

Work-place conflicts

A case study on coping strategies of VET teachers

1. Introduction

Dealing with conflicts in the work place can be very stressful. Thus, it should be a necessary part of teacher training. To handle these processes, it is essential to acquire the problem solving competences that are necessary when working with trainees later on. This can be supported through analysing stress-reducing and conflict coping strategies as well as through simulating conflicts.

Thus, the purpose of my 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
- draw the findings that can be learnt from the study.

2. Background of the study

Pedagogues and sociologists working on the issue of stress and conflicts during a vocational training nearly exclusively focus on the role of the trainees and usually neglect the VET teachers who deliver an essential part of the training.

Not only are the view points of economic sciences and sociology important when we look at how stress and conflicts in the work place and professional every day life are dealt with: 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 leads to a compromise which is acceptable to all involved.

Conflicts in the work place have several particularities that distinguish them from other conflicts such as political conflicts:

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

Sadly enough, the VET research 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.

I would like to address exactly this issue: which strategies do future VET teachers 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 although it is a part of the day-to-day business of the future VET teachers.

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 several theses on the ways how future VET teachers deal with stress and work-place conflicts. 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 where at least one actor experiences contradictoriness in his thinking/imagination/perception and/or feeling and/or intentions 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 VET teacher training. 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 incompatible or unfulfilled interests, different expectations, intentions and attitudes collide and when all involved agents believe their position is right yet there is a mutual dependency or they depend on the same resources.

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.

Whilst stress, work-place conflicts and VET teacher training find themselves under great separate scientific interest, researchers continue to not combine the three issues. The low number of studies dealing with such issues serves as an indicator for this. 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.

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”. Teacher stress can be 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” (KYRI-ACOU 1987: 146).

Stress can cause teachers to leave the profession. Results of several studies indicate that in seven of 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. These “potential leavers” experience more emotional exhaustion and less personal accomplishment in their jobs.

Other studies have shown that the intention to leave teaching is associated with teacher stress and work-place conflicts. Stress and work-place conflicts is one of the many reasons why teachers leave their jobs. Furthermore, stress can lead to problems in the workplace, such as poor morale, job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and high medical care costs. Thus, preventing teacher stress and offer training on coping strategies is an educational and economic necessity.

4. Coping with workplace stress

I will now focus on strategies on how to cope with stress and conflicts.

Studies have examined various sources and consequences of workplace stress. 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, and conflict solving strategies such as supervision and mediation.

Stress-management research conducted by BUNCE and WEST (1996) found that many successful intervention programs begin by building participants’ knowledge and awareness of stress. Once causes of stress have been recognized and identified, preventative measures can be taken. Participants of stress-reducing programmes can become empowered through various stress-management activities.

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. Moreover, teachers and administrators can clarify specific stress related issues at school, estab-

lish specific goals, develop and implement strategies to alleviate or modify structures, processes, and behaviours to reduce stress and solve conflicts.

Furthermore, several experiments emphasized the importance of cognitive appraisal and re-appraisal. Strategies for changing how one thinks about stressful or stress-producing situations 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.

All these studies have two results in common:

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

Thus, a systemic approach allows us to investigate the role of each party and to differentiate different kinds of conflicts. Such an approach 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, that is an inner and/ or 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.
- 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.

5. A case study on work-place conflicts: Research Design

Considering what we stated above we deduced two questions:

- How can we convey the competence to constructively deal with stress and 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.

We decided to use a case study as case studies are often used in problem-based learning. Using the case study method means to present a real-life 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).

To serve this purpose we chose a well documented and appropriately elaborated conflict case. 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 sum up the most important information on the conflict and parts of the first step to give an example for the following steps:

"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 [= referred to as "the group"]. [...]

Jörg Adams is the informal leader of the group and the youngest.[...] 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 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, one 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]“.

The study was conducted at the University of Darmstadt. 17 VET teacher students participated. The students had to select two out of four options. Each option directed the student to the according next step. 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 participants needed an average of 7 steps to resolve the conflict – it must be noted that there was no “right” or “wrong” solution.

6. 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 given 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. First, we identified several categories according to which the chosen answers could be clustered:

- 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:

	n₁ = 50		n₂ = 35		n₃ = 20		n₄ = 118	
Pro AK	17	34%	3	37%	13	65%	64	54%
Pro JA	3	6%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0/
Pro group	10	20%	7	20%	7	35%	12	10
No statement or links	20	40%	15	43%	./.	./.	42	36%

n₁ = 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.

n₂ = universal set of all used steps, including those not featuring a tendency or a link.

n₃ = number of used steps excluding those not featuring a tendency or a link.

n₄ = 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.

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 Mr. 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.

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.

The study was used as an initial step and as a kind of pre-test to implement training units on the awareness and handling of conflicts in VET teacher training. From now on it will be used, evaluated and improved regularly.

7. Results

What are the lessons that can be learnt from this study?

Evaluative studies of how VET teachers deal with stress and conflicts have several outcomes:

- As workplace stress and conflicts are relatively new concepts within VET research, only a few empirically based studies are available for review. Thus, there is a lack of research dealing with stress and work-place conflicts of teachers.
- Those studies aiming at this issue show that learning how to handle stress and conflicts often lead to improved peer support, a reduced levels of somatic complaints, a decrease of work pressure, role ambiguity and job disaffection.
- The awareness and acceptance of stressors and conflicts can be regarded as one of the most effective coping strategies as many critical stressors do not leave room for control, and passive acceptance may be the most appropriate coping strategy in some situations (GOLDBERGER/ BREZNITZ 1993: 5).
- Coping strategies of work-place conflicts are very often based on subjective theories and partiality in favour of one of the involved conflict parties.
- 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.