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Managing Conflict in Nepali Schools : Educational Leaders' Experiences and Negotiation Practices

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how educational leaders experience and respond to conflict in their everyday school contexts. For this, we conducted a qualitative study using narrative inquiry within an interpretive paradigm, and we collected information through in-depth interviews with four educational leaders from government and private schools in Chitwan, Dharan and Surkhet, selected through convenience sampling. We then analyzed the interviews thematically to understand how conflicts emerge in schools, how they are interpreted, and managed. The findings suggest that school leaders often struggle to clearly identify and manage conflicts in their institutions. Many leaders rely heavily on personal judgment and experience rather than formal policies or structured negotiation strategies. Challenges such as weak communication and limited active listening, ego clashes, unclear conflict-resolution mechanisms, lack of professional training in negotiation, and ongoing resource constraints shape the type of conflicts in schools. We learnt that conflict is not always perceived as a problem. When approached thoughtfully, it can open spaces for dialogue, reflection, and overall institutional growth. The study highlights the need for transformational leadership practices, clear policies, open communication, teamwork in negotiation, and formal training in conflict management to help school leaders move from merely handling conflict to using it as a tool for collaboration and positive change.

Key words: Conflict, conflict resolution, collaboration, educational leadership, negotiation

Contextualizing Conflict in Nepali Schools

The local staffroom of a government school in Far-West Nepal is packed with tension as a heated argument breaks out between two teachers regarding classroom management. The principal, already stressed by displeased parents and the school management committee, attempts to mediate but gets frustrated and gives up. Similarly, in a posh, private school, parents demand transparency in fees and threaten to take the matter to court. In another rural part of the country, a head teacher struggles to appease local political leaders while trying to retain qualified teachers.

Any person who works in an educational setting in Nepal knows that these scenes are not exceptions, rather, they are an integral part of the daily function of our educational institutions. These conflicts can range from disagreements over workload, hierarchical discrepancies, or even friction caused by external stakeholders, including political and community interference (Bush & Coleman, 2000). They have been woven so intricately into our daily administration that such conflicts are often either ignored or swept under the rug rather than facilitating open discussions unless the matter escalates beyond control.

Difference in values, objectives, expectations and preferences between individuals and groups means that conflict is natural and sometimes even necessary. If managed constructively, conflict can lead to progressive change. Kondalkar (2006) lists conflict into functional and dysfunctional types. When managed with due diligence, functional conflict can lead to innovation and better decision-making capability, and it can also strengthen relationships between conflicting individuals. On the other hand, dysfunctional conflict “disrupts workflow, damages morale, and lowers productivity” (Kondalkar, 2006, pp. 162–164). Yet, in Nepal’s educational settings, conflict is seen negatively. It is avoided if possible or taken as a personal attack and a grudge is held. Even when disagreements happen openly, they are pushed aside only to resurface more vigorously later. Clearly, the absence of structured negotiation mechanisms in our educational settings mixed with our cultural tendency to tilt towards group conformity and respect hierarchy leading to hesitancy in communication, makes conflict resolution difficult. Despite these challenges and recurrence in educational settings, conflict management and negotiation are rarely discussed as topics requiring significant attention. This topic is skirted around whereas curriculum reforms, school enrollment, and exam outcomes are highlighted.

Appreciating the need to open up conversation around this very human side of the organization, this article narratively explores real stories, common patterns, interventions, and practices on conflict and its resolution. We have asked how Nepali educators understand conflict and manage it, what tools they use and how they think culture, power and communication shape negotiation outcomes. The goal of this article is not to see conflict as a problem but to reframe it as an opportunity to create a space for dialogue, change and growth. This article seeks to fill the gap that conflict is not a threat but as an opportunity for open dialogue, learning and growth. Throughout this journey, we explored how Nepali educators experienced and navigated conflict in their professional career. By engaging with them and hearing their stories, we designed this article to engage in much needed conversation about human, emotion and relational dimensions of education.

Situating the Study in the Nepali Context

Conflict is inevitable in organizations as it arises from differences in opinion, goals, interests and perspectives. Kondalkar (2006), defines conflict as “the process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected something that the first party cares about” (p. 160). This means that conflict may originate even without objective wrongdoing, merely through perception of wrongdoing. According to Bush and Middlewood (2013), conflict in educational organizations largely emerges from diverse values, communication barriers, power struggles among different position holders, competition for resources and opportunities, etc. Similarly, Kondalkar (2006) also identifies several sources of conflict, including limited resources, communication gaps, overlapping authority, personality clashes, and goal divergence. If left unresolved, such conflicts may cause irreparable damage to the organizational productivity and reputation (Deutsch, Coleman and Marcus, 2011). Therefore, it is essential to ensure that the school leadership employs effective conflict management strategies and negotiation tactics before conflicts can escalate.

In Nepal, the educational landscape is heavily influenced by various cultural, social, economic and political factors (Acharya, 2015). According to Structural Conflict Theory, organizational hierarchies and power dynamics can cause and perpetuate conflict. Nepal's largely hierarchical structure often creates imbalances in power between the school leadership, administrators, teachers and students, leading to conflicts. On top of that, the complex political structure of Nepal directly influences educational policies and practices further exacerbating those conflicts.

While the Interactionist View of Conflict believes that conflict is not always detrimental, sometimes, it can lead to innovation and mitigate groupthink, not addressing conflicts on time may negatively impact employee's performance (Robbins and Judge, 2019). For this reason, organizations must facilitate negotiation as the primary tool to resolve conflict before it can create chaos.

Negotiation enables stakeholders to reach mutually beneficial agreements (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 2011). Nepal is a collectivist country and has higher respect for authority (Bista, 1991). Therefore, in Nepal, negotiation practices are often dependent on and influenced by collectivism. This means it is essential for educational leaders to take into account various group behavior and communication practices prevalent in their organization rather than focusing only on individual differences, to negotiate effectively. As per the Negotiation Order Theory developed by Anselm Strauss, such practices of negotiation and renegotiation among organizational members is essential to maintain stability within the organization and to resolve conflicts thereby leading to sustainability (Strauss, 1978).

Nepal's organizations, much like its job market and political order, are extremely volatile and ensuring sustainability within an increasingly challenging socio-cultural and politico-economic scenario requires effective conflict management tactics among many other strategies. Nepal's educational sector is currently largely focused on introducing and implementing structured conflict management practices, especially to address challenges related to governmental reforms (Hamal, 2020). In such settings, it is necessary to explore

how educational leaders deal with various conflicts that arise within an organization while also studying how they foster cooperative relationships and sustainable conflict resolutions.

This article aims to study the most prominent types of conflict leaders face within their educational organizations and the steps they take to negotiate a resolution. To do so, we have conducted a narrative inquiry of four school leaders within four private and public schools of Surkhet, Dharan and Chitwan and the result of the study has been presented in this article. Our study is based exploring answers to the following questions:

1. How do school leaders in Nepal narrate their experiences with conflict within their institutions?
2. How do the leaders negotiate with internal and external stakeholders when managing institutional conflicts?

The Unspoken Challenge of Conflict in Nepali Schools

Educational institutions comprise of regular interactions between different individuals such as teachers, administrators, students, parents and external stakeholders. Naturally such intricate and cross-cutting relations can lead to conflict arising from differences in expectation, breakdowns in communication, competition, limited resources, and misalignment of institutional goals (Deutch et al., 2011; Bush & Coloman, 2000). In the context of a developing country like Nepal, educational institutions function within a border framework marked by cultural diversity, different political influences, bureaucratic challenges, and complex variation in the level of stakeholder's engagement, all of which can intensify the potential for conflict.

In the Nepali society, school leaders, especially principals are frequently required to put on multiple hats- they are responsible for guiding the teaching and learning exercise, overseeing the school's day to day operations, maintaining a fine balance between discipline and freedom for students, and ensuring smooth cooperation between multiple stakeholders (Pherali, 2011). They must efficiently balance the demand and expectations of instructors, students, parents and the school administration committees while keeping things moving smoothly. Despite such weight of their responsibilities, many school leaders do not receive formal training in stakeholder management, conflict resolution, or negotiation practices (Bista, 1991). Instead, they mainly rely on personal experience, seek guidance from other resources (such as a teacher's group), or use authoritarian means to negotiate through difficult situations.

In these scenarios, principals and leaders may feel increased strain, making it even more challenging and difficult to manage disagreements constructively (Pherali, 2011). When conflict is not resolved on time, the consequences might spread wider across the school. And as a result, morale of a teacher can suffer, as might the general school atmosphere, and children's learning and development may suffer as a result (Bush & Coleman, 2000).

Although there is a rapid growth of scholars of educational leadership in Nepal, there is still a remarkable gap in knowing and understanding how schools, principals and leaders manage conflict inside their organizations. Dhakal (2025) highlights that educational

leadership in Nepal faces multiple sociocultural and institutional challenges and notes that the literature on leadership dynamics within Nepali schools remains limited, particularly regarding how leaders cope with workplace challenges and negotiation strategies in complex contexts. Indeed, we know very little about the leaders' actual strategies to resolve conflicts, how they negotiate with their parents, teachers and school administration committees, or the difficulties they face along the way. Without such understanding, important activities focused on improving leadership abilities and improving school administration may overlook an important part of school's life: conflict resolution.

Even though conflict is considered negative in general, in Nepali schools, this can be, on the contrary, a force of good change. Conflict, when managed constructively, can expose the weakness of the policies, outdated teaching methodologies, or unjust systems that would remain otherwise undisputed (Zubir et al., 2025). For example, a heated argument between the teachers on the question of work distribution or classroom management may result in some innovative idea and a more just order in case it is addressed respectfully. Nonetheless, due to cultural inclinations that discourage conflict and seek to maintain harmony at all costs, conflict is, in most cases, suppressed instead of examined and, in that way, schools become deprived of a chance to grow and develop (Marin, Olekalns, & Adair, 2019).

Conflict dynamics in Nepali schools differ according to whether the institution is private or public. Disputes in private schools frequently focus around business concerns such as fee transparency, parental expectations, and the school's ability to maintain a competitive reputation. Meanwhile, public schools face increased political involvement, limited resources, and staff shortages, resulting in regular confrontations between instructors and administrators (Acharya, & Sigdel, 2025).

Despite differences between private and public school systems, both confront similar obstacles such as personal rivalry, communication gaps, and limited institutionalized conflict resolution processes. These challenges are deeply tied to organizational culture and weak communication structures, which can impede collaboration and innovation when conflicts arise (Kostovski, 2025; Rechter, 2024).

In our study, we study those challenges by focusing on how school leaders describe their experiences of conflict and how they negotiate with relevant stakeholders to resolve those conflicts within their organization. This study is limited to only three districts of Nepal (Surkhet, Chitwan and Sunsari) which restricts its representation to the broader population, especially remote or non-urbanized areas. As this study is conducted only in public and private schools, conflict in the other organizations like religious and community schools can be different. External factors like policy implementation and political issues are not explored because the study's focus is on the organization's internal conflict.

Methodological Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research design within an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to gain a holistic understanding of conflict management in Nepali schools from the perspective of educational leaders. Narrative inquiry was employed as the methodological approach, which allowed us to explore conflict as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped

by the interpretations and meanings attributed by individuals to their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The research was conducted in selected public and private schools across three districts of Nepal: Surkhet, Dharan, and Chitwan. Participants included four school principals, selected through convenience sampling, who provided rich insights into negotiation techniques, leadership strategies, and conflict resolution practices. Semi-structured in-depth interviews served as the primary data collection tool, guided by prepared questions but allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their lived experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented with relevant school documents to support triangulation.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to identify patterns and variations in conflict management approaches, negotiation strategies, and leadership styles. Triangulation between interviews and documents was used to enhance validity. Ethical considerations were rigorously maintained: participants were assured of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and they were informed that participation was voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time. This careful attention to ethics ensured that the study respected participants' autonomy and safeguarded their professional reputations throughout the research process.

Findings and Discussion: Conflict Management in Nepali Schools

Conflict is not just a single argument between two disputing parties. Rather, it is sometimes a slow burn of cumulative arguments that build up over time, while other times, it is a sudden flare-up of differences in human opinion and expectations. In this section, we unwrap the lived experiences of four Nepali school leaders (Head Teachers/ Principals) from rural and urban public and private school leaders. These leaders have had more than 18 years of experience leading their schools have been through many internal and external conflicts. A detailed, open-ended interview with them helped unravel the intricate complexities of conflict, its negotiation, and management, all of which is shaped by their socio-cultural environments, nature of their institutions, leadership philosophies, and community dynamics.

The pseudonyms provided to the four leaders is: Ram (Head Teacher of a public school in Surkhet), Sita (Female Head teacher of a Public School in Surkhet), Laxman (Principal of a private school in Chitwan) and Bharat (Principal of a private school in Dharan). Our interviews helped us identify the following themes:

Leadership as Identity and Relational Practice

All four leaders described leadership not merely as a formal title but as a relational and emotional practice that shapes how conflict is perceived and managed. Leadership, for them, is both identity and action. Sita, a public school head teacher, explained "Conflicts happen when people don't understand or appreciate each other's opinions. Active listening and balancing egos are key, but I rarely facilitate face-to-face negotiation myself." Similar to this conversation, Ram emphasized fairness and foresight when he said "Leadership is about relational clarity and ensuring that decisions are perceived as fair, especially in politically charged spaces."

In private schools, Laxman and Bharat emphasized proactive, emotionally intelligent leadership, intervening early to prevent disputes from escalating. Emotional intelligence for them included understanding students' psychology, parent anxieties, and staff dynamics.

These perspectives align with transformational and relational leadership theory, which stresses that leadership is enacted through relationships, emotional awareness, and strategic intervention rather than through authority alone (Bush, 2018; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Northouse, 2022). The leaders' narratives show that leadership identity directly influences the choice and effectiveness of conflict management strategies.

Roots of Conflict: Miscommunication, Pressure, and Politics

The participants consistently said that conflict arises from miscommunication, divergent expectations, and external pressures, though the specific drivers differed by context. In public schools, Sita observed "Even forming a School Management Committee invites conflict. Discussions with divergent community voices and unclear authority often become the starting point of disputes." Bharat noted the subtle but pervasive effect of political influence when he said "From teacher recruitment to fund allocation, favoritism overshadows fairness and invites conflict with external parties."

In private schools, parental dissatisfaction and emotional tensions among staff were more prominent, reflecting how socio-cultural expectations and resource flexibility shape the nature of conflict. Laxman emphasized personal awareness when he mentioned "It depends on the individual's understanding level; conflict often stems from perception rather than the issue itself."

These conversations are very similar to literature in organizational theory, which identifies communication breakdowns, hierarchical pressures, and political interference as recurring sources of workplace conflict (Kondalkar, 2006; Deutch et al., 2011). In Nepali schools, cultural norms emphasizing harmony further add to these dynamics by discouraging open confrontation, often leading to suppressed conflict (Marin, Olekalns, & Adair, 2019).

Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Leaders across both public and private schools used contextually grounded strategies ranging from empathetic mediation to structured interventions when dealing with conflict. Sita advocated careful listening and planning, believing that mutual understanding can often prevent escalation. She said "When people truly understand each other, conflicts often resolve before they grow." Ram further emphasized proactive identification of disputes and transparent, auditable administrative processes, while Laxman and Bharat prioritized immediate intervention, combining emotional intelligence with procedural clarity. Laxman stated "We personally convince parents, and even after communicating, we intervene and manage directly."

The approaches used by these leaders are similar to transactional and transformational leadership models. Transactional strategies emphasize clear protocols and immediate corrective action, whereas transformational approaches focus on relationship building, empathy, and creating safe spaces for dialogue (Leithwood et al., 2020). The

leaders' strategies reflect the importance of context, resources, and institutional culture in shaping how conflict is approached.

Collaboration and Institutional Support

All leaders highlighted the critical role of collaboration and institutional frameworks in effective conflict management. Bharat stated that "A school cannot run well without cooperation—it is a survival strategy, not a fancy term." This was further emphasized by Sita who talked about shared responsibility when she said "Every staff member must carry the shared mission rather than one person bearing the burden of leadership and conflict management." Participants also identified systemic gaps, calling for structured training, clear policies, and government-supported capacity building. Ram demonstrated that even in the absence of external policy, internalized rules and institutional mechanisms could insulate schools from chaos. These reflections by the participants reminded us of research that emphasize that functional conflict, when supported by collaboration and institutional clarity, can be a source of learning, innovation, and organizational growth (Kondalkar, 2006; Bush & Coleman, 2000).

Making Sense of Conflict through Organizational Theory

The primary learning from this study is that conflict is never an isolated incident, not a series of such incidents. Rather, conflict stems from and is shaped by larger organizational structures and systems, including leadership, communication, work alignment, values, and behaviors. In our study, we have drawn from the lived experiences of four school leaders, and their responses have helped us understand the nature, causes, and intervention towards organizational conflicts.

In this section, we discuss their significance with respect to several theoretical concepts of Organizational Theory and Behavior.

Systemic Outcome of Conflict

The first perspective we discuss is the Systems Perspective which views schools as open systems continuously interacting with their environments (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The major sources of conflicts we identified in this study stem from communication gaps leading to misunderstandings, lack of mutual respect (ego-clash), governance confusion, and community interference. Clearly, small disruption in one aspect of the system directly hampers the overall function of the whole system. In our case, teacher conflict hampers students' learning outcomes, which naturally impacts the school's function and reputation. Nepali schools, especially public schools, are more intensely subjected to systemic vulnerabilities due to blurred boundaries between community politics and internal operations.

Interlink between Leadership and Emotional Intelligence

The four school leaders view themselves as a significant bridge in maintaining emotional balance within the organization. They stated that facilitating calm but active dialogue between disputing parties, showing empathy, and actively listening helps resolve conflicts faster rather than waiting for it to fester and erupt later.

Such an approach to managing conflicts with emotional intelligence is reflective of Goleman's (1995) model of emotional intelligence, where leaders manage their emotions and those of others to facilitate constructive outcomes. Such an approach to leadership is necessary during emotionally intense environments, especially in schools where interpersonal conflict can cause irrevocable damage to teachers' and students' mental health and hamper organizational reputation.

Transformational Leadership as part of Organizational Culture

One of the precursors of positive organizational culture is fair and collaborative leadership. Such leadership helps create safe spaces to discuss and manage conflicts, thereby leading to harmony within the organization. According to Bass (1990), such a leadership model reflects transformational leadership where leaders inspire and motivate others toward a collective mission. For all the participants of our study, leadership was neither authoritative nor centralized power. Rather, it was a relational role bounded by shared purpose and accountability. Yet, they still believed that hierarchical standards exist and one cannot skip abiding by the top-down model that still guides Nepali culture. The only thing that is being done differently, according to the leaders, is making decisions democratic.

Lack of Formal Conflict Resolution Structures

Contingency Theory (Donaldson, 2001) holds that inefficiencies and inconsistencies emerge when organizations lack structure to match their complexity. A severe lack of clear policy and formal training on conflict management was observed in three out of the four schools, especially in public schools, which has led to overreliance on the leaders to resolve conflict at individual capacity using their own personal relations and strategies. Such lack of formal coping mechanism means that conflict resolution is reactive and not strategic.

Conflict as a Learning Opportunity- Current Reality or Future Possibility?

Aligned with Human Relations Theory (Mayo, 1933), this study highlights the possibility of conflict leading to stronger organizational values, communication, and improved relations, but only when managed constructively. This view supports the idea that conflict is not inherently destructive; how organizations respond to conflict determines its outcomes (Rahim, 2002). The leaders we interviewed were not too optimistic about building from destruction, and the primary reason for this was their lack of preparation in managing conflict.

Conclusion

This study used a narrative inquiry approach to examine the everyday conflicts encountered by Nepali school leaders and the strategies they use to negotiate and manage them. The findings illustrate that conflict resolution is shaped not only by institutional structures but also by leaders' personal attributes, relational skills, and the socio-cultural environments in which their schools operate. These insights offer a valuable point of reflection for other school leaders who may compare the experiences shared here with their own practices and identify strategies that support more effective conflict engagement.

Across the four narratives, participants consistently highlighted the absence of clear policies, limited professional preparation, and inadequate institutional support for managing

conflict. These gaps point to an urgent need for structured frameworks, leadership development programs, and targeted capacity-building initiatives that equip school leaders to address conflicts in a systematic and contextually responsive manner.

Importantly, this study reaffirms that conflict, when approached constructively, is not detrimental to school life. With intentional leadership, open communication, and formalized negotiation processes, conflict can evolve into a catalyst for dialogue, innovation, and organizational growth. By embracing conflict as an opportunity rather than a disruption, Nepali educational institutions can strengthen collaboration, enhance leadership effectiveness, and cultivate cultures of continuous improvement.

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