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**THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES USED IN CONFLICTS BETWEEN  
TEACHERS AND STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY, KOTEBE METROPOLITAN  
UNIVERSITY, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH IN FOCUS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The aim of this study is to investigate the sources of conflict between students and teachers, how they are managed, and their effect on students and thus gain insight about student-teacher conflicts at Kotebe Metropolitan University, Faculty of Languages and Humanities, Department of English Language and Literature. The study is a qualitative one and has been carried out with the method of case study. The method of criterion sampling which is one of the methods of purposeful sampling is used in the qualitative study tradition. Participatory observation technique and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The study has shown that the main reasons for the conflict between teachers and their students were the existence of poor and insufficient communication between the parties involved, and teacher dominance in such interactions. It has also shown that inappropriate conflict solving strategies negatively affect the students' psychology, social behavior as well as their academic success. It is absolutely necessary to manage the teacher student conflict correctly in order to create a positive school climate and to conduct the education process effectively.*

**KEY WORDS:** conflict, conflict management, teacher, student, reason for conflict

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Conflict is a concept that can affect the relations and experiences of people as a social entity during their interaction with the public positively or negatively (Gray and Stark, 1986). Conflict naturally and normally occurs in schools. Conflicts can range from ordinary personal differences and anger, to violence that may end in terror and in wars. Sometimes unresolved conflicts may lead to violence. Conflicts are events which the individuals or groups have difficulty in working together, thus leading things to a standstill, or simply leading to chaos (Eren, 1984).

Although there are always conflicts in universities, most of the student, teachers, heads as well as parents are failing to act efficiently to solve the conflicts. For the student, it is important to know that conflicts can be resolved appropriately, and that will in turn help the student to achieve academic success, and it should lead to qualitative relationships between their peers and themselves and their teachers, as well as to their happiness. Firstly, it is important to uncover the causes, types and nature of these disputes, what communication problems the students have among themselves, with their teachers or with other important members of the school administration. An understanding of the reasons for and the nature of the conflicts is necessary for appropriate conflict management and to fight effectively against these conflicts (Turnokli, 2004).

There are many cases such as personality traits of students and teachers in the educational organizations, differences between their values, beliefs and attitudes, crowded classes mainly in EFL/ESL classrooms, lack of quality educational teach-in processes, misunderstanding of the communication process, inadequate tools and equipment and sharing of limited resources which cause conflict to be experienced in class or school level (Argon, 2009). There are likely to be many factors that can potentially affect the quality of teacher-student relationships. Some of these factors may include individual student's characteristics and behaviors, teacher characteristics and behaviors, prior relationship experiences, and broader social and contextual influences (Murray and Murray, 2004).

The defects of a teacher-student relationship and a failure to cooperate may cause teacher student conflicts. The important thing is for teachers to solve these matters correctly and effectively without damaging the relationship, losing the cooperation with students or distrusting educational process. The primary task of teaching is to gain and maintain the cooperation of students. Without that cooperation, the school or individual classroom cannot function (Cothran and Ennis, 1997). There is some research on managing conflicts in schools, and higher learning institutions through the use of authority .A survey of high school, undergraduate and graduate students about methods of resolving conflict revealed that students viewed the actions of instructors as coercive, highly powerful and authoritarian (Dunn et al. 2002). Research results revealed that distributive conflict resolution strategies such as violence, complaint, anger, and swearwords were used frequently instead of constructive solutions such as negotiation, problem solving discussion and mediation (Turnuklu and Sahin, 2003). The use of coercive power is shown to be negatively related to student satisfaction, learning, and the extent to which teacher influence transcends the classroom (Jamieson and Thomas, 1974).

It should be born in mind that issues linked to human and their behaviors are to be known by the teacher in order to manage student's behaviors successfully (Gulec and Allis, 2004). It has been known that in schools and classes where conflicts are frequent, absenteeism and indifference are prevalent together with widespread blocking and disrupting behaviors against the teaching and learning process which create a negative class atmosphere. Resolving conflict in a constructive way before it transforms into violence and turning classroom into a safe atmosphere are of utmost importance for the quality of education and instruction in the classroom. To do this, first of all, the reasons lying behind the conflict need to be revealed. A number of characteristics such as teachers' personality, attitudes and actions may make negative or positive impacts on students, which requires teachers to pay attention to their behaviors.

Teacher preference for managing conflicts in an authoritarian way affects the education process negatively. Students having conflicts are truant; they may cause disturbances in class and thus slow down the teacher as well as slow down their own learning. Conflicts in schools terrify students and lead to truancy (Tobias and Myrick, 1999). Based on the results of students' negative feelings and teachers' negative responses for students not asking for teachers' help, it can be suggested that teachers could be more positive towards students' conflicts and create an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable to discuss their problems with their teachers (Atici, 2007). Conflicts do

not only influence the students but also the teachers. Teachers experiencing conflicts are also stressed and exhausted. Therefore, teachers spend a significant part of their time and energy in handling problematic students.

### **Aim of the study**

The aim of the research is to display the reasons why teachers use the strategy of domination in the conflicts between teachers and students and its impact on students with a case study at Kotebe Metropolitan University.

### **Research questions**

- What are the reasons that lead the teachers to conflict?
- Why teachers use the strategy of domination in the conflicts with their students?
- What the impacts of conflicts between students and teachers?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The study is a qualitative one and has been carried out with the method of case study. “The case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin, 1984). “A case study is one of several ways of doing research whether it is social science related or even socially related. It is an in-depth investigation/study of a single individual, group, incident, or community” (Olanike, 2012, P.236).

### **Data Collection and the analysis**

The study contains annotations and ratings on a case study and therefore the real names of people on whom this study is based are replaced by pseudonyms. The researcher gave a talk on this subject and then interviewed 35 3<sup>rd</sup> year English major students aged 21 to 26 and asked them to report their experiences of conflicts with their teachers in order to gather useful data for the study. Analyzing student narratives, the most appropriate case (that is, the one in which a “domination” strategy was used by a teacher in conflicts with his students) was selected.

For the research, a case study method was used to investigate the process of conflict between teacher and students. In order to analyse the situation, individuals were taken into consideration. Observation and interview techniques were applied in order to gather the necessary information for the case study. The model “participant observer”, which is a part of the observation technique, was used. The participant observers in this case study are Kemal’s classmate Melaku and Semira . The participant observers Melaku and Semira were asked to report without any prejudice and neutrally about the incident between Kemal and his teacher Mr. Solomon, The stories reported by the participant observers were taped and written down by the researcher in order to be used as a case study.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the participants involved in a conflict and participant observers in order to increase the reliability of the study. The interviews were intended to reveal all perspectives on the conflict, and the feelings of all involved. Thus, it became possible to gather appropriate data. The interviews with the parties involved in the conflict and the participant observers were taped and written down by the researcher for the purposes of analysis. As part of the “Analysis of the case study”, by applying the rules of conflict management and with the data gathered through interviews with the parties involved in a conflict and the participant observers, this case was commented on in order to clarify the dimensions of such conflicts as well as the reasons for them. Descriptive data analysis, which is a part of qualitative data analysis, was used for the analysis of the data gathered through interviews with participant observers and all parties involved in the conflict.

### **Data on the characteristics of the teacher and students involved in a conflict**

It is very useful to know something of the character of both parties involved in a conflict, in this case that of Kemal and Mr. Solomon. Mr. Solomon is 42 years old and he has been working as English teacher for 15 years. Kemal is 24 years old and is attending his 3<sup>rd</sup> year as an English major student. Kemal is an introverted character and has difficulty in finding friends. Generally, he is calm and adapts himself to others. As he has a calm and adaptable personality Kemal has hardly any problems with his classmates. Mr. Solomon is a severe and very strict teacher who constantly asserts his authority. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that he is a popular teacher. His students describe him as an angry and authoritarian person.

### **The observation process for determining the personal and behavioral characteristics of the people in the case study**

In order to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis of the case study in the research, Kemal and the teacher Mr. Solomon were observed at campus two days per week over the course of one month at the campus. Meanwhile, the relationship of Kemal with his friends and his teachers both during the lessons and in the breaks was observed. As a result of the observations made, it was observed that Kemal strengthened his relationship with his friends and enjoyed time with his friends both in lessons and in the breaks. In the lessons, Kemal was very respectful to his teachers. Over the period of observation, he did nothing to disrupt the process of his lessons. However, Kemal was not interested in his lessons. The observation period revealed that though Kemal got on well with his friends and that he was respectful and followed the rules and order of the classroom, unfortunately he was observed to be unsuccessful as a student. By contrast, the teacher, Mr. Solomon displayed very strict and authoritarian behavior both in the lessons and outside of them. In the lessons, he stuck rigidly to the subject of the lesson and appeared to have no personal relationship with his students. He warned students against improper behavior in class and he was strict and sometimes angry with his students. The findings at the end of observation reveal that the Mr. Solomon has a strict and even authoritarian personality.

### **Case narrative**

Kemal is sometimes late for class. It cannot be said that he has good marks and the teachers would not say that he is a popular student. Mr. Solomon is Kemal's Research Methodology instructor. Kemal was late in class again when this conflict occurred. Mr. Solomon was standing at the

blackboard and giving his lesson when Kemal knocked on the door and entered the class. Kemal apologized for being late and wanted to go to his desk when Mr. Solomon angrily shouted at him: "I am bored with your being late. The others cannot concentrate on the subject matter because of you. You are not a competent student. The next time you are late I will not let you enter the class". Kemal wanted to explain something; however, Mr. Solomon did not let him talk and ordered him to sit down. For the rest of the lesson, Mr. Solomon concentrated on Kemal. He was annoyed by everything; he was upset when Kemal was talking to his classmates or when he made no contributions to the lesson. Most of the lesson passed, not in teaching, but in teasing of Kemal could not concentrate on the lesson.

After the lesson Kemal went with his classmate Melaku to the staff room and wanted to talk to Mr. Solomon. However, though Mr. Solomon was not pleased, he accepted the request to talk with Kemal. Kemal told Mr. Solomon that he was living far away from school and that his family's financial situation was worsening. He added that he had to walk to school every morning and is, therefore, late for the lessons sometimes, Mr. Solomon listened to him without saying a word and then said: "It makes no difference, the reasons you have listed, this is not an apology. I do not want you to be late again. You will have to bear the consequences, if you are late again". He ended the conversation, not allowing Kemal to say anything further.

## **RESULTS**

### **Analysis of the case narrative**

The conflict reported in this case study occurred between the Research Methodology Instructor Mr. Solomon and his student Kemal. It may be understood that there were many reasons why the conflict between Mr. Solomon and Kemal took place, especially if we take the relationships and data into consideration.

### **Reasons for conflicts concerning the relationship**

#### **Misunderstanding, prejudice, fixed judgments**

Kemal has poor marks and is sometimes late for the lesson .Mr. Solomon knows these characteristics of Kemal and has his fixed prejudice. Mr. Solomon possibly would not have treated one of his students who has good marks and is rarely late, in the way he has treated Kemal for the rest of the lesson.

#### **Lack of communication**

Mr. Solomon only knows that Kemal is not doing well in school and is late for the lessons. He does not know Kemal's financial situation, his family or his personal problems. This conflict could have probably been avoided, if Mr. Solomon had known Kemal better. The university has a predominant climate which could also have contributed to the lack of communication between Kemal and Mr. Solomon.

#### **Ongoing Negative Behavior**

There is no doubt that Kemal's negative behavior, such as his bad marks and his late arrival, prepared the ground for the conflict.

## **Reasons for conflict concerning data**

### **Lack of information and Wrong information**

Mr. Solomon does not know the reasons for Kemal's late arrival at school and believes that Kemal has no particular reason. The lack of information and wrong information Mr. Solomon had about Kemal led to that kind of behavior causing such a conflict. The fact is that there is insufficient communication between teachers and students at universities. This means Mr. Solomon and his colleagues either have insufficient information on their students, or indeed no information at all. Such a poor working communication system between teachers and students causes a lot of visible and invisible conflicts between teachers and their students.

This conflict situation between Kemal and his teacher Mr. Solomon can be described as a "potential conflicts". This conflict belongs to the group of "potential conflicts" as there were inequalities in Kemal's and Mr. Solomon power and roles. The behavioral characteristics of Kemal and his teacher .Mr.Solomon were thought to affect the course of case Study. Therefore, the data obtained in the observation made before the research were also used in the analysis and commendation of the sample case.

There is no doubt that Kemal's negative personal character laid the foundations for such a conflict. Mr. Solomon was especially annoyed by Kemal because his lesson was interrupted and the students' concentration was disturbed when Kemal was late for the lesson. The following statement from Mr. Solomon clearly shows his underlying reaction towards Kemal when he was late again. "Kemal is a student who is sometimes late for the lesson. Every time when he is late both my concentration as well as my students' concentration on the lesson is disturbed. If I did not warn him, then Kemal would be more often late for the lesson. I ignored his behavior a few times. However, I could not keep ignoring it".

In this conflict situation which took place in the classroom, Mr. Solomon chose the "domination strategy". Kemal was unfortunately not given the chance to declare why he was late and he was subject to insinuating remarks throughout the lesson. Mr. Solomon clearly showed his power over the students. Mr. Solomon's behavior made Kemal defend himself. As Kemal could not answer back verbally, he defended himself by acting in a way that would not be acceptable to his teacher. Melaku, one of the participating observers, was asked to explain his views on the conflict between Kemal and Mr. Solomon for the rest of the lesson. Melaku's answers show that Mr. Solomon teased Kemal in various ways and wielded this power over Kemal in an inept way.

Melaku explained: "Kemal and Meron were sitting next to each other. Our teacher, Mr. Solomon, was annoyed when Kemal entered the classroom. Mr. Solomon teased Kemal throughout the lesson. I do not really think that Kemal did anything to annoy Mr. Solomon. From time to time he was talking to Meron, but very quietly. We all talk to our bench neighbor, don't we? But every single thing he did.".

The fact that Mr. Solomon did know anything about Kemal was possible one of the most important factors for this conflict situation. Mr. Solomon said that:

“There are too many students in the university. It is impossible to know everyone’s problems. I have to treat them all equally. Therefore, I refuse to know about the personal problems of my students”.

This lack of communication between Mr. Solomon and Kemal led to an expansion of the conflict situation. However, had Mr. Solomon not refused to know his students personally, this conflict situation between him and Kemal would probably have not occurred. Meron, one of the participating observers, declared:

“Mr. Solomon does not talk to us so often. We only talk with him during the lessons and our conversation is solely based on the subjects. I believe that his behavior leaves no room for other conversation. He is very strict with us and, as a result, we do not talk to him unless it is about the lesson.”

Meron’s words confirmed Mr. Solomon’s own statement. Mr. Solomon’s statement as well as Meron’s opinion shows that there is a weak tie between himself and his students. Kemal made a considerable effort to try to solve the conflict situation between himself and his teacher when he visited his teacher after the lesson in order to explain the reason for being late. However, it is quite clear that Mr. Solomon refused to respond to Kemal’s well-intentioned step. In such a case, it would have been better had the teacher shown that he was apologetic about the conflict and let Kemal know that he understood the problem. The golden rule for solving any conflict situation is to make sure that both parties involved in a conflict understand each other and that each party gets the message that they have been fully understood. Kemal does not really believe that his teacher Mr. Solomon understands him. Kemal’s statement on the conflict between him and his teacher Mr. Solomon shows that a certain period of understanding each other is necessary in conflicts:

“I apologized to my teacher about being late and he teased me for the test of the lesson. I went to the staff room and told him the reason for this incident. He refused to understand me and he became angry”.

Kemal believes that the fact that his teacher does not know him personally and the lack of communication between him and the teacher were the reasons why the conflict occurred. Mr. Solomon had to show Kemal that he was sorry about the conflict and had to try to find ways to avoid any similar possible conflicts in the future. Mr. Solomon had to solve the conflict by applying a strategy of cooperation and compromise. “Did you talk to Kemal about this conflict afterwards? Did you take any attempts to solve the problem?” were the questions Mr. Solomon was asked and he gave the following answers:

“Kemal explained the situation to me after the lesson. It does not matter what the reasons were, as I do not allow my students to interrupt my lesson. I am sure that after such a conversation Kemal will not repeat this behavior”.

Mr. Solomon is convinced that the way he treated Kemal badly during the lesson, and their conversation after the lesson, has resolved the conflict between him and Kemal. However, Kemal’s

statement clearly shows that he was not really happy about the solution: “I really do my best to be on time. I have never missed my lessons intentionally. My teacher does not want to see this fact. Although I explained the situation to him, he was not appreciative of this”.

Kemal thinks that he does his best to be on time and believes that there should be another solution for the conflict. After the lesson Kemal and his classmate Meron went together to their teacher. Meron says:

Kemal was really sad about what had happened. Kemal does not want to be late for the lessons. He was really sad to be treated this way for a thing he does not do intentionally. He asked me to accompany him when he wanted to talk to Mr. Solomon and to explain the situation to him. So I accompanied him. However, Mr. Solomon did not understand him. He did not offer any solution and he did not appreciate the problem. This really made Kemal feel sad.

It is clearly revealed that Mr. Solomon applied a domination strategy throughout the whole of the lesson. He also continued to apply this strategy when Kemal tried to talk to him after the lesson. Mr. Solomon ignored Kemal’s views and wishes, thus showing the usage of the domination strategy. There is no doubt that Mr. Solomon’s domination strategy also had a psychological impact on Kemal. Kemal explains his overall experience of the conflict thus: “I feel so sorry because I am late for the lessons from time to time and it made me feel worse to see that my teacher did not understand me. I know that nobody understands my situation in relation to this”.

Kemal already regrets the conflict between himself and his teacher as he knows that it is not right to be late for the lessons. However, it made him feel bad to be treated in this way for something which was not intentional. Meron gave the following answer when she was asked about Kemal’s feelings after the conflict situation and how he have behaved for the rest of the day in other lessons: “he was in a bad mood after his conversation with Mr. Solomon. Generally, we joke around during the breaks; however, Kemal was in a bad mood on that day. He could not concentrate on the lessons”.

Meron’s statement clearly shows that the conflict had been very upsetting for Kemal. For the rest of the day, Kemal was thinking about the situation he had experienced as well as what his teacher had said. Kemal was introverted and vacant as he believed that nobody understood him. His psychology also was also reflected in his response to his other lessons. He could not concentrate on the lessons as he was thinking about the conflict situation all the time. The plot revealed by the Case Study conducted on Kemal and the teacher Mr. Solomon and the behaviors of Kemal and Solomon teacher are in accord with the results of the observation made before the case study. This is also confirmed by the explanations of the participant observers.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

There are conflict situations in universities as there are in every single institution and organization. It is of great importance that attempts are made to successfully resolve conflicts, not only for personal reasons, but also for the sake of the institutions, this has to be done as conflicts cannot be

ignored or avoided. Conflict situations can negatively affect the teachers' performance as well as the performance of the institutions. A teacher is successful if he knows his students personally, is proficient in his subject, knows the strategies of learning and educating and knows how to cope with conflicts successfully. However, if teachers are not proficient in solving conflicts, the effects can be wide-ranging. If it is thought that teachers educate individuals who are part of society, then every single example of negative behavior on the part of teachers can cause great damage to that society. Therefore, it is of great importance that teachers know the strategies of conflict management.

### **The dimension of conflict sources**

The basis for the conflict between Kemal and his teacher Mr. Solomon is marked by factors such as a lack of communication, misunderstanding, prejudice and fixed opinions, continuing negative behavior, insufficient and wrong information and misunderstanding of the data. The most frequently seen reasons for the basic conflicts school teachers face are: pressure, proving one's position, lack of information and knowledge and differences in education and knowledge and differences in education and culture (Ozgan, 2006). This case study shows that it is important for teachers to know their students personally.

### **The dimension of preferred success strategy and its conclusions**

Mr. Solomon made it difficult to solve the conflict by his applying a domination strategy. However, better results for both parts involved in the conflict could have been reached, had Mr. Solomon chosen cooperation and compromise strategies. Empathy was necessary for the right type of conflict management. Knowing Kemal's problem was the key point for the conflict solving. The organizational model argues that empathic tendencies of the individual may influence specific relationship behaviors such as conflict management (Wied et al., 2007).

Wrong choices made by teachers negatively affect the psychology of students and teachers as well as the relation between teachers and students, and it does not contribute to a solution. The students might think that all communication methods are blocked with the teacher as soon as the teacher applies the domination strategy in conflict situations. In the dominating strategy, one of the parties attempts to impose his/her own resolution to other party by using his/her power in various ways. In fact, this includes enforcement rather than a resolution (Karip, 2003).

It is clear that by applying this type of strategy the teacher gives the message his students that all forms of communication are blocked, and all the wishes and opinions of the students are to be ignored. This choice endangers the teacher-student relationship not only for the period of conflict but also longer term. By applying the domination strategy the teacher indirectly tells the student that his/her feelings are not important enough. This makes the student feel that he/she is of little value. Such a psychology will not only reflect on the students' relationship to the teacher but also on all relationships. Those negative feelings might also contribute to a decrease in student achievement in school.

However, the domination strategy seems to affect not only the students but also the teacher may be negatively affected by his/her own choice. Ozgan (2006) stated the moods of university

instructors are also negatively affected by conflicts with their students. Although the rate of negative strategies seemed low, students reported that teachers at times punished students, using corporal punishment, getting angry, complaining about students to the principle, being sarcastic, sending students to the discipline committee, reprimanding and threatening (Atici, 2007). The climate in the classroom will probably be changed in a negative way as the choice made by the teachers will lead to a corrupt relationship with their students. This might affect the overall period of education negatively. Teaching in a negative climate and a decline in achievement can put the teachers psychologically under pressure.

The basis for a positive classroom climate is provided by conflict management. Managing conflicts successfully and a positive classroom climate affect the relationship between teacher and students. Research shows that a positive classroom climate is characterized by active and cooperative interaction between a teacher and students who are motivated. The school climate has been widely perceived as a critical factor in successful higher learning institutions and as a litmus test for student academic achievement (shin and Koh, 2007).

This case study shows that Kemal was introverted and was not able to concentrate on the lessons as he felt bad. This shows that the domination strategy applied by Mr. Solomon also affected Kemal's academic achievement. Heydenberk and Heydenberk (2007) explained that the relationship between teachers and students also affects students academically. Roesner et al. (1996) studied the mediating role of attachment or belonging on academic achievement. Student's relationships with teachers shape their school-related beliefs, sense of school belonging, and academic achievement. Ozgan (1999) in his Master's thesis concerning the effects of an empathic classroom climate and students' achievements found that the achievements of students who believe that there is an empathic classroom climate are at a high level.

The results show that teachers generally chose the domination strategy in conflicts with their students. The fact that teachers do not have enough information about their students and the insufficient communication between teachers and students are contributing to conflicts between students and teachers. The teachers negatively affect their students' psychology as well as their academic achievement and social relationships by applying the domination strategy. In research on the effects of conflict resolution training on elementary school students, about half of the students involved brought their conflicts to the teacher or applied what the authors assessed as destructive and ineffective strategies in handling conflicts (Atici, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

From the whole research process and the findings, it has been learnt that it is absolutely necessary to manage the teacher student conflict correctly in order to create a positive school climate and to conduct the education process effectively. A healthy learning environment can only be realized with the existence of healthy relationships. Because of that, taking these conflicts correctly, the formulation of programs in which dramatizations and group therapy are used is going to be implemented in my faculty. The development of the ability to manage conflicts is in my view, extremely important for which, as a dean, I believe that I should organize different trainings on

conflict handling and management strategies for the academic staff on regular basis. In here the participation of both students and teachers together is also quite crucial. Such a platform, in my view, will give students and teachers the chance to get to know each other better and to be closer. This will enable them to prevent conflicts which occur through their not knowing each other.

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