the set responses, even before a selection has happened? Can we sort the responses into categories that distinguish themselves by being in favour or against one of the conflicting parties?

Does the participant’s choice of steps and responses express a partial, neutral, group related or systemic view point on the conflict?

The content of the given measures was analysed to these questions. All chosen steps are quoted in the appendix. The following categories were used to analyse the contents:

- pro AK: This category comprises all responses that have a tendency to support Andreas Kluge directly as well as indirectly in the conflict.
- pro JA: This category comprises all responses that have a tendency to support Jörg Adams directly as well as indirectly in the conflict.
- pro group: This category comprises all responses that tend to benefit the inner social system of the whole working group of 25 people.

This leads to the following data:

	<b>n<sub>1</sub> = 50</b>		<b>n<sub>2</sub> = 35</b>		<b>n<sub>3</sub> = 20</b>		<b>n<sub>4</sub> = 118</b>	
<b>Pro AK</b>	17	34%	3	37,5%	13	65%	64	
<b>Pro JA</b>	3	6%	0	0%	0	0%	0	
<b>Pro group</b>	10	20%	7	20%	7	35%	12	0%
<b>No statement or links</b>	20	40%	15	42,9%	./.	./.	42	

n<sub>1</sub> = universal set of all responses available for selection, i.e. total of all possible steps including those not featuring a tendency or a link to a following response.

n<sub>2</sub> = universal set of all used steps, including those not featuring a tendency or a link.

n<sub>3</sub> = number of used steps excluding those not featuring a tendency or a link.

$n_4$  = universal set of all used responses (including those not featuring a tendency or a link) and excluding the quantity of step 25 ( $n = 17$ ), as this step had to be chosen by all participants.

The resulting data shows initially that the individually selected ways through the conflict differ to quite an extent and do not follow a traceable pattern. Despite the limited size of the sample we may deduct that dealing with conflicts is dependent of a “subjective theory” to prescind emotions in order to cope with the conflict and to allow to deal with it (WAHL/ WEINERT/ HUBER 2001: 21ff.).

Apart from this the results show that the participants tended to act in favour of a party which could be spotted despite the partial presetting of the options. E.g. there were only three measurements favouring Jörg Adams but 17 pro Andreas Kluge; yet nobody chose an option favouring Jörg Adams. The students justified this by stating they felt that they simply did not take to Jörg Adams as interviews after the case study revealed.

We could not observe an incongruity between the analysis and the solution of the conflict; yet we can deduct this from the observed partiality (cp. BITZER/ LIEBSCH/ BEHNERT 2002: 77).

To investigate whether the observed partiality correlated with the quantity of the selected responses to deal with the conflict a content analysis was undertaken with eleven participants. Those had scored the average number of seven measures. There was no connection between the number of steps and the partiality of the selected measures.

## 8. Results

What are the lessons that can be learnt from these results?

Evaluative studies of intervention programs have a variety of outcomes for stress management and/or reduction. Both long- and short-term effects were noted. Overall results include:

- Improved peer support
- Reduced levels of somatic complaints
- Enhanced feelings of personal accomplishment
- Decreased work pressure and role ambiguity
- Improved job satisfaction

While the majority of the studies showed positive effects, several authors mentioned the need for follow-up, long-term evaluation. One study collected data a year after the intervention and found that improvements had regressed to initial levels (BUNCE/ WEST 1996). Another study (GOLEMBIEWSKI/ HILLES/ DALY 1987) showed that initial improvement faded somewhat one year after the program was completed. The acceptance of life's stressful events could be an effective coping strategy. As GOLDBERGER and BREZNITZ (1993: 5) explained:

“Many workers in the field make the value judgment...that an internal locus of control is preferable to an external one; they argue that self-control can be used effectively to combat the potentially deleterious effects of stress. However, many critical stressors do not leave room for control, and passive acceptance may be the most appropriate coping strategy in such situations.”

In this synthesis, I examined research on several coping strategies and discussed some factors that apply to teachers in diverse contexts. This review permits the following conclusions to be drawn:

- Workplace stress and burnout can lead to teacher absenteeism and attrition.
- High rates of teacher turnover are negatively associated with student achievement.
- Teacher absenteeism might affect student achievement.

As workplace stress and burnout are relatively new concepts within VET research, only a few empirically based stress-management intervention programs are available for review; most programs focus on non-educators from predominantly Western cultures.

Successful stress and conflict management programmes begin with the awareness of one's very own ways of how to deal with stress and conflicts and then should lead to training in cognitive, physiological, and situational coping strategies as well as training in changing the perspective in conflicts towards a systemic approach.

Thus, VET teachers training on how to be aware of stress and conflicts promotes both, i.e. how to handle stress and how to solve conflicts in a creative and constructive way.

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