

# Exploring perceived sources of conflict among educators in three Eastern Cape schools

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## Abstract

Conflict is part of organisations and manifests between people in various contexts, including in schools. The purpose of this exploratory intrinsic qualitative interpretive case study was to explore the causes of conflict among teachers in three primary schools residing in previously disadvantaged social contexts, as previous studies have not explored these perceived causes among primary school teachers and neither have these studies been able to frame the causes by means of a conceptual nor Bourdieuan lens. Exploring conflict as tensions are important as it has the potential to result in dysfunctional conflict that negatively impact on the teachers, learners and learning. Purposive sampling was used and fifty-nine educators participated from three primary schools in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Qualitative data was gathered using semi-structured individual interviews, focus group interviews and an open-ended questionnaire. The six categories of the conflict cube of Bradshaw were used to indicate the six main themes, namely relationship conflicts, value conflicts, data conflicts, structural conflicts, interest conflicts and needs-based conflict. The categories associated with each of the main themes are presented as sub-sets by utilising the categorisation properties of a conflict cube. A Bourdieuan lens has also been utilised to interpret the data. The findings suggest that principals, School Management Teams (SMTs) and educators have to be made aware what causes conflict within the field to enable all role players to be more cognisant of these issues in order to become more proactive in their day-to-day interactions within the school context. It is proposed the visual participatory methodologies are explored as tools to assist with the drafting of policies.

## Introduction

Conflict is part of our social fabric and appears to be unavoidable (Ajam, 2015; Haraway & Haraway, 2005). Organisations form an inherent part of society, and hence there is potential for conflict in various ways within every organisation (Ikeda, Veludo-de-Oliveira & Campomar, 2005). Conflict as a phenomenon is not always directly observable, and human beings might be even unaware of it at certain points in time, but yet it exists (Roth, 2007). It appears that conflict has the potential to be dysfunctional or destructive (Parker & Stone, 2003; Plocharczyk, 2007). Nevertheless, it also offers possible positive outcomes in the form of functional or constructive conflict (Deutsch, 1969). Also, it seems that conflict resolution could lead to enhanced understanding and provide clarity among those involved related to the issues that are causing conflict (Nelson & Quick, 2008; Robbins & Judge, 2009).

Schools as organisations are part of society in which teachers and learners interact on a daily basis, and as such, there is thus the potential for conflict as alluded to above. The

recent outburst in the Northern Areas in Port Elizabeth in August 2015 (Areff, 2015; Sesant, 2015) appears to testify to the above, as parents and teachers engaged in violent protests that included the lockdown of the whole area owing to vacant substantive teacher posts that had not been filled. Hence, the South African school system is not excluded from conflict. At the same time, it is important to note that Higher Education Institutions are also susceptible to the conflict which was evident during the #FeesMustFall protests from September to October 2016 in South Africa.

The purpose of this research paper that formed part of a larger postgraduate case study is threefold:<sup>1</sup> Firstly, it is to ascertain what the perceived causes or sources of conflict are, as perceived by educators in three primary schools to sensitise and inform principals, School Management Teams (SMTs), teachers and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) about these perceptions. Secondly, the purpose is to utilise the conceptualisation of Bradshaw (2008) and Moore (2003), more specifically Bradshaw's (2008) causes or sources multi-faceted conflict cube, to ascertain whether this cube is an appropriate tool to categorise these apparent causes within the education sector among educators. Thirdly, the discussion and implications of the findings were reviewed by using theoretical perspectives recontextualised from the literature to interpret the findings in the discussion section in a manner that has not been done in the previous larger study of Cain (2013). In addition, a Bourdieuan lens (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994; Maton, 2008; Reay, 2004) is used to discuss the findings. In this paper, we therefore argue that conflict has the potential to impact on the teachers, learners and learning and as such, it is important to ascertain what the causes are in order to sensitise principals, School Management Teams (SMTs) and educators about these causes with a view that they can be proactive to minimise it where possible.

## Theoretical perspectives on conflict

Conflict is a "*dynamic process*" that influences relations (Pondy, 1969, p.299). It arises due to differences in attitude (A in Figure 1) and behaviour (B in Figure 1), leading to contradictions (C in Figure 1) experienced as a result of incompatible goals (Galtung, 2000). Based on the position of Galtung (2000), this could imply the following in practice: Three persons are applying for the same position at the same school, and thus they have the same goal, i.e. to be appointed. However, only one person can be appointed. The implication is then that the goals of the other two have not materialised which then may result in a certain attitude which leads to some form of behaviour or action, even non-behaviour or inaction (Figure 1). A contradiction (C in Figure 1) thus results and '*an issue is born*' as the other persons become frustrated, because their needs and interests have not been achieved. The cyclical nature of the process then may manifest again as not being appointed may result in developing a negative attitude, as depicted by A in Figure 1. This then leads to a certain kind of behaviour that could result in conflict as a result of the contradiction, i.e. not being appointed, denoted by B in Figure 1. Based on the above, it is

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<sup>1</sup> This study is based on a post-graduate study.

argued that conflict emerges due to personal attitudes that result in behaviour due to contradictions over incompatible goals (Galtung, 2000).

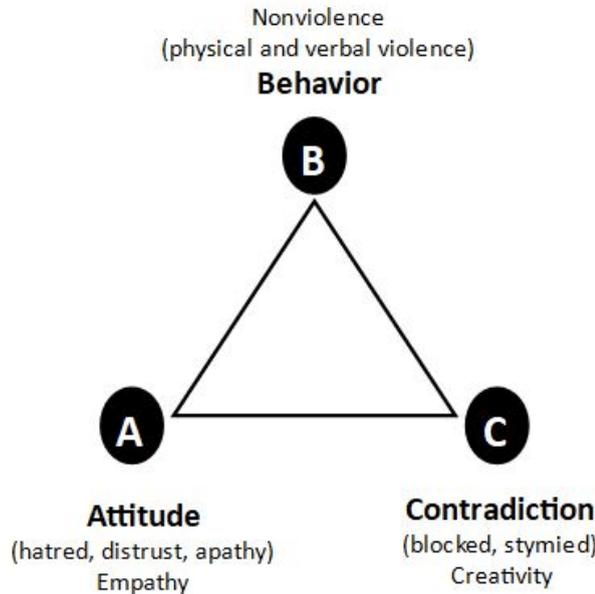


Figure 1: ABC conflict theory (Galtung, 2000, p.1)

From the above, it is thus evident that when individuals or groups seem to experience that their goals, needs, and interests are not valued or addressed, the possibility of conflict is high, as contradictions or mismatches appears to form between what is experienced and expected (Galtung, 2000). This position above seems to be in line with the frustration-aggression hypothesis of Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer and Sears (cited in Berkowitz, 1993) which posits that there is a link between aggression and frustration. Their theoretical position is that barriers to achieving one’s goals have the potential to result in aggression, which could result in a disposition to hurt or offend someone as a response (Berkowitz, 1993). Galtung’s (2000) position pertaining to attitudes which result in behaviour as actions and conflict due to contradictions, therefore seems to resonate with intrapersonal theories such as psychodynamic theory and attribution theory. The psychodynamic theory posits that human beings experience conflict that exists in the mind due to intrapersonal states which influence our actions (Lulofs & Cahn, 2000). Similarly, a form of ‘othering’ may emanate which result in attributing the outcome to someone else’s action. The above then links to attribution theory (Lulofs & Cahn, 2000).

Conflict can be categorised in several ways. Speakman and Ryals (2010) and Lewicki, Saunders and Barry (2011) classify the causes of conflict into four levels, namely intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup. Another perspective for the categorisation of the causes or bases of social conflict is the conflict cube of Bradshaw (2008) which relates to Moore’s (2003) perspective. Moore (2003) argues that the causes or sources of conflict are relationship-based, value-based, data-based, structural-based and interest-based. Bradshaw (2008) concurs, but adds needs-based conflict as an additional base or source and presents a six face cube (see Figure 2). Bradshaw (2008) also suggests

that the sources or causes of conflict can be on multiple levels at the same time. For the purpose of this study, the Bradshaw's multi-faceted conceptualisation of conflict has been used to indicate how to apply it in an educational-organisational perspective and is further elaborated upon below.

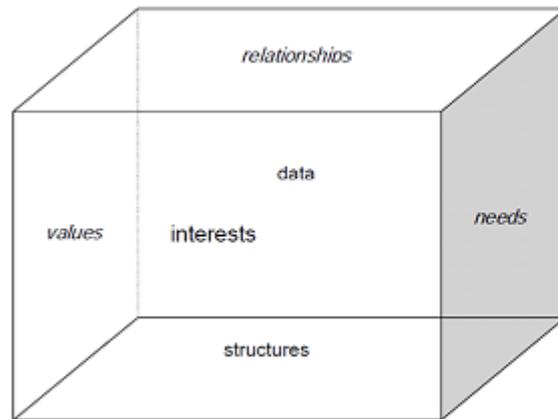


Figure 2: Bradshaw's (2008, p.3) multi-faceted conflict cube

Our values refer to what we as individuals or a group believe as being important, worthy and correct from our perspective (Bradshaw, 2008; Mayer, 2000) and as such values include and appear to be shaped by religious, political and ideological beliefs that influence what we value (Bradshaw, 2008). Our values are thus assessed employing criteria or norms that people develop to assess the conduct or behaviour of individuals or groups around us in society (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001). This implies then that people carefully assess what is happening in their surroundings, however, these values as behaviour and attitudes are not always necessarily obvious (Bush & Anderson, 2003). The above becomes apparent in the words of Mayer and Louw (2009, p.3) who postulate that “values are often un-reflected and unconscious until conflict occur”.

Interest-based conflict results due to competition over resources, or for example, when individuals or groups cannot come to an agreement related to how resources should be distributed and shared (Hitt, Miller & Colella, 2006; Rahim, 2001). The shortage of resources creates an impression that personal and professional objectives will not be achieved based on the impression that others who have received resources will succeed instead (Landau, Landau & Landau, 2001) and as such this scarcity could lead to intensified competition in the workplace (Zide, 2005). It is therefore important that the sharing of limited resources is done in such a manner that staff at school (and in other organisations) understand and accept that the manner in which it is distributed is to achieve shared common objectives to the interest of all role players (Prinsloo, 2003).

According to Bradshaw (2008) needs can be physical and psychological and based his position on the human-based needs perspective of Maslow, as it appears that needs fulfilment drives us as human beings (Bradshaw, 2008). These needs refer to safety, job security, self-esteem and self-actualisation (Du Preez, Campher, Grobler, Looek & Shaba,

2003). The needs-based dimension also appears to include issues of power; power being “the ability to get others to behave in ways that they ordinarily would not” (Corbett, 1991, p.74). Power as a need also becomes apparent when Wilmot and Hocker (2001) state that individuals are driven by needs that matter to them, hence to influence to their own benefit.

Moore (2003) posits that data-based conflict arises as a result of the absence or lack of information, distortion or misinformation and/or the manner in which data is interpreted and assessed. Bradshaw (2008) concurs as he states that the individual’s perception or understanding of what is communicated influences the interpretation and as such interpretation could result in conflict due to communication issues, or as he states, “seeing only one side of the picture” (Bradshaw, 2008, p.19).

Bradshaw (2008, p.19) posits that structural conflict has a “social, political and economic” dimension. Although Bradshaw does not refer to the school as an institution in his conflict perspective, the authors of this paper are of the opinion that the above-mentioned aspects could also be manifesting at school among staff. It appears that structural conflict can also be linked to how work is organised (Aquinas, 2006), implying thus that there are certain rules that have to be adhered to when one engages with certain aspects and hence, not adhering to these rules could lead to conflict. In addition, increased specialisation (Hitt *et al.*, 2006; Nelson & Quick, 2008), interdependence on one another (Aquinas, 2006; Nelson & Quick, 2008) and physical layout within the workplace can thus also be classified as structural, as it is argued that structural-based aspects have the potential to lead to conflict on a social level and within the ‘*politics*’ within the organisation.

According to Moore (2003, p.64) relationship-base conflict is conflict that results due to “strong emotions, misperceptions or stereotypes, poor communication or miscommunication and repetitive negative behavior”. The above highlights Bradshaw’s multi-facet perspective as the relationship-base appears to have a data-base dimension as well, and as such it shows the interrelatedness. Relationship conflict refers thus to engagement or interaction among people, and this includes current and previous engagement or interaction (Bradshaw, 2008). From Bradshaw’s perspective, it seems thus that previous interactions could influence the manner in which people engage with one another and hence this could impact on relationships.

## Bourdieuian theoretical lens

In order to make sense of the perceived causes of conflict, we argue that Bourdieu’s (1977; 1984, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994) theory of habitus seems to be useful to make sense of conflict as the concepts habitus, field, capital and doxa appear to assist with sense-making of conflict as a phenomenon. Bourdieu posits that habitus constitutes a set of dispositions which could result that a person acts or reacts in a certain manner, i.e. some kind of inclination (Thompson, 1991). The individual’s dispositions influence action, or as Thompson (1991, p.12 with reference to Bourdieu) states “dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are ‘regular’ without being consciously co-ordinated”. Furthermore, our dispositions are shaped by our perceptions, feelings, thinking, actions and

behaviour (Maton, 2008) which imply that our historical experiences seem to create schema (Belland, 2009; Bourdieu, 1993) which is embedded in a person (Reay, 2004). As such, our past shapes our current experiences without an individual even being aware of the influence of the historical past (Bourdieu, 1990) and hence habitus becomes a structure that structures structure (Bourdieu, 1994) unknowingly or as Bourdieu (1977, p.72) states a “structured structure” and “structuring structure” in the form of rules, roles and behaviour with the inclination or tendency to reproduce or preserve the current structure or system (Morrison, 2005). Habitus thus has the potential to serve as a *‘doxa’* which an individual or group take for granted as common sense, i.e. a lens through which not only reality is interpreted, but also the cognitive reality (Bourdieu, 1984).

Habitus does not exist in isolation, as capital and field play an integral part with habitus that results in certain possible actions or practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Capital as a concept refers to “economic capital (money and property); cultural capital (cultural goods and services, also including educational credentials); social capital (networks and acquaintances) and symbolic capital (which refers to legitimacy)” (Navarro, 2006, p.17). According to Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) each person finds himself/herself within a field at a certain position determined by capital and as such the standing or power within the field is based upon the individual’s capital, or as they eloquently state “They are, rather, bearers of capitals and, depending on their trajectory and on the position they occupy in the field by virtue of their endowment (volume and structure) in capital, they have a propensity to orient themselves actively either towards the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and hence the field becomes a structure that structures habitus (Morrison 2005). Experience within the field provides thus greater leverage for the individual, as the field according to Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1994) is analogous to a game in which individuals participate.

## Methodology

Ontologically this exploratory intrinsic qualitative case study is positioned within the interpretive paradigm with the epistemological stance that meaning is constructed by means of social interaction, or as Creswell (2009) posits, our life world or reality is socially constructed and hence there are multiple realities that individuals or groups socially co-construct (Mertens, 2005).

Qualitative data was gathered from three primary schools. Five individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, four focus groups interviews with three to four participants per focus group, as well as an open-ended questionnaire completed by forty-three participants from the three schools. These tools were chosen as it provided participants with an opportunity to construct their perceptions and understanding related to the causes of conflict by means of social engagement between the researcher and the participants.

Purposive sampling was used as there was an educational association between the researcher and the three schools situated in the Northern Area suburbs of Port Elizabeth, South Africa. These three schools were nearby from one another. Participants included post

level one educators in the foundation phase and intermediate phase as well as principals, deputy principals and heads of department to collect data from multiple perspectives. The rationale for focusing on the three primary schools was that previous interaction with the educators residing in these three schools suggested that conflict manifested on a regular basis, hence the intrinsic nature to conduct the research in these three schools.

The case study approach has been criticised by various researchers based on the argument that generalisation of findings appears to be problematic (Yin, 2009). However, Punch (2009) and Blaikie (2010) are of the opinion that one does not have to generalise from every case. This is supported by Stake (1995) who states that readers of research tend to generalise to their specific context, and hence readers seem to decide whether findings seem to be credible. In order to strengthen credibility, multiple data collection sources have been used for triangulation purposes (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The data was analysed by using the suggestions of Creswell (2009) and Tesch (1990, as cited by Creswell, 2009). The multi-faceted sources of conflict cube (Bradshaw, 2008) was used to group the six main themes. Categories associated with each of these a-priori themes were identified using the analysis procedure mentioned above. Trustworthiness was ensured by accurately reporting the findings without bias nor manipulation (Ary Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2009). In addition, participants were also presented with transcriptions of the recorded data in order that they could verify what they have stated (Ary *et al.*, 2009). In addition, various data generation tools were implemented in order to triangulate the findings (Creswell, 2009). In addition, participants were not only from one specific group as post level one educators, head of departments, deputy principals and principals participated.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's ethical approval committee. Participants were informed using a letter what the research entailed and was asked to indicate whether they wanted to participate by completing an informed consent letter.

## Findings from the data

The findings from the data are presented below categorised according to the six a-priori themes based on Bradshaw (2008) and Moore (2003). Each of the six main categories is presented as a theme in bold with sub-categories presented in italics.

### Theme 1: Interest-based conflict

#### *Limited possibilities for promotion*

It appeared that the lack of availability of promotion posts was a source of tension. The Department of Basic Education in the Eastern Cape Province has not published vacancy lists regularly. As such, teachers were concerned about the above and this leads them to experience emotions of despair. This was highlighted when a teacher said:

*In the school set-up, you only have that limited possibility for promotion. And people improve their qualifications. They grow themselves, and yet they remain on post level*

*I for 20 years, 25 years, and I believe that's cause for frustration, because you have developed yourself in the meantime. But now you don't get the opportunity to exercise management, to exercise your leadership on a higher level. You remain a class teacher . . . and there's the financial implication that goes with it, plus the personal frustration and that pride that comes with it (Personal interview, School 3, Participant G).*

Another teacher concurred when stating, *"Promotion post. Promotion comes up, err, so rarely and then there's a lot of competition . . ."* (Focus group D, School 3, Participant 2). Teachers thus felt that they were overlooked for promotion. It appears that this resulted in frustration, as their personal interests were not achieved.

#### *Limited resources*

The lack of financial resources had serious implications for teachers at school. Often, basic duties could not be performed due to unaffordability of telephone accounts, unrepaired telephone connections, non-availability of fax machines and lack of paper. This became evident when a participant noted:

*. . . educators became frustrated, and that caused more conflict, because if they need to receive a fax or send a fax or get information, there's no fax machine, no telephone line, the telephone line was cut, there was no paper to roll off the machines, they were all broken, machines were not working . . . and that caused more conflict (Focus group interview C, School 1, Participant 1).*

Although fax lines are in many contexts a thing of the past due to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the form of email has taken over, the vast majority of South African schools are not online on the world wide web. In addition to the above, the absence or scarcity of basic educational resources related to the classroom context also resulted in conflict, *"Resources, sometimes when you ask for certain resources, then it's 'No, there's no money available' . . . [Then there is the] desk problem. Some teachers have not desks in their classrooms . . . The conflict is about resources"* (Personal interview, School 1, Participant R).

## Theme 2: Needs-based conflict

#### *Self-esteem needs*

Teachers felt that they were also losing self-worth, as indicated below, because their human interests and needs were not being met, not even to be promoted, an aspect that was also alluded to in the interest based theme. The interest and self-esteem needs became apparent during a personal interview in School 3 by Participant G when stating:

*I've now been promoted [after many years] and that you find in the, err, outside world, the opportunities are more . . . available, cause if you speak to youngsters that you taught . . . How they have progressed, within 10 years. And after 20 years, 25*

*years, here I am. I'm still driving my jalopy. I'm still struggling. So that also brings inner conflict . . .* (Personal interview, School 3, Participant G).

The above also suggests that teachers have a need to be recognised, as non-recognition impacts on their self-esteem. The self-esteem aspect as a possible cause for conflict was also highlighted in the open-ended questionnaires when a participant stated, “*A low self-esteem can also be a breeding ground for conflict*” (Questionnaire, School 3, Participant 2).

#### *Need for power*

The data also highlighted the fact that the principals could cause conflict when trying to exert authority and power over teachers. One teacher commented on principals being ‘*power hungry*’ with their external mannerisms:

*Power, . . . they're hungry for power, I don't know, when you, when you look at that man, his walk, his whole body language says, I'm in control, I've got the power. I am the boss. When you look, the way he speaks to you, everything man, it says that they're hungry. He just, he just wants to be, like uh somebody that says something then you must do this and no, it's fine, no it's not. . .* (Focus group B, School 2, Participant 3).

The importance of exerting power was also evident when another participant mentioned that the principal wants to show that he is in charge by winning at all cost, “*The only thing for him is, he just wants to win, you see, he just see himself. I am big; I am the principal and, and power, hunger for power*” (Focus Group B, School 2, Participant 2). The data also indicated that there were certain post-level one teachers that tried to play power games by trying to show that they have some authority, as one teacher explained “*Also, I think there's a power struggle, you know. Some people [Post Level One educators] always wanting to be in a powerful position*” (Focus group D, School 3, Participant 2). Manipulation and abuse of power were also evident when a teacher stated, “. . . *some people just want to manipulate, even if they are Post Level One educators, they want to still manipulate or dictate to their seniors and so on*” (Focus group C, School 1, Participant 1). It appears that the need for power as needs-based cause and value-related aspects as the cause were both interrelated. Different viewpoints seemed to be both power related, as well as value related.

### Theme 3: Relationship-based conflict

#### *Favouritism*

The data indicated that favouritism was a very contentious issue that caused conflict among educators, especially in the ways that principals and the SMTs dealt with the staff. It appears that management was more open to certain staff members or staff groupings’ viewpoints. This became evident when a staff member stated:

*. . . it's caused by, uhm, favouritism. Now that, that it usually comes from the management where you will see they prefer certain individuals over others and then*

*as such, you kind of feel that certain people's values or views are valued more than the others, that usually starts conflict* (Focus group C, School 1, Participant 3).

Favouritism pertaining to promotion posts as well as favouritism of individuals in general also seemed to be causing conflict, as a participant stated in the questionnaire *"The biggest problem is favouritism . . . If the principal favours certain individuals over others, it's bound to create conflict . . . Also when it comes to promotion posts, this is even more prevalent if the principal influences the SGB"* (Questionnaire, School 1, Participant 16).

#### *Lack of respect and tolerance for different opinions*

The data revealed that lack of respect and tolerance appeared to be a common concern that appeared to be causing conflict among educators. One participant put it as follows:

*A lack of respect, people do not respect the other one, lack of understanding, uh, lack of tolerance, uh, people do not tolerate somebody else's ideas . . . so you have that lack of respect, a lack of understanding, lack of tolerance for somebody else's ideas and that normally causes problems when this person feels he can make a valuable contribution, but from the other side, you feel no, you can't* (Focus group A, School 2, Participant 3).

Lack of respect for the opinions of others was also causing conflict. A staff member eloquently stated that it is important not to be influenced by previous differences and that one should always be open to show respect when someone contributes, even if there had been disagreements before:

*. . . it could even be a case of underestimating input from certain, from certain members . . . because of stereotyping or past impressions that have been created, and yet I have come to realise that those very role-players can make valuable contributions . . .* (Personal interview, School 3, Participant G).

The importance of tolerance and respect also became evident when a teacher noted, *"Inability to exercise tolerance. . ."* (Questionnaire, School 3, Participant 2) was attributing to conflict. It was also noted that teachers in senior positions were perceived as not always open to the opinions of post level one teachers and as such it appears that not valuing these teachers' perspectives were causing conflict.

#### Theme 4: Value-based conflict

##### *Different beliefs and viewpoints as a result of different contexts*

It became evident from the data that respect for diversity related to having different values and viewpoints related to religion, race, culture and beliefs were also being viewed as potential causes of conflict, as staff members come from diverse contexts. This was alluded to when a staff member stated, *"Prejudice can also contribute to conflict. Beliefs and worldview, e.g. all Muslims are terrorists. Diversity, race, religion, culture"* (Questionnaire, School 3, Participant 2) and another one affirmed this when stating

*“Religious conflict – not respecting the next Educator’s beliefs”* (Questionnaire, School 3, Participant 1) were potential conflict zones. The above was affirmed by another educator when stating, “. . . we are different people, so we all have different points of view (regarding how we see and do things). . .” (Focus group D, School 3, Participant 2) which again highlights that lack of respect for diverse opinions and having different values have the potential for the manifestation of conflict.

#### *Not valuing guidance*

It was also noted that certain teachers felt that what they believe and value are more important to what younger educators valued. More senior teachers made it clear that their guidance should be valued as they perceived that their beliefs and experience appear to be more valuable. At the same time, this also implied a power related conflict dimension, linking with the needs-based aspect alluded to previously. This became apparent when a teacher expressed it as follows, “. . . they can’t just willy-nilly walk in and think they know it all from University and have very little respect for a teacher that is teaching for plus minus 20 years and they don’t want to learn from you. Because that I have experienced first-hand with someone in my grade . . .” (Personal interview, School 3, Participant D).

It appears then from the above that the younger and less experienced teachers who were fresh from the university were not always agreeable to the guidance of the more experienced teachers. It appears thus that younger and more experienced educators have different beliefs and as such this brought about tension, as more experienced teachers had the perception that their input should be valued more.

### Theme 5: Data-based conflict

#### *Lack of communication*

The data revealed that a lack of communication contributed to conflict. This became apparent when a teacher stated: “. . . I would say in that sense that boiling of feeling is caused by lack of communication” (Personal interview, School 1, Participant 1). Another participant alluded to the fact that sometimes information has been communicated, but that the manner in which it was done caused confusion “. . . people don’t, err, see things in the same way, you know, and whoever is bringing the message across is maybe not clear enough and that brings a lot of confusion . . .” (Focus group D, School 3, Participant 2) or in some instances there was absence of communication, “Information not being passed on to all” (Questionnaire, School 2, Participant 2).

#### *Lack of transparency and consultation*

It became evident from the data that lack of transparency and communication from the school management team was causing conflict. This was alluded to when a participant stated that “They always, they never open, when they are, when they are dealing with issues, and that becomes the biggest cause of conflict in schools” (Focus group interview C, School 1, Participant 3). This was supported by another participant who said, “. . . a lack of transparency . . . And just the fact that educators are not brought into the whole picture (by

*the school management) . . . leads people to doubt one another and that causes conflict”* (Focus group A, School 2, Participant 1). Another participant stated that non-consultation was sometimes being perceived as intentional when stating, “. . . *not consulting with all role-players and in most cases, it’s not done deliberately”* (Personal interview, School 3, Participant G).

#### *Gossip and spreading untruths*

It was also noted that gossip and spreading untruths were causing conflict among staff. This was noted when a staff member indicated that backstabbing and the spreading of news were causing conflict, “*Backstabbing by spreading news”* (Questionnaire, School 1, Participant 8) and another two participants concurred when stating “*Gossips”* (Questionnaire, School 3, Participant 7) and “*Gossiping”* (Questionnaire, School 2, Participant 8) were causing conflict.

### Theme 6: Structural-based conflict

#### *Management and leadership issues*

Participants were of the opinion that management was not always prepared to listen to what staff had to say, as one participant indicated, “*When educators are not listened to by the Principal and SMT and tension arises”* (Questionnaire, School 3, Participant 12). Another staff member also highlighted the fact that management was in many instances indecisive to take a stance on a particular matter:

*And what I also find out what can cause conflict, it is when, when, management do not take a stance on an issue. They throw it open; sometimes everything cannot be opened up to the staff. The staff cannot make decisions for decisions that management must take sometimes . . . And if sometimes people believe they must be involved in every decision that the school makes. That can lead to conflict . . .* (Focus group D, School 3, Participant 1).

It appears moreover that poor leadership was also perceived as causing conflict. One participant indicated that it appeared that some leaders seemed not being able to lead as expected, as it seemed that leadership skills were not apparent. This became evident when he stated, “. . . *especially if the person hasn’t got the ability or qualities a leader should have and he, uhm, is not in a position to deliver himself or to perform, . . .”* (Focus group C, School 1, Participant 1). This was also affirmed when another teacher stated that what was a constant issue was that there was “*Not always clear leadership”* (Questionnaire, School 3, Participant 9). The data thus suggest that what is required is strong and exemplary leadership from those in management to limit conflict.

#### *Workload allocation and time tabling*

Another aspect that caused a great deal of friction was workload related concerning duties and responsibilities. The workload relates to the number of school subjects or learning areas that are allocated to an educator, including extra-curricular activities. Some teachers were

unhappy since subjects were assigned to them in which they were not feeling confident, as they felt that they did not have the necessary content knowledge or subjects that appear to require less preparation time. This was highlighted when a participant stated:

*. . . when an educator has been given certain learning areas he/she is not really acquainted with . . . then you can feel the tension and conflict. And now instead of dealing with the conflict with the person who allocates these duties especially the learning areas . . .* (Focus group C, School 1, Participant 1).

Another participant concurred when stating that it appears that the inequitable allocation of learning areas was a cause of conflict when he wrote “. . . workload allocated, allocation, learning area allocation . . .” (Questionnaire, School 1, Participant 9), highlighting the allocation of workload as a source of conflict. In addition to the above, time tabling, an aspect closely related to workload, appeared to be another cause of concern, when a participant mentioned “. . . especially first term . . . your workload allocations, the timetabling. Everybody wants a comfortable ride on the timetable, wants an easy workload. And we all out watching who has more than the other, when it comes to admin time . . .” (Personal interview, School 3, Participant G). It appears thus that some teachers felt concerned as time tabling was perceived to be set in such a manner that favoured certain individuals and as such the perception of favouritism was highlighted again.

#### *Punctuality and time-related issues*

Sticking to deadlines also appeared to be causing conflict as staff perceived that the lack of full cooperation to complete administrative tasks and handing it in on time. This became evident when a participant stated, “A typical example of this is where some educators hand in exam schedules on time for reports, while others take their time to complete. This is a potential situation for conflict to arise” (Questionnaire, School 2, Participant 4). Another participant indicated “. . . if you’re the grade head and you have to do a final analysis on anything, you have to wait for the other two teachers to bring their information . . .” (Personal interview, School 3, Participant I), implying that some educators did not adhere to deadlines. Another teacher alluded to the above too when stating that not adhering to time frames caused conflict when stating:

*You have to wait for analysis and I would say hopefully, with some young teachers coming in, you have to wait for everything that the management team wants to be filed and put away. You’re always waiting for this one person and after a while, it becomes too much, because now, you want your things to be right and you’re used to having your things on time. But you always find there’s one (educator) amongst the three that does not do their part, and I’m telling you, it’s stressful at the end of the year* (Personal interview, School 3, Participant I).

The above was also referred to in the open-ended questionnaire when a participant noted, “Teachers (are) not doing or handing in work [books, DOE mark sheets and schedules] on time or by due dates” (Questionnaire, School 2, Participant 6). Linked to the above, participants stated that punctuality appears to be an issue, especially about staff arriving late at school, being late for class and reporting late for playground duty. This was indicated

when participants wrote, *“Coming late of teachers to school. Not arriving at their classes in time”* (Questionnaire, School 1, Participant 2) and *“Late coming and playground duty when educators do not do their duty”* (Questionnaire, School 1, Participant 11).

#### *Roles and responsibilities: Lack of consultation and uncertainty*

From the data, it was noted that roles and responsibilities assigned to teachers were also perceived as a cause of conflict. It appeared that staff was of the opinion that in many instances they were not consulted about expectations related to rules and responsibilities, *“Allocations of certain err certain roles and responsibilities and err staff err, what you call it err . . . school organisation. You’re supposed to do that, you are there, nutrition is your baby (the school feeding scheme is your responsibility), that is your baby, and there’s sometimes a conflict around that issue”* (Personal interview, School 1, Participant R), implying that duties and responsibilities appear to be unfairly allocated by the school management.

It also appeared that the duties and responsibilities were not made clear enough, *“I’m not sure they [the educators] supposed to do certain things and now they think somebody else must do those things. For example, there’s one about the staff playground duties that we have. When staff feels that they not sure if it is compulsory to do staff duty or whatever . . .”* (Personal interview, School 1, Participant R). This then highlights the importance of clearly outlined procedures in order to circumvent unnecessary conflict.

## Discussion and implications

The findings suggest from an interest-based related perspective, that the perceived unfair promotion of teacher appointments and limited promotional opportunities were of great concern. Recent unhappiness pertaining to promotion posts has been pointed out, however it appears that the Minister of Basic Education has exonerated those implicated (Joubert, 2017a, 2017b) and union officials have denied that they can all be painted with the same brush (Gqirana, 2016). It is thus evident that promotion positions is a very sensitive aspect which require serious re-thinking of not only shortlisting procedures, but also the application process and final appointment in order to serve social transformation and social justice by having the learners’, community’s and school’s best interest at heart. Hence, appointments should have the future of the learners at heart and not those of any particular individual to the extent that there is a win-win outcome for the school and learners. The plight for taking the community’s interest at heart was also highlighted by the recent Klipspruit unrest due to community dissatisfaction to the principal appointed (Macupe, 2017).

Similarly, the absence of resources or limited availability of resources (Hitt *et al.*, 2006; Rahim, 2001) as needs also appeared to be causing conflict and hence from an equity theory perspective (Abigail & Cahn, 2011), teachers became despondent. In addition, needs-based causes with special reference to self-esteem needs, also appears to impact on conflict (see Galtung, 2000), as post level one teachers felt unappreciated by their younger peers, by student-teachers and by peers in senior positions, hence, alluding to the psychodynamic

theory (Abigail & Cahn, 2011) perspective that our inner emotional states are influenced as a result of our intrapersonal states.

From a relationship-based conflict perspective, it appears that favouritism and lack of respect and tolerance of different opinions seemed to be problematic, as certain staff members' opinions appeared to be more appreciated than others, again highlighting that this probably impacted on the self-esteem of staff members. In addition, not valuing and acknowledging different beliefs and viewpoints from educators was also perceived as causing conflict, hence highlighting that it is important to acknowledge that not all individuals hold the same value system (Bradshaw, 2008) and as such it is important to be aware that diverse values and beliefs may often lead to disagreements (Cowan, 2003). It also appears that certain senior teachers insisted that younger teachers should value their guidance and experience, however, in many instances, it seemed that younger teachers were not inclined to accept this guidance as a given, an aspect that was alluded to before, as values and beliefs of individuals appeared to be different.

With reference to the data-based dimension, it seemed that lack of communication was also a concern. Moore (2003) and Littlejohn and Domenici (2007) have both argued that lack of information, interpretation and misinformation appear to be causing conflict, hence, linking to the uncertainty theory dimension (Abigail & Cahn, 2011). In addition, the spreading of untruths and gossiping also appeared to be causing conflict, an aspect to which Scott (2010) has referred to as an escalating aspect. With reference to the structural-based dimension, it appeared that poor and indecisive leadership and management might lead to conflict (Bradshaw, 2008), hence the importance of enabling the leadership of institutions to deal with structural issues (Snodgrass & Blunt, 2009). The findings also highlight the importance of clear defined roles and duties expected, as uncertainty regarding this could lead to conflict, aspects to which Aquinas (2006) and Steyn and Van Niekerk (2002) also referred. The above hence also foregrounds the important role of School Governing Bodies and the various role players during both the short listing- and interview process in such a manner that the learners' and their future education is at the centre.

The findings also affirm that the categorisation of the causes of conflict appears to be inter-related (Bradshaw, 2008; Moore, 2003), as one type of conflict could permeate on more than one level. This became evident from interest-based conflict and relationship-based conflict, as the interest related to promotion recognition appears to also influence relationships. The same seems to apply for interest-based related power issues and its influence on relationship-based aspects, where the interest of promotion appears to also influence relations due to favouritism. The above is also applicable to data-based conflict and relationship-based conflict, as different values and viewpoints seem to be also influencing relations. Similarly, structural conflict and data-based conflict also appear to influence relations. It becomes evident from the above that the conflict which emanated, functioned in the three particular primary schools on a social plane and an economical plane, hence alluding also to the inter-relatedness of status and monetary rewards. Relations among staff are socially mediated and it appears that the need for equity and financial gain through promotion; influence relationships, attitudes and behaviour, concurring with Galtung's (2000) ABC conflict model, i.e. attitude and behaviour has the potential to lead to conflict as a result of economic goals that were not reached as a result of interference.

The interference alluded to above refers to the six faces of the conflict cube that has individually or as a combination the potential to impact on the economical plane when individuals are not recognised for promotion as an example. The reaction from the economical plane could thus result in attitudes and behaviour that influence one or more dimensions in the conflict cube through behaviour on the social plane.

In addition, the data seem to suggest that the causes of conflict functioned predominately on the dysfunctional level rather than at a functional level in the three schools, especially with reference to the relationship-based and need-based dimensions already highlighted previously. This was evident from the defiant attitudes and intolerance, poor cooperation and teamwork, poor relationships, division and group forming, poor morale, lack of motivation and work ethic to which participants alluded. Hence, from a psychodynamic theory perspective it appears that the participants experienced conflict as a phenomenon that has negative consequences, as their inner perceptions or sub-conscious states (Abigail & Cahn, 2011; Lulofs & Cahn, 2000) have been triggered to respond in a negative manner within the school context, for example absenteeism as evident from the data, hence concurring with Galtung's (2000) ABC position. However, conflict is not necessarily negative (Deutsch, 1969; Nelson & Quick, 2008; Robbins & Judge, 2009), as it could result in positive outcomes or win-win situations (see Hitt, Miller & Colella, 2006; Schermerhorn, Hunt & Osborn 2000). The challenge would be to limit its lingering nature to ensure that it does not result in disunity, disempowerment, injustice in promotion and perceptions of not appreciating every educator as part of the value chain. It is thus imperative that conflict should not become a poisonous toxic mix that asphyxiates and eventually strangles educators and the community and learners that it serves. As such, it is thus vital that both the Department of Basic Education and educators (including principals) deliberately re-imagine processes or procedures to limit the possible causes of conflict.

Interpreting the data from a Bourdeuian (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994; Maton, 2008; Reay, 2004) perspective suggests that habitus as embedded dispositions encompassing historical inculcated beliefs, behaviours, actions and inclinations impinge on the causes of conflict among educators. The habitus of each person is unique, yet there could be certain similarities among a certain group of educators. As such, each person's values are not identical due to their habitus, position within the field and their culture capital. With reference to value-based conflict, the finding about '*Different beliefs and viewpoints as a result of different contexts*' appears to support the notion that this could be as a result not only due to different positions of individuals within the field, but also ascribable to different capital. Similarly, the senior teachers' comments that young student teachers are not valuing guidance, can also be linked to the above, as the different positions within the field among senior teachers and student teachers could be causing this tension probably due to being at different positions within the field. It seems thus that senior teachers perceive their capital and field position as more significant, thus subscribing to a doxa, i.e. how young teachers should value their position within the field as one of being more experienced teachers and thus student teachers or new teachers should not challenge their experience as a form of common sense due to their seniority. Equally important, the senior teachers perceive that their beliefs and values are of greater significance as the student teachers', probably as a result of their embedded habitus that their historical embedded knowledge and experience is the structure to adhere to. As such, '*structural-*

*based*' conflict appears to be as a result of the organisational structured habitus that the teachers hold dear to them. The participants held certain structural aspects such as management, leadership, punctuality, work allocation and roles and responsibilities as potential aspects that lead to conflict, probably as a result of their personal habitus and the organisational habitus that they have experienced for years; i.e. it has been inculcated and as a result history has been embedded in how they perceive structure and action. The above clearly suggests that there are certain values and beliefs that are not only important within the organisational habitus, but also within themselves.

Data-based-conflict regarding lack of communication again highlights that the participants valued information as a form of capital, as information as capital has the potential to position the participants at different locations within the field which again could result in different actions or even inactions. With reference to the findings related to the categories '*interest-based conflict*', '*needs-based conflict*' and '*relationship-conflict*', it appears that several social based aspects are valued by the participants as these aspects provide or impinge on the mobility within the field, i.e. how for example peers and society view the participants. This can probably be ascribed to aspects mentioned such as limited promotion opportunities, needs for self-esteem, a need for power and their infelicitous position towards favouritism as these aspects influence field mobility and field positioning. Field position appears to influence capital acquisition not only on the economical plane, but also symbolic capital as a form of promotion which suggests a form of justice, i.e. climbing the ladder of promotion. Mobility within the field to higher positions might then also result in different practices as action, hence also alluding to structuring as a force that shifts power and conduct.

## Conclusion and practical significance

The findings suggest that conflict was very much present in the three primary schools. However, as this study was limited to three schools only, the findings cannot be generalised, but at the same time Stake (1995) has argued that readers can ascertain whether what has been presented appears to be plausible. In addition, the framework used to categorise the perceived causes (Bradshaw, 2008) also appears to be validating that educator conflict can be framed within the framework's parameters, as well as whether the Bourdieuan perspective provides a plausible interpretational lens. Our position is that the causes of conflict as action(s) that result at a dysfunctional level or destructive mode should be explored by embracing habitus as a lens. It is important to take note that habitus does not act in isolation, rather the elements field and capital assist with the shaping of habitus (Maton, 2008). As such, the equation, "*[(habitus) times (capital)] + field = practice*" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.101) suggests that there is an internal relationship between habitus, capital and field which constitutes practice or differently put; the intertwined relationship affords mobility and action(s) within the field. Within the field individuals may use or abuse their power as a result of their capital, capital that becomes a tool of positioning and mobility (see Navarro, 2006). Maton (2008, p.51) succinctly summarises the intertwinement as follows, "*the field, part of the ongoing contexts in which we live, structures the habitus [as a result of capital – our insertion], while at the same time the habitus is the basis for actors' understanding of their lives, including the field.*"

It is therefore important to not only understand the habitus of the individual educators as actors, but also the habitus of the leadership of the school which includes the School Governing Body.

Conflict is ever present within the field of the individual and organisation and as such, it cannot be wished away, as it is evident that conflict within these schools is of a serious nature. Hence, one cannot have an '*ostrich head in the sand ignorance perspective*', as this would probably lead to more conflict within the field. It is clear that educators (principals, deputy principals, Heads of Departments, School Management Teams, Post Level One teachers), School Governing Bodies and departmental education officials have to acknowledge that conflict is part of life in the field. As such, it is recommended that educators at the participating schools and surrounding schools are not only made aware of the perceived sources or causes of conflict among educators by means of presentations by departmental officials from the Department of Basic Education, but that they are enabled to become proactive to identify and deal with conflict. Hence, educators and principals have to be enabled, by for example the Department of Basic Education, in such a manner that they have the knowledge capital and skills capital to handle this phenomenon in the field. Although habitus (including a person's conflict habitus) seems to be fixed, a person's habitus could be altered. This is due to its evolving and dynamic nature, as it may be transformed due to training, education and new experiences (Stahl, 2014). As such, one's habitus has the potential to change, despite being embedded within us as a result of our past historical experiences that shaped who we are. However, training, education and new experiences do not predict that there will be change in the habitus of people, but offer a possibility that it could. This thus implies that opportunities as enabling capital have to be regularly provided to principals and educators, as these opportunities as enabling ongoing capital development events within the field has the possibility to impact on individuals' existing habitus, with reference to conflict management in this paper.

We argue that in order to possibly influence an individual's habitus, the focus should be on embracing different methodologies during training as enablement. Hence, we propose the utilisation of visual participatory methodologies such as drawing, photovoice, photo collages and digital storytelling; methodologies that require deep inner reflection and the sharing of thinking in larger groups. These alternative methodologies require transcending the traditional once-off training sessions and workshops. In addition, we propose that these alternative methodologies might result in extremely rewarding outcomes when re-drafting existing policies and procedures pertaining to educator conduct, guidelines pertaining to administrative responsibilities, workload allocation, filling of vacancies and promotion posts, allocation of resources and policies and procedures related to conflict management, i.e. to co-create a common habitus which educators and leadership value in order to promote optimal teaching action(s) within the field.

We posit that it is through the relinquishing of existing ways of '*doing*' and through embracing different methodologies alluded to above, that all stakeholders could become wiser within the field. These shared suggestions are not silver bullets, but at least it is a starting point to sensitise all. Engaging educators in the above could set the scene for greater intrapersonal understanding within the field in which they operate and assist with the development of their capital. Further research that utilises participatory visual

methodologies pertaining to how educators, principals and departmental officials suggest conflict should be dealt with; how it could be minimised and whether the re-drafting of school-based policies are useful; should be embarked upon in order to ascertain whether participatory visual methodologies hold promise to promote positive agency in the field.

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