# Conflict and Schools
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History reveals that conflict has always been a part of human existence. Schools therefore cannot be expected to isolate themselves from it. Nonetheless, many of us in Trinidad and Tobago continue to express surprise at the levels of conflict that continue to arise in our schools.

What has been emerging in schools seems to correspond to developments in society. Since the 1950s—particularly the 1960s—a new liberalism and lack of restraint appeared to have taken over young people in the western hemisphere. Schools and universities have been particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon. Many writers explain this in terms of the intensifying turbulence and materialism of western societies as they moved to new levels of materialism and affluence. All, however, agree that it is impossible to be a successful leader in an organisation (schools included) without encountering and confronting conflict.

In Trinidad and Tobago, many tend to believe that our schools are in crisis. My response is that perhaps this perceived crisis lies in the failure of our school leaders to resolve conflict in their schools. I say this fully aware that the strategies adopted for the resolution of conflict in any school will be dependent on a combination of the culture of society, the culture of and climate of the school, the relevant policies of the school, the personalities, the philosophical base, and the maturity of individuals working in the school. Also, I recognise that conflict in schools can come from within the school, outside the school, or within individuals in the school.

School leaders, therefore, can avoid being caught by surprise if they increase their awareness of what is taking place in the community surrounding the school, in the society, and in the school, so that potential conflict can be identified in advance.

Leaders have to recognise that, whatever the consequences of conflict, their role will always be to guide or contain conflict to the lower end of the continuum and to upgrade its presence into a positive force within the school. Under no circumstances should they try to sweep it under the carpet.

Several approaches to conflict resolution have been recommended in the literature. These include ignoring it, imposing a resolution, or facilitating a process where all those involved work out a solution either within their group, team, or department, with the help of an external facilitator.

Clearly, ignoring conflict is not the route to take. On the other hand, if it is suppressed, it may surface elsewhere in a different and, very often, a more destructive form. This is particularly the case when conflict is imposed in an authoritarian manner without caring much about the participants' views or feelings. A case in point is the practice by the Ministry of Education of transferring personnel in order to resolve conflict at schools. Very often, this only helps to locate the conflict elsewhere.

Perhaps the best strategy—often the most difficult and more time consuming—involves discussion, compromise, consensus, and the ability of colleagues to listen to each other. When this approach fails, then clearly the time for the psychiatrist and psychologist to step in will have arrived. Amateurs may do more harm than good in situations where the source of the conflict may be rooted in organisational members. Some researchers in organisational theory and behaviour argue that schools with visions, missions, and goals which have been internalised by staff members, and which are characterised by ongoing attempts at team building tend to have fewer incidents of conflict among staff. Others have found that in schools where there are honest, understanding, and committed relations between staff and students, conflict is rare.

In instances where conflict comes from outside the school in the form of intruders who are motivated by criminal intent, irate parents, or youth who wish to engage in gang warfare, only a good risk management programme can help. Administrators and staff, with the assistance of security personnel in the school, are required to formulate, implement, and monitor a safety and security plan for the school. This plan must be shared by all who have a stake in the school—teachers, parents, and students.

We live in a changing and increasingly risk-oriented world in which conflict is a very real and unavoidable phenomenon. As a result, administrators need to know how to address and cope with it. This cannot be done by accident or by chance. The Ministry of Education has to ensure that its school leaders are well placed to deal with conflict. First of all, it must have a policy which demands that administrators develop skills in reducing the emotional dimensions of conflict. Also, administrators must be encouraged to develop sound philosophical bases as well as a comprehensive understanding of their internal and external environments.

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