A qualitative study to explore post-primary principals' view of the influence of staff conflict on school culture.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. The research objectives are threefold: to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture; to explore the conflict resolution strategies employed by these principals; and to develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

Utilising a qualitative methodology, the study involved semi-structured interviews with principals to gain in-depth insights into their perspectives and practices. The findings reveal the complex nature of staff conflicts, including their causes, manifestations, and impacts. Principals identified various factors contributing to conflicts, such as personality clashes, differing values, and power dynamics. The study highlights the dual nature of conflicts, with both constructive and destructive outcomes significantly influencing school culture.

The research highlights the importance of socio-emotional support systems for principals, including counselling services, peer support networks, mentorship programs, and professional development workshops focused on emotional intelligence and reflective practices. Additionally, it calls for comprehensive data collection on staff conflicts and regular updates to policies to provide clear guidelines for conflict resolution. By integrating relational leadership and sensemaking theories, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamic processes of leadership and conflict management. This integration emphasises the importance of building trust, fostering open communication, and adapting leadership strategies through reflective practice.

The thesis concludes with practical recommendations for educational policy, including the development of clear conflict resolution policies, mandatory training for principals and staff, and the allocation of resources for support services. The findings highlight the critical role of principals in shaping a positive and inclusive school culture through conflict management. This research contributes valuable knowledge to the field of educational leadership, offering strategies to support principals and enhance the overall school environment, ultimately benefiting both staff and students.

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Table of Acronyms

ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BOM	Board of Management
CEIST	Catholic Education: An Irish Schools' Trust
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
ERST	Edmund Rice Schools Trust
ESRI	The Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education Training Board
ETBI	Education Training Board Ireland
Fórsa	Irish Trade Union for Public Service Staff
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
JMB	Joint Managerial Body Secretariat of Secondary Schools
LAOS	Looking at Our Schools
Le Chéile	Schools Trust
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OIDE	A new support service for teachers and school leaders, funded by the Department of Education
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
WRC	Workplace Relations Commission

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The dynamic and multifaceted nature of staff conflicts within schools weaves intricately into the fabric of their culture. Staff conflict refers to the interpersonal or group tensions that arise from differing values, goals, attitudes, or behaviours among individuals working together, as described by Kostelić et al. (2023), Alfirević et al. (2016), and Thapa (2015). These conflicts are an inevitable result of collaboration within any organisation. A more detailed definition and explanation of the types and sources of conflict, as well as the factors that contribute to them, are presented in section 1.6.

This chapter delves into the nuanced role of school principals in comprehending and managing the complexities of conflict, with empirical evidence indicating that up to 40% of a principal's daily responsibilities are devoted to conflict resolution (Runde 2014). As schools grapple with heightened expectations, demographic shifts, and evolving stakeholder demands, the impact on principals is evident, contributing to burnout and stress-related challenges. The toll on principals is palpable, with a survey by NAPD (2022) revealing alarming statistics of burnout and stress-related medical conditions among principals. The ensuing leadership changes and challenges, coupled with a surge in job re-advertisements (NAPD 2022), underscore the urgency of supporting principals in their demanding roles. This chapter sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture.

1.2 Setting the context

Staff conflicts affect the culture of the school (Kostelić et al. 2023; Alfirević et al. 2016; Thapa 2015). Staff conflict is inevitable, when those who work together have to interact and depend on each other. This research shows that principals shoulder the responsibility of understanding the multifaceted dimensions of conflict in schools and acquiring the skills to manage and address disputes. Other research indicates that a substantial portion, up to 40%, of a principal's daily role is dedicated to handling conflicts, with involvement in up to five disputes per day reported by Runde (2014). Additionally, a study by Bruce et al. (2022) found that 75% of school principals had experienced conflict in their roles. Given the emotional intensity often linked to conflict, immediate leadership intervention

is imperative. Conflict resolution, due to its time-consuming nature, requires prolonged engagement from principals. Consequently, the persistent challenge of conflict demands considerable attention and adept handling from school leadership. As staff conflicts frequently arise from disparities in values, emotions, and opinions, principals, drawing on their skills and training, play a crucial role in managing conflict situations and determining strategies to minimise or address tension among staff. Thus, as it is essential to recognise that conflicts are inherent in human nature, constituting a fundamental aspect of emotional and moral growth, then rather than expecting conflicts to cease, leadership should involve navigating and mitigating their impact within the school environment.

The role of school principals can be incredibly demanding, navigating frequent changes, heightened expectations from various stakeholders, and the diverse needs of students. Indeed, the resulting workplace stress-related sick leaves and premature resignations among school principals have contributed to increased costs within the education sector, with studies by the Economic and Social Research Institute in Ireland showing that stress and psychological risks are significantly prevalent among employees in the education sector (Russell et al. 2018). The rising numbers of principals leaving their roles, not only impact their individual schools negatively, but also have indirect repercussions on the broader education sector. According to a survey by IPPN, from 2018 to 2022, 39% of responding schools experienced leadership changes, with 60% of these cases involving principals leaving before reaching retirement age or transitioning to different roles (2023). Analysis from educationposts.ie indicates that, out of 376 principal job ads placed between September 1, 2021, and August 31, 2022, 60 were re-advertised, representing 16% of all principal postings (IPPN 2023). Indeed, a growing number of principals are finding it increasingly challenging to manage the extensive and intricate demands of their daily responsibilities (Riley 2019; 2015a; 2015b), with a survey conducted by NAPD in 2022 revealing alarming statistics: two-thirds of principals and deputy principals experienced burnout due to stress, with 39% diagnosed with stress-related medical conditions. This marked a significant increase from 2015, with 40% reporting the need for prescription medication in 2022 compared to 18% in 2015 (NAPD 2022). In light of the high turnover among post-primary principals and the noted issues regarding the low application rates and job readvertisements for the principal position (Coolahan et al. 2017), supporting principals in their role has become increasingly critical. A significant contributor to these statistics is the challenge of dealing with staff conflict, which adds to the complex demands that principals face daily.

In this thesis, school culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms and behaviours that shape the daily interactions and overall environment within a school. It represents how members of the school community, including principals, staff, and students, understand and enact their roles, guiding their actions and relationships. School culture is not static; it evolves over time, influences by the experiences and interactions within the school. A more detailed exploration of school culture is provided in section 1.6.

As noted, how schools navigate, and address conflict is a pivotal aspect of their culture (Schein and Schein 2017; Fehr and Gelfand 2012). Principals play a crucial role in shaping this culture by creating a space where staff can care for others, fostering the development of social capital and social networks (Giles 2018; Thacker 2016; Paul and Riforgiate 2015; Wachtel 2015). The connection between conflict resolution and care is evident when conflicts are managed adeptly, transforming them into stepping stones for potential progress rather than sources of discord. Schools actively engaged in resolving conflicts, not only contribute to a harmonious and positive school climate, but also demonstrate a commitment to cultivating an environment where care for individuals is prioritised (Larasati and Raharja 2020). Moreover, the school culture, shaped by how conflicts are addressed and interpersonal relationships are managed, significantly influences the job satisfaction of staff and their overall perception of their work (Demir 2015). A school's success is not measured by the absence of conflict but by its proficiency in handling conflicts when they arise. This approach, not only nurtures a culture of care and support, but also contributes to a positive working environment where individuals feel valued and respected. Importantly, school culture extends beyond the staff to influence students' academic achievements (Ohlson et al. 2016; Connolly et al. 2011; Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran 2011). Thus, the interplay between conflict resolution, care, and the overall culture within a school creates a holistic educational environment that fosters positive relationships, emotional wellbeing, and academic success for both staff and students.

1.3 Research question and objectives of the study

This study addresses the following overarching question:

How do post-primary principals in Munster construct, interpret and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture?

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture.

2. To explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster, in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture.

3. To develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

1.4 Significance of the study

Longitudinal data sheds light on a discernible imbalance in stress levels among primary and post-primary principals and deputy principals, revealing concerning figures: 29.5% report burnout, 28.2% struggle with sleep difficulties, 23.6% face higher-than-average stress, and 11.5% indicate depressive symptoms (NAPD 2022). Principals wield a central influence in steering their schools, shaping a shared purpose and vision while aligning programs and resources to realise this vision. Existing research strongly argues that leadership significantly enhances students' likelihood of success (Johnston and Williamson 2014; NAPD 2010; Firestone and Riehl 2005; Leithwood and Riehl 2003). These statistics highlight the immense pressure faced by principals, and a significant contributor to this stress is the ongoing challenge of managing and resolving staff conflict.

Each school possesses a unique cultural identity (Cogaltay and Karadag 2016; Hongboontri and Keawkhong 2014), with principals exercising substantial influence over this culture (Huguet 2017; McKinney et al. 2015). This, in turn, impacts staff morale, subsequently influencing student learning (Aldridge and Fraser 2016; Cogaltay and Karadag 2016). As such, the assertion is made that relying solely on formal policies is inadequate to uphold codes of professional conduct. Indeed, as purposeful conversations regarding professional norms are posited as crucial in fostering a positive and collaborative school culture (McEvoy and Smith 2018), the intent of this current research study is to offer nuanced insights to school principals, fostering a deeper understanding of staff conflict and its profound influence on school culture.

Existing research literature on the influence of staff conflict on school culture provides insights into the importance of collaborative relationships within the school context (Liu et al. 2021; Voogt et al. 2016; Balkar 2015; Apaydin and Seckin 2013). However, a critical examination of this literature reveals that it primarily describes what is already known about the significance of these relationships. Researchers indicate that principals hold a

considerable influence over the quality of professional interactions that facilitate and support collaborative exchanges among staff (Chatelier and Van Dermijnsbrugge 2022; Argon 2015; Baglibel et al. 2014). However, this perspective prompts a critical inquiry into the multifaceted nature of these claims and the potential limitations or nuances that may exist within the complex interplay of staff conflict, leadership, and school culture.

Thus, although it is known that staff conflict exists (Bruce et al. 2022; Crossfield and Bourne 2018), it was not known how principals in Munster construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, and that further research is warranted in identification of resolution-focused solutions for staff conflicts in schools (Bruce et al. 2022). Indeed, the field of education could benefit from understanding principals' understanding of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. The lack of scholarly inquiry, as it relates to staff conflict among staff in professional interactions, indicates a need for further study due to the challenges facing education (Asaloei et al. 2020; Reio and Sanders-Reio 2011). This current study aims to delve into this very concept of how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. The utilisation of a school's human resources and its sustainability heavily relies on adept management, a robust cultural fabric, and adaptive leadership in response to changing global conditions (Yukl 2008). Thus, as the progress and evolution of education are intricately linked to supportive policies that significantly shape its trajectory over time (Gocen 2021; Tonich 2021; Shelley and Purzer 2018), these supportive policies need to be identified, with the role they contribute to the progress and evolution of education highlighted.

1.5 Structure of the study

Comprising seven chapters, this study unfolds in a structured manner. After this concise introduction, chapters 2 (policy context), 3 (literature review), 4 (theoretical framework), and 5 (methodology) lay the groundwork by outlining the rationale, context, research design, sample selection, data analysis, ethical framework, and the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Subsequently, the study's findings (chapter 6) and their associated implications and recommendations (chapter 7) are then presented. The subsequent section elaborates on the content within each of these chapters.

Chapter 2

This policy context chapter explores the crucial role of managing staff conflict in shaping a positive school culture within the dynamic landscape of post-primary education in Ireland. Recognising the paramount significance of this aspect, the chapter delves into how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. Emphasising the role of policies in mitigating and addressing staff conflict, the chapter explores their influence on the broader cultural milieu of school settings.

Within the complex educational sector in Ireland, the governance of workplace conflict is intricately linked to a comprehensive legal framework. This framework is shaped by key policy documents, legislative instruments, and overarching principles that guide schools in navigating the intricate dynamics of staff relationships. Despite the robust legal foundation, the chapter highlights the fact that specific information or policies on staff conflict resolution are often addressed in a tangential manner. It argues for the need for explicit and comprehensive policies to address this gap, emphasising their importance in fostering positive workplace relationships and creating an equitable, inclusive, and conflict-resolution-friendly school culture. The chapter further explores the dynamics of school policies on staff conflict and their influence on school culture. It sheds light on existing gaps, recent policy developments, and the role of professional development in preparing principals for conflict resolution. Overall, the chapter provides an examination of the policy context surrounding staff conflict management in post-primary education in Ireland, offering insights into areas that require attention and improvement.

Chapter 3

This literature review chapter is a critical exploration of the interplay between school culture, leadership dynamics, and staff conflict within educational settings. Rooted in organisational theory, sociology, and education, the evolution of the concept of school culture is traced, shaped by influential figures such as McGregor (1960) and Schein (2013). Schools, being unique organisational entities, have seen the dynamic development of school culture theory, influenced by various academic disciplines. Deal and Kennedy's (1983) extension of this framework to educational contexts is highlighted, providing a valuable perspective for analysing and improving school culture.

Simultaneously, the chapter underscores the importance of understanding the evolving landscape of leadership literature, especially for post-primary principals dealing with staff

conflict. Leadership evolving from trait-based models to contemporary approaches, are explored, with a focus on recognising the changing nature of work and emphasising followers, relationships, and situational contexts. The literature review navigates through the evolution of school culture, schools of leadership thought, the concept of conflict, and the specific context of staff conflict within the school setting, offering a comprehensive overview of these interconnected elements.

Chapter 4

This theoretical framework chapter outlines the objectives and overarching approach of a qualitative study aiming to explore how post-primary principals in Munster construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. The study sets three specific objectives: to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture; to explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture; to develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

At the heart of the study is the adoption of the relational leadership theory, which views leadership as a dynamic and social process constructed through interactions. The study emphasises the uniqueness of each post-primary principal, recognising leadership as a nuanced, context-specific, and socially embedded process. Sensemaking theory is integrated into the framework, aiming to explore the cognitive processes through which post-primary principals actively seek and process information during conflicts. The approach acknowledges that sensemaking is not about discovering an absolute truth but understanding actions by searching for meaning, which is particularly relevant in exploring how principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture within the retrospective and ongoing nature of sensemaking.

From a social constructivist perspective, the study recognises that organisations, including schools, are intersubjective realities continuously constructed and enacted through communication and interaction. Post-primary principals, as key decision-makers, play a central role in shaping this intersubjective reality. By focusing on the principal, the study aims to delve deeply into how their experiences contribute to the broader organisational tapestry. Overall, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive and

multi-faceted approach to understanding the complex dynamics of staff conflict, leadership, and school culture within the context of post-primary education in Munster.

Chapter 5

This methodology chapter provides a detailed insight into the research design and approach employed in the study, focusing on exploring the influence of staff conflict on overall school culture. The research design is conceptualised through Saunders et al.'s (2019) research onion, ensuring a systematic and layered approach to the research process. The philosophical foundations are rooted in social constructivism, shaping the ontology, while interpretivism guides the epistemological stance. The chosen methodology is qualitative, utilising semi-structured interviews to uncover the nuanced experiences of school principals.

The chapter also explores the researcher's positionality, offering insights into the lens through which the study is conducted. Ethical considerations underpin the entire research endeavour, with the ethical framework providing a safeguard for the participants. Data analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step reflective thematic analysis approach, ensuring a rigorous exploration of themes emerging from the rich qualitative data. The concept of credibility is discussed, emphasising steps taken to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the study findings.

The methodology is aligned with the principles, concepts, and tenets of the theoretical framework. It emphasises exploring how principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, aligning with the relational leadership theory. The focus on interpretivism resonates with the sensemaking aspect of the theoretical framework, capturing nuanced meanings and interpretations of principals in dealing with staff conflict. Overall, the methodology contributes to the depth and quality of insights garnered from the exploration of principals' experiences of staff conflict on school culture.

Chapter 6

Organised around four central themes – staff conflict, interplay between school culture and conflict resolution, perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship, and reflective practice in the context of staff conflict – the chapter's findings offer nuanced insights derived from the rich tapestry of data collected.

Chapter 7

In the concluding chapter, conclusions are drawn from the process, directly addressing the research question and research objectives. Pivotal insights are outlined, each encapsulating a fundamental area of knowledge crucial in comprehending the dynamics and origins of staff conflict, and its influence on school culture. To address the research question, I consider themes from the literature with the phases of the research process to propose recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture. Additionally, I propose suggestions for future research in the conclusion.

1.6 Definitions

The following definitions provide a concise overview of crucial terms to establish a clear understanding of key concepts that form the foundation of this research, laying the groundwork for more in-depth exploration in subsequent chapters.

Conflict. According to Robbins et al. (2013), conflict begins when one party perceives that another has or is likely to negatively impact something the first party values. Personal and environmental factors influence group members, often leading to conflict (Almost et al. 2010). Conflicts arise due to incompatibility, dissatisfaction, arguments, and discrepancies in preferences, values, goals, and attitudes among organisational employees (Lee et al. 2017). They stem from narrow agreements, personality clashes, bullying, and harassment (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2020). Egerová and Rotenbornová (2021) assert that workplace conflicts can emerge between employers and employees or supervisors and teams.

Conflict resolution. Those navigating the challenging terrain of conflict resolution are acutely aware of the intricate and challenging path they must tread, dealing with individuals who have been impacted by the experience and consequences of conflict. Conflict resolution serves as a comprehensive strategy providing the conflicting parties or mediators with the means to manage or resolve conflicts (Kriesberg and Neu 2018).

Relational leadership theory. As per Uhl-Bien (2006), relational leadership constitutes a social influence mechanism fostering the emergence of coordination, such as evolving social order, and inclusive change encompassing new approaches, attitudes, values, ideologies, and behaviours. The constructionist perspective aims to highlight and unravel relational aspects within contexts, regarding leadership as fundamentally intersubjective

(Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). Relational leadership theory, within the constructionist framework, is defined as a theoretical approach that focuses on the relational processes and collective practices (Ospina et al. 2020). These practices, whether material, embodied, or discursive, involve social actors in constructing and reshaping social order (Crevani and Endrissat 2016; Uhl-Bien 2006).

Sensemaking. It's not solely about absolute truth and correctness but rather the pursuit of understanding by seeking meaning in actions (Weick et al. 2005). Weick et al. posit that sensemaking involves the interplay between action and interpretation rather than being solely influenced by evaluative choices. Sensemaking, an ongoing process, delineates how individuals address ambiguous and unforeseen demands by employing various cognitive frameworks to comprehend their intricate surroundings (Weick 1995). In the realm of school leadership, principals act as sense-makers, adept at flexibly responding within a dynamic environment (Ganon-Shilon and Schechter 2019).

School culture. School culture functions as a network of meanings that exerts influence across every facet of the school environment (Ismail et al. 2022). According to Sabanci et al. (2017), culture, deeply rooted in our societal fabric, is conveyed through our thoughts, beliefs, and actions, profoundly shaping our perceptions and behaviours. School culture encompasses the collective values, beliefs, symbolic representations, and shared comprehension among school members (Karadag and Oztekin-Bayir 2018). This includes shared norms, values, beliefs, and traditions that encapsulate the school's identity and impact the conduct of principals, teachers, and students (Karadag, Kilcoglu and Yilmas 2014). It's a continually evolving entity, aiming to foster a positive, conducive environment for students and staff, with a focus on learning at its core (Prokopchuk 2016). Despite schools sharing similar structures, each school is distinct, possessing its unique symbols, artifacts, traditions, and customs, which mould the values, norms, and beliefs of its members. Hence, each school boasts its individual and distinct culture.

These definitions provide a solid foundation for the subsequent exploration and analysis of these concepts in the literature review and theoretical framework chapters. The choice to focus on these concepts is because of their central role in understanding the influence of staff conflict on school culture.

1.7 Conclusion

In navigating the intricate landscape of staff conflicts and their influence on school culture, this introduction chapter highlights the pressing need to address the challenges faced by school principals. The empirical evidence presented highlights the profound influence of staff conflicts on the wellbeing of principals and the broader educational sector. As the subsequent chapters unfold, a focused study to explore how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture unfolds. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of conflict resolution and school culture, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership, promoting environments where both staff and students thrive.

Chapter 2: Policy Context

2.1 Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of post-primary education in Ireland, the management of staff conflict and its influence on school culture is paramount. Acknowledging this critical aspect, it becomes imperative to explore how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. Central to this exploration is the understanding that policies play a pivotal role in mitigating and addressing staff conflict, consequently shaping the broader cultural milieu of school settings. In the complex landscape of the educational sector in Ireland, the governance of workplace conflict is intricately tied to a comprehensive legal framework. This framework is shaped by key policy documents, legislative instruments, and overarching principles that guide schools in navigating the intricate dynamics of staff relationships. However, it's essential to note that, while there is a robust legal foundation, specific information or policies on staff conflict resolution are often addressed in a tangential manner. While the legal framework and various guidelines provide a robust foundation, the need for explicit and comprehensive policies on staff conflict resolution within the educational sector is apparent. Addressing this gap is crucial for fostering positive workplace relationships and creating a school culture that is equitable, inclusive, and conducive to addressing staff conflicts. The chapter therefore delves into the dynamics of school policies on staff conflict and school culture, shedding light on the existing gaps, recent policy developments, and the role of professional development in equipping principals for addressing staff conflicts.

2.2 Legal framework

It is crucial to contextualise the legal framework that governs workplace conflict within the educational sector. The legal landscape in Ireland is comprehensive, with several key policy documents shaping the parameters within which schools must operate.

Providing a foundation for understanding the legal landscape, the Code of Practice on Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures (Workplace Relations Commission 2015) outlines the procedural guidelines for addressing workplace conflicts, ensuring fair and transparent processes are in place. The Code outlines the steps that should be taken in addressing conflicts, from the initial identification and reporting of an issue, to the investigation, decision-making, and potential appeal stages. By delineating these

processes, the policy aims to instil confidence in employees that their concerns will be taken seriously and addressed in a systematic and just manner. Moreover, the Code highlights the importance of communication throughout the conflict resolution process. It encourages open and honest communication between all parties involved, promoting a collaborative approach to finding resolutions. This emphasis on communication aligns with broader principles of positive workplace culture and is particularly relevant in the context of school settings, where fostering healthy relationships among staff members is crucial for school culture.

Delving into specific legislative instruments, the Employment Equality Acts 1998 – 2015 and the Workplace Relations Act 2015 are pivotal in regulating employment relationships and dispute resolution mechanisms. These acts establish the legal framework for addressing discrimination, harassment, and conflict in the workplace, including school settings. The Employment Equality Acts, 1998 – 2015 prohibit discrimination on nine grounds, including gender, age, and disability, creating a legal foundation for maintaining an inclusive and conflict-free workplace. Simultaneously, the Workplace Relations Act 2015 streamlines and consolidates various workplace relations procedures, offering a comprehensive framework for dispute resolution.

The implications of these laws on school policies are profound. The Code of Practice for the Governance of Education and Training Boards (Department of Education and Skills 2018) outlines the governance expectations for school settings. Within this context, compliance with employment and equality legislation is paramount, shaping school policies to align with the principles of fairness, non-discrimination, and adherence to due process. Furthermore, the Guidelines on the Equality Act 2004 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Schools (Department of Education and Skills 2016) highlight the commitment to an inclusive educational environment, reinforcing the need for schools to foster a culture that addresses staff conflict in a manner consistent with the principles of equality. Understanding and integrating these legal frameworks into school policies, not only ensures compliance with national and local laws, but also contributes to the creation of a school culture that is equitable, inclusive, and conducive to conflict resolution.

2.3 Navigating workplace relationships

Before the enactment of the EU Charter of Fundamental Human Rights in 2012, the launch point for defining and safeguarding working conditions was rooted in national and

international policies. Notably, the International Labour Organisation played a pivotal role in setting the stage for workers' rights. The International Labour Organisation Constitution (1919) and subsequent conventions, such as the Labour Inspection Convention C81 (1947) and the Occupational Safety and Health Convention C155 (1981), laid the groundwork for principles addressing workers' health, safety, and dignity. These precursor policies reveal an historical context where the focus primarily rested on the physical aspects of working conditions. The International Labour Constitution, established in the aftermath of World War I, prioritised setting international labour standards, reflecting the urgent need to address the harsh working conditions prevalent during that era. The subsequent conventions detailed below aimed at refining and expanding these standards, reflecting evolving societal norms and technological advancements.

The Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention C187 (2006) emphasises the need for a national system for occupational safety and health that considers technological developments, new working processes, and the diversity of workplaces. It encourages a proactive approach to occupational safety and health, including preventive measures and the involvement of workers and employers in the decision-making process. The convention on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work (adopted in 2019, not yet commenced), and its accompanying recommendation C190 and R206 address the evolving issue of violence and harassment in the workplace, including new forms of harassment facilitated by technology. It emphasises the right of everyone to work in an environment free from violence and harassment and provides a framework for prevention and response. These conventions demonstrate the International Labour Organisation's commitment to adapting to the changing nature of work and the challenges posed by technological advancements. They address, not only physical aspects of working conditions, but also broader issues related to rights and dignity of workers in the context of evolving societal norms. However, despite these landmark advancements, the persistent challenges identified in sectors like education, as highlighted by research (Ariza-Montes et al. 2016; Fahie 2014; 2013; ESRI 2007), show the need for continued policy evolution. The emphasis on workplace relationships, conflicts, incivility, and bullying as significant factors impacting the health and wellbeing of workers in Ireland points to a gap that historical policies did not fully address. Bullying differs from interpersonal conflict in that it is characterised by a pattern of repeated behaviours over an extended period of time, whereas conflict and aggression can manifest in a single

interaction (Einarsen et al. 2009). The EU Charter, with its Article 31 (2000) mandating the cultivation of a culture of respect, marks a shift towards a more comprehensive approach, acknowledging the interplay of interpersonal dynamics in shaping working conditions.

The EU Charter of Fundamental Human Rights is a key legal document that outlines the fundamental rights protected within the European Union. It was officially proclaimed in Nice in December 2000 and became legally binding with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009. The charter covers a broad range of rights, including civil, political, economic, and social rights. Article 31 (2000) specifically addresses the right to fair and just working conditions. It states that every worker has the right to working conditions that respect his or her health, safety, and dignity, and it also provides for limitations on working hours and rest periods. This article reflects the EU's commitment to ensuring that workers are treated fairly and with dignity in their workplaces. Article 31 mandates the cultivation of respect in the workplace. This implies that the EU Charter goes beyond merely establishing legal rights; it actively promotes a broader cultural shift in how workplaces are managed and how individuals interact within them. Mandating the promotion of a culture of respect signifies an expectation that employers, employees, and other stakeholders actively work towards creating an environment that values and prioritises respectful behaviour.

Article 31 in the EU Charter also represents a shift in the approach to addressing working conditions. Historically, labour policies and regulations may have focused primarily on physical aspects of working conditions, such as safety and hours of work. However, the emphasis on cultivating a culture of respect indicates a recognition of the importance of addressing interpersonal dynamics and the social aspects of the workplace. This shift signifies a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to a healthy and supportive work environment. The EU Charter, through Article 31, acknowledges the interplay of interpersonal dynamics in shaping working conditions. This means recognising that the relationships, interactions, and communication among individuals in the workplace have a significant impact on the overall wellbeing of workers. By acknowledging this interplay, the EU Charter suggests a holistic approach that considers, not only the physical aspects of work, but also the social and psychological dimensions.

The inclusion of Article 31 in the EU Charter represents a commitment to shaping a workplace culture that goes beyond legal requirements, focusing on respect, dignity, and the overall wellbeing of workers. It marks a shift towards a more comprehensive

understanding of working conditions that includes the intricate dynamics of human interactions within the workplace. In conclusion, while the International Labour Organisation's early policies laid a foundational framework for workers' rights, the EU Charter represented a paradigm shift by explicitly recognising the multifaceted nature of working conditions. The ongoing challenges in sectors like education signal the imperative for policymakers to continually reassess and refine policies, ensuring they align with the complexities of modern workplace relationships.

2.4 Department of Education

The Department of Education in Ireland plays a pivotal role in shaping the educational landscape, providing guidelines that influence school management and culture. The Department of Education's guides the foundation for expectations in school management and culture. However, the lack of explicit guidance on staff conflicts in these documents highlights a gap in policy, leaving school principals to navigate these complexities independently. Addressing this gap is crucial for fostering a comprehensive and inclusive approach to school culture and conflict resolution.

Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools

Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools (National Educational Welfare Board 2008) is a foundational document and offers comprehensive guidelines for schools in Ireland to develop and implement codes of behaviour. "These guidelines provide a framework for developing and implementing a code of behaviour in schools. Schools should use these guidelines to develop a code that reflects the needs and values of their own school community" (National Educational Welfare Board 2008, 10). The guidelines serve as a framework for schools, indicating their foundational nature, highlighting the document's purpose in assisting schools in creating codes of behaviour tailored to their specific communities. While primarily focusing on student behaviour, the document implicitly addresses the broader aspect of school culture, emphasising the need for a positive and inclusive environment. "The code of behaviour should be understood and accepted by the school community, pupils, parents and teachers as a statement of the school's commitment to the rights of all its members and the responsibilities of everyone to respect the rights of others" (National Educational Welfare Board 2008, 21). It reveals an approach that is not just about managing student conduct but rather as a broader commitment to the rights and responsibilities of all members of the school community. It suggests an implicit recognition of the document's impact on shaping the overall school

culture. The guidelines recognise that staff behaviour and interactions contribute significantly to the overall culture of the school. "The code of behaviour should outline expected standards of behaviour for all members of the school community, including teachers and other school staff" (National Educational Welfare Board 2008, 8). It directly acknowledges the role of staff in the code of behaviour, recognising that their behaviour is integral to the overall standards, and shows the significant contribution of staff behaviour to the school's culture acknowledged. "The code of behaviour should reflect the principles of natural justice and should include the principles of prevention, intervention, and support" (National Educational Welfare Board 2008, 12). By highlighting the principles of prevention, intervention, and support, the code of behaviour acknowledges the interconnectedness of student and staff conduct. It implies a holistic approach that considers both preventing negative behaviour and supporting positive conduct among all members of the school community. While these guidelines set clear and unflinching standards, particularly in terms of fostering integrity in the school environment, they offer little explicit guidance on managing staff conflict. The document emphasises expectations and norms but does not delve deeply into the complexities of conflict resolution among staff. As a policy document, it lacks direct tools or frameworks for principals to navigate the often-challenging terrain of interpersonal staff conflicts. While the commitment to a positive and inclusive environment is evident, its utility in addressing staff conflict, beyond setting standards of behaviour, remains limited.

The Teaching Council

The Teaching Council Acts (2006; 2001) brought an important development to the profession of teaching in Ireland. As outlined in the Acts, the establishment of the Teaching Council aimed to create, revise, and uphold codes of professional conduct for teachers, encompassing teaching standards, knowledge, skills, and competencies (2001). The council's fundamental values include education quality, collaboration, collegiality, and cooperation. Functioning as a statutory body, the Teaching Council operates through a self-regulation model outlined in the Code of Professional Conduct (2007), later updated in 2016. This framework seeks to foster a professional teaching approach acknowledging the leadership role inherent in all teachers. Emphasising the expansive role of a teacher, extending beyond the classroom walls, the code stresses the significance of collaboration with colleagues, parents, management, and external agencies to deliver high-quality education. The Teaching Council Code of Professional Conduct (2016) serves as a guiding framework for school principals in their tasks and decision-making

processes. This encompasses navigating professional relationships, making decisions aligned with the best interests of students, and addressing conflicts among staff members. However, it's notable that the Code does not explicitly address staff conflicts, leaving a gap in its coverage of this specific aspect. While the document emphasises collaboration and positive relationships, explicit attention to conflict is not apparent. The absence of direct guidance on how to address staff conflict within the educational setting shows a gap in the policy. A relevant excerpt from the Code emphasises the importance of school principals to "seek to develop positive relationships with pupils/students, colleagues, parents, school management and others in the school community, that are characterised by professional integrity and judgement" (The Teaching Council 2016, 10). While the Code outlines agreed standards for professional values and conduct, it does not explicitly delve into the nuances of handling staff conflicts. Here, school principals, being educational leaders, are expected to comprehend and adhere to these standards, particularly in the context of managing staff conflicts, where ethical and professional conduct is crucial. The Code underscores collaboration with other staff members, emphasising the need to "work in a collaborative manner with ... other members of staff ... in seeking to effectively meet the needs of pupils/students" (The Teaching Council 2016, 8). In summary, the Teaching Council's Code of Professional Conduct (2016) plays a vital role as a live document guiding school principals. It establishes standards for professional values, conduct, and relationships. However, the absence of explicit guidance on staff conflicts leaves room for interpretation and adaptation by school principals in managing these specific challenges within the broader context of ethical and professional conduct. This flexibility also may be seen as a positive aspect, allowing principals to tailor their conflict management strategies to the unique needs of their schools, while still adhering to overarching professional standards.

The Teaching Council Code of Professional Conduct serves as a foundational framework that guides the leadership expectations of post-primary principals. Incorporating these principles into their leadership practices can significantly contribute to creating a positive school culture and influence how staff conflicts are managed within the school environment. In summary, these Department of Education guidelines provide a foundational understanding of the expectations for school management and culture. While not explicitly addressing staff conflict, they form the backdrop against which post-primary principals can navigate the complexities of conflict resolution and contribute to the broader goal of thinking about and cultivating a positive and inclusive school culture.

2.5 School policies on staff conflict and school culture

While some schools may have informal mechanisms for dealing with staff conflicts, the lack of a dedicated and standardised policy is a notable gap. The absence of a specific policy may lead to inconsistencies in how conflicts are managed across different schools. Hence the need to conduct a qualitative study to explore how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture could shed light on whether schools currently lack or possess explicit policies on this matter. This commitment to influencing positive school culture is also notably shared among ACCS, JMB, ETBI, ASTI, FORSA, and TUI in schools. This commitment aims to promote personal integrity and dignity within school settings.

The Dignity in the Workplace Policy draws on provisions from the Labour Relations Commission Codes of Practice and the Health and Safety Authority Code of Practice, focusing on the prevention and resolution of workplace bullying. The responsibility for maintaining a workplace free from bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment primarily falls on management, with specific emphasis on Boards of Management and school principals. These entities are urged to provide information, set positive examples, offer training, promote awareness, remain vigilant, and ensure fair treatment for both complainants and respondents. The Dignity in the Workplace Policy, although comprehensive in addressing issues such as bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment, notably does not encompass the specific realm of staff conflict.

This Dignity in the Workplace policy defines workplace bullying as repeated inappropriate behaviour, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical, or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another or others at the place of work and/or in the course of employment. This behaviour could reasonably be regarded as undermining the individual's right to dignity at work. An isolated incident is not considered bullying, but it may still be an affront to dignity at work. Examples of bullying behaviours include exclusion with negative consequences, giving impossible deadlines, verbal abuse/insults, intimidation, aggression, and excessive monitoring of work. Harassment is defined as any form of unwanted conduct related to discriminatory grounds (e.g., sexual orientation, age, civil status, religion, disability, etc.), which has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity and creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment for the person. Harassment includes acts, requests, spoken words, gestures, or the production/display of written material. Examples of

harassment behaviours include verbal harassment, written harassment, physical harassment, intimidatory harassment, visual displays, excessive monitoring of work, isolation, or exclusion from social activities. Sexual harassment is defined as any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that violates a person's dignity, creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. This includes acts, requests, spoken words, gestures, or the production/display of written material. Examples of sexual harassment behaviours include physical conduct of a sexual nature, verbal conduct of a sexual nature, non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature, and gender-based conduct.

The policy emphasises the importance of maintaining a workplace free from bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment, and it provides a clear procedure for making and addressing complaints. It also outlines both informal and formal resolution methods, encourages mediation, and sets a time limit for making complaints. Additionally, the policy includes examples of behaviours that do not constitute bullying, harassment, or sexual harassment. It emphasises that an isolated incident of inappropriate behaviour, fair criticism of an employee's performance, reasonable discipline arising from proper management, legitimate management responses in crisis situations, and complaints related to reasonable instructions or work duties are not categorised under these forms of misconduct. The intention is to differentiate between actions that might be challenging or uncomfortable but fall short of meeting the policy's criteria for specific workplace misconduct. This distinction aims to guide employees and stakeholders in understanding what does not qualify as bullying, harassment, or sexual harassment according to the defined policy parameters.

As of November 2023, post-primary schools have been issued with updated guidance and templates for policies on Staff Anti-Bullying, and Harassment and Sexual Harassment. These two policies replace the former Dignity in the Workplace policy. The Anti-Bullying policy is constructed in line with The Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Prevention and Resolution of Bullying at Work (2021), jointly developed by the Health and Safety Authority and the Workplace Relations Commission. While the Harassment and Sexual Harassment Policy adheres to the guidelines laid out in the Code of Practice on Sexual Harassment and Harassment at Work (2022), released by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. Section 26 of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 mandates employers to consult employees on health and safety matters, a requirement explicitly stated in both codes of practice.

The Staff Anti-Bullying policy introduces several distinctive features and additions aimed at fostering a safe and respectful working environment. Noteworthy elements include a strong preventative focus, emphasising employees' duties to maintain a workplace where diversity is valued, and everyone is treated with dignity. The policy prioritises early intervention, promoting local-level resolution through mediation. It aligns with the Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Prevention and Resolution of Bullying at Work (2021), addressing workplace bullying specifically and excluding harassment and sexual harassment covered by separate policy. The inclusion of cyberbullying is highlighted, encompassing digital means like social media, texts, and online platforms. Additionally, the policy provides clear definitions of bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment, along with explicit examples and a two-stage complaint procedure, encouraging mediation for conflict resolution. The roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders, such as complainant, respondent, management, employees, contact person, and nominated person, are defined to ensure a comprehensive approach to addressing workplace bullying. This policy reflects a commitment to statutory health and safety obligations, promoting a positive workplace culture and emphasising fair and confidential treatment for all parties involved in complaints.

The Harassment and Sexual Harassment Policy represents a comprehensive commitment to fostering a safe working environment free from all forms of harassment. The policy introduces distinctive elements that emphasise prevention, early intervention, and resolution through mediation. It acknowledges the devastating impact of harassment and sexual harassment on individuals' health, morale, and performance, and recognises the adverse consequences for both employees and the organisation. One distinctive feature is the strong preventative focus, highlighting the responsibility of all employees to maintain a respectful working environment where diversity is valued. The policy promotes early intervention and resolution at the local level, emphasising mediation as a vital tool in addressing complaints. This proactive approach aims to minimise distress and restore workplace relationships, fostering a positive and inclusive culture.

The policy extends beyond traditional boundaries, covering harassment and sexual harassment not only within the workplace but also during employment-related activities outside the workplace, such as school trips and events. This broad scope reflects a commitment to addressing inappropriate behaviour in various contexts, ensuring a comprehensive approach to maintaining a respectful environment. Furthermore, the policy is grounded in the Code of Practice on Sexual Harassment and Harassment at Work

(2022) issued by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, aligning with established legal frameworks. This alignment enhances the policy's credibility and provides a clear framework for assessing and addressing complaints on an individual basis.

The inclusion of a specific section on bullying, along with its definition and examples, demonstrates the policy's commitment to addressing various forms of inappropriate behaviour comprehensively. By distinguishing between bullying and harassment, the policy offers clarity on differentiating behaviours, ensuring that each is appropriately addressed through the relevant policy and procedures. The emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders, including complainants, respondents, management, employees, and a designated contact person, outlines a collaborative approach to preventing and addressing harassment. It underscores the importance of fostering a positive workplace culture, with management playing a key role in setting an example and actively addressing complaints while ensuring fairness and confidentiality. Finally, the policy's inclusion of a mediation process as a confidential and voluntary means of resolving complaints stands out as a progressive approach. Encouraging parties to consider mediation early in the process, and its availability even during or after formal investigation, reflects a commitment to finding resolutions that minimise conflict and stress for all involved parties. The Harassment and Sexual Harassment Policy introduces distinctive elements such as a strong preventative focus, a broad scope, alignment with legal frameworks, comprehensive definitions, and a commitment to mediation. These features collectively contribute to creating a safe and inclusive working environment and addressing inappropriate behaviour.

The updated post-primary school policies on Staff Anti-Bullying and Harassment and Sexual Harassment, implemented in November 2023, reflect a proactive commitment to fostering a safe and respectful working environment. The Staff Anti-Bullying policy focuses on prevention, early intervention, and clear definitions, with an emphasis on cyberbullying. It outlines roles and responsibilities comprehensively, aligning with statutory health and safety obligations. The Harassment and Sexual Harassment Policy extends beyond traditional boundaries, emphasising prevention, early intervention, and mediation. Its broad scope, alignment with legal frameworks, and commitment to mediation contribute to creating a positive and inclusive workplace culture, with both policies collectively addressing various forms of inappropriate behaviour and underscore the importance of collaboration and confidentiality in resolving complaints.

2.6 Staff professional development policies

Staff professional development policies play a crucial role in shaping the skills, practices, and attitudes of educators. Examining policies related to staff professional development reveals insights into the commitment of schools to equip their staff with the necessary skills for conflict resolution and communication. Understanding the pivotal role of ongoing staff training in preventing and managing conflicts is essential. Staff professional development policies play a crucial role in shaping the skills, practices, and attitudes of educators. Examining policies related to staff professional development reveals insights into the commitment of schools to equip their staff with the necessary skills for conflict resolution and communication. Research by Fullan (2007) and Day (2017) shows the importance of continuous professional development in fostering a positive school culture and improving staff collaboration. Ongoing training not only enhances teachers' abilities to manage interpersonal challenges but also contributes to the overall wellbeing of the school environment. Understanding the pivotal role of ongoing staff training in preventing and managing conflicts is essential, as it empowers educators with communication tools and strategies to address conflicts before they escalate, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious school culture.

Continuous learning guarantees that educators remain updated on the latest best practices in interpersonal dynamics and conflict resolution strategies. Furthermore, the significance of ongoing professional development is highlighted by the Wellbeing in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion policy (Department of Education 2013). These guidelines emphasise a holistic approach to staff wellbeing, recognising that conflicts have the potential to impact mental health. In this context, continuous training in conflict resolution and communication skills emerges as a proactive and strategic measure to support the wellbeing of staff members. By investing in these skills, the school not only equips its staff to manage conflicts but also contributes to creating an environment that nurtures positive mental health.

The establishment of the Centre for School Leadership in September 2014, through a partnership between IPPN/NAPD and the Department of Education, marked a transformative step. This initiative presented a unique opportunity for developing a comprehensive continuum of professional development specifically tailored for school principals. The shared objective was for the Centre to evolve into a recognised centre of excellence for school leadership. The Centre for School Leadership's responsibilities

extended across the entire spectrum of leadership development, from pre-appointment training to the induction of newly appointed principals, and through continuous professional development throughout their careers. The Centre also played a key role in advising the Department of Education on policy in this crucial area of ongoing professional development, particularly in leadership roles within schools. CSL has recently been dissolved and its work subsumed by Oide, providing professional learning supports as provided by CSL, and other organisations including JCT, NIPT and PDST.

In 2018, research undertaken by the Centre of School leadership entitled: School Leadership in Ireland and the Centre for School Leadership: Research and Evaluation (2018) showed that managing staff conflict and related organisational challenges were identified as critical areas for professional development needs among school principals in Ireland. Conflict management and resolution was identified by 34.8% of participants as the top area requiring continuous professional development (2018). Managing challenging behaviours was the second most indicated critical area identified by 32.2% of participants, with conflict management / resolution and dealing with challenging behaviours consistently highlighted as a critical area, showing the prevalence of such issues in school settings, as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Top 20 "critical" areas for professional development

(Source: CSL 2018)

The data in the table above shows that staff conflict is a significant area requiring attention in the professional development of school principals, reflecting an awareness of the complexities of leading a school setting, including dealing with staff conflicts. Staff members, equipped with the latest insights from continuous training, are better positioned to navigate interpersonal dynamics and employ conflict resolution strategies, fostering a harmonious and positive atmosphere. Research by Timperley et al. (2007) highlights that professional development directly enhances teachers' ability to apply conflict resolution techniques. This research reinforces the idea that continuous training is critical in building the capacity of staff to deal with conflicts constructively, contributing to school culture. The 2018 research conducted by the Centre for School Leadership identified staff conflict and related organisational challenges as key areas where school principals need professional development, highlighting important implications for leadership practices. The identification of conflict management and resolution as the top critical area for professional development reflects a heightened awareness of the challenges school principals face in dealing with staff conflicts.

The Department of Education introduced an Employee Assistance Service for school staff in recognised post-primary schools in 2020, which became permanent in 2022 as part of an Occupational Health Strategy. The aim of this strategy is to "promote the health of employees in the workplace, with a focus on prevention rather than cure" (Department of Education and Skills 2022). There has been a global shift towards recognising the importance of mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. As societal attitudes evolve, organisations, including school settings, are acknowledging the need to address the mental health of their employees proactively. The field of education has undergone significant changes and challenges, especially in recent times, with factors such as workloads, changing teaching methodologies, and the impact of external events like the COVID-19 pandemic prompting a re-evaluation of support structures for education professionals. This emphasis on prevention rather than cure, as stated in the Occupational Health Strategy, suggests a forward-looking and holistic approach to employee wellbeing and understanding that addressing issues at their roots is important in maintaining a healthy work environment. The policy emerged as a response to a combination of factors, including societal shifts in attitudes towards mental health, specific findings from reports like the CSL report, and a broader understanding of the changing landscape of the education sector. The aim to promote health in the workplace and focus on prevention suggests a strategic and comprehensive approach to supporting employees in the

education sector. The service provides advice to employees on a range of issues including conflict and mediation. In essence, ongoing support for staff extends beyond a routine educational practice; it becomes an integral element in realising the broader vision outlined in the document. Through this proactive approach, the school, not only addresses conflicts, but also prioritises the overall wellbeing of its staff, fostering a positive and supportive school culture.

It is noteworthy to mention that as of now, there haven't been direct policy decisions made in relation to prioritising staff conflict as a specific continuous professional development need. In fact, the absence of a policy supporting school principals in this particular endeavour underscores a crucial gap in the existing framework. This specific issue, related to staff conflict, has not been allocated a dedicated professional learning budget or other financial supports. The gap in policy decisions and financial support for addressing staff conflict thus signals an area that warrants attention and strategic planning and further emphasises the need for explicit policies recognising the importance of ongoing training in conflict resolution for staff and the crucial role school principals play in fostering a positive school culture. With the above in mind, allocating a specific continuous professional development budget would, not only acknowledge the significance of addressing staff conflict, but would also provide tangible support for the practical implementation of training initiatives, contributing to the overall wellbeing of the school community.

2.7 The dynamics of post-primary principalship

The role of the principal in post-primary schools in Ireland is shaped by a combination of policy documents and legislative acts. In a post-primary school context, daily operations are governed by a plethora of legislation, including The Constitution of Ireland, statutory laws such as the Education Acts, Education Welfare Act, Safety Health and Welfare Legislation, Equal Status Acts, Teaching Council Acts, Children First Act, and Employment Legislation. Furthermore, schools must adhere to procedures outlined in numerous circulars from the Department of Education, averaging around one hundred circulars annually. In addition, there are policies specific to each school, which comply with the law and department guidelines. Understanding and navigating this multifaceted legal and policy landscape is crucial for post-primary principals as they address staff conflicts. This understanding is vital to ensure that the resolution processes align with existing laws and policies governing workplace dynamics, promoting fairness, adherence

to regulations, and the wellbeing of the school community. It enables principals to make informed decisions, implement appropriate conflict resolution strategies, and create a work environment that fosters professionalism and positive relationships among staff members.

Aligned with global trends, the concept of school leadership has evolved significantly over time. Initially referred to as headship, the term principalship, gained formal recognition when circular 06/73 (Department of Education 1973) outlined the functions of a principal. This moment marks the foundation of the contemporary understanding of school leadership in Ireland, as noted by Humphries et al. (2023), O' Hanlon (2008), and Herron (1994). While interpretations of the principal's role as both leader and manager have shifted within varying management and governance structures, documentation on these developments remains limited. In 1973, the role of the principal in Ireland encompassed various roles and responsibilities, encompassing administrative, instructional, and community-oriented responsibilities. The principal played a pivotal role in maintaining student discipline, overseeing staff, and ensuring compliance with rules and regulations. The principal's active engagement in community and parental relations highlights the significance of cultivating a positive partnership between the school and its community. This commitment to various aspects of school functioning highlights the principal's pivotal role, as outlined by the Department of Education in 1973.

A pivotal moment followed with the publication of the OECD's 1991 Report Review of National Education Policies in Ireland. This report served as a catalyst for many of the changes and goals outlined in the subsequent Green Paper Education for a Changing World (1992). The Green Paper highlighted the principal's role in ensuring teaching quality, with an emphasis on providing support to teachers facing challenges. The document also highlighted principles such as equality of access, the nexus between education and enterprise culture, cost-efficiency, adaptation to environmental changes, quality assurance, accountability, and the imperative of greater transparency. The official introduction of the language of leadership occurred in the Green Paper Education for a Changing World (Department of Education 1992), marking a notable shift in discourse. This linguistic shift persisted in subsequent policy documents. The 1995 White Paper Charting Our Education Future, further accentuated the importance of career development for teachers and staff development initiatives. It stressed the necessity for teachers to be adaptable to a changing society and proposed widespread continuous professional development as a means to achieve this goal.

Several key policy developments reflect these priorities, in particular that of school leadership. This included one of the key recommendations from the OECD (2007) was that for developments within school leadership policy to take effect, a greater degree of autonomy needed to be afforded to schools and principals. Identified skills gaps among principals included change management, finance, people management, and political and interpersonal skills. The Independent Study into School Leadership Main Report suggested a need for leadership development to address evolving challenges, with a lack of skills in areas such as interpersonal communication and change management contributing to conflicts within the school (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2007). Since the mid-1990s, nearly all countries participating in the Improving School Leadership initiative had introduced or reinforced training and development programs for principals. These programs served the dual purpose of preparing individuals for entry into the principal role and enhancing the skills of current principals (Huber and West 2002). Upon assuming their positions, principals may not possess the necessary competence as pedagogical leaders, often lacking knowledge in personnel management (Pont et al. 2008). The imperative for leadership training and development is highlighted by research conducted in various sectors, including private businesses and other fields: Challenges encountered by leaders in business and education exhibit significant parallels, emphasising the crucial role of professional development in addressing these challenges (Pont et al. 2008).

While the policy documents identified don't address staff conflict, the importance of promoting collegiality among teachers, and creating a cohesive management unit between the principal and deputy-principal, is most certainly highlighted. Indeed, as principals significantly influence the school culture, shaping educational aims, developing curriculum policies, and creating supporting structures, good leadership is identified as a key characteristic of successful schools, involving instructional leadership, a supportive school climate, and clear goals:

> Perhaps one of the strongest themes to emerge from this existing literature on effective school leadership (as well, incidentally, as studies on leadership in the private sector), relates to the importance of developing staff, nurturing talent … professionals throughout the organisation are genuinely engaged and can influence its culture, ethos and strategic direction (Department for Education and Skills 2007).

The papers show the collaborative effort required among various stakeholders in the school community to develop and implement policies on behaviour and bullying with a whole school approach. It highlights the need for cooperation between boards of

management, teachers, parents, and students, and the ongoing evaluation of existing codes to improve practices. The White Paper of 1995 Charting our Education Future (Government of Ireland 1995), subsequently informed and led to the Education Act (1998) and Education Welfare Act (2000). These Acts still represent the current legislative framework for schools, management, teachers, and principals, as well as other partners in education.

The multifaceted legal and policy landscape, including various legislative acts and policies, plays a crucial role in shaping the environment in which post-primary principals operate. Understanding and navigating this complex framework are highlighted as crucial for post-primary principals as they address staff conflicts, ensuring that resolution processes align with existing laws and policies governing workplace dynamics. The historical context of the principal's role, evolving from headship to principalship presented, emphasising the multifaceted responsibilities encompassing administrative, instructional, and community-oriented roles. The importance of the principal's role in maintaining student discipline, overseeing staff, and fostering positive partnerships between the school and its community shows the impact on school culture. The shift in discourse towards leadership, as evidenced by policy documents like the OECD's 1991 Report and subsequent Green Paper, reflects the changing perceptions of the principal's role and its impact on school culture. The policy developments and recommendations from the OECD (2007) emphasise the need for leadership development to address evolving challenges among principals, including skills gaps in areas such as interpersonal communication and change management. The acknowledgment of identified skills gaps contributing to conflicts within the school indicates a potential focus area for recommendations and approaches to address staff conflicts. The emphasis on promoting collegiality among teachers, creating a cohesive management unit, and the importance of leadership in shaping educational aims and policies all contribute to fostering a positive and conducive educational environment. The comprehensive context underlines the intricate legal and policy framework within which post-primary principals operate, traces the historical evolution of the principal's role, and highlights key policy developments emphasising the need for leadership and autonomy. These elements directly align with the current study's objectives of examining the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster on staff conflict on school culture; exploring conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture; developing recommendations and approaches that will

contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

Education Act 1998 and 2012

The statutory framework set out by the Education Act 1998 and 2012 (Government of Ireland) formalised the role of the principal, these responsibilities influence how principals manage conflicts, shaping the overall culture of the school. Based on the responsibilities set out in the Act, there were primarily two important dimensions to the role; that of leadership and management. The leadership role was set out in terms of teaching and learning whereby the principal was to assume "...responsibility in accordance with this Act for the instruction provided for students in the school and shall contribute, generally, to the education and personal development of students in the school" (Government of Ireland 1998). This was to be conducted with the teachers to promote co-operation with the community, signalling a collaborative dimension (Government of Ireland 1998). In terms of the management function, the principal was to be responsible for the day-to-day management of the school including the guidance and direction of the teachers and staff and be accountable to the Board of Management. Providing leadership in relation to this function with regard to staff, students and other members through the creation of a school environment supportive of learning was also included in this section (Government of Ireland 1998). Commitment was also given to leadership development in the White Paper (Department of Education 1995), stating that by end of the decade all school principals will have participated in, and be part of, development programmes (Department of Education 1995). These development programmes were actively followed up with the setting up of the Leadership Development for Schools Programme in 2002, positively supported by significant numbers in leadership posts (Morgan and Sugrue 2008).

It is noteworthy that, before the 1990s, there was scant documentation on school leadership, whether from a policy or research standpoint. Sugrue (2003) highlights the global evolution of the school principal's role, shifting from predominantly administrative in the pre-1970s era to predominantly managerial in the 1970s and 1980s. Presently, there is a growing recognition that the role encompasses both leadership and managerial functions. Similar developments have been observed in Ireland. The Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998) marked a turning point by delineating, for the first time, the responsibilities of school principals within a framework of leadership and management. This legislation formalised school leadership as a vital element in the

education policy framework, replacing previous ad hoc arrangements with formal and statutory authority. A notable shift in tone regarding the principal's role is evident when comparing the 1973 provision (Department of Education) to that of the Education Act (1998). The former leans towards discipline, control, and supervision, while the latter adopts a more developmental and consultative approach, incorporating leadership as a central element in the discourse. The language of leadership was previously absent. This evolving nature of the principal's role sets the context in understanding how principals manage staff conflict and its influence on school culture.

The Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998) is significant in shaping the role and responsibilities of school principals. The statutory footing given to the principal's role includes leadership and management dimensions. The leadership role emphasises responsibility for instruction, contribution to education, and personal development in collaboration with teachers and the community. The management function involves the day-to-day management of the school, guidance of teachers and staff, and accountability to the Board of Management. Leadership development is also emphasised in the White Paper (Department of Education 1995), and this commitment is reflected in the establishment of the Leadership Development for Schools Programme in 2002. The examination of staff conflict aligns with the leadership and management dimensions outlined in the Education Act. Examining conflict is crucial for management and collaborative leadership. The exploration of principals' experiences on the influence of staff conflict relates directly to their role in contributing to education, personal development, and creating a supportive school environment. It touches upon the collaborative dimension emphasised in the Act. The aim of developing recommendations for ways of addressing staff conflicts is in line with the commitment to leadership development. It recognises the evolving role of principals from administrative and managerial functions to encompassing leadership responsibilities, as outlined in the Education Act. The Education Act forms the legislative basis for the principal's role, emphasising leadership, collaboration, and management. The research aims align with these legislative principles by focusing on developing recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflict within the framework of the principal's responsibilities as outlined in the Act.

2.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this exploration of policy context has painted a rich and nuanced portrait of the challenges, responsibilities, and opportunities within the education sector. It calls for a comprehensive approach to supporting school principals, acknowledging their multifaceted roles, and emphasises the critical need for the development of recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, a holistic and collaborative approach is paramount in fostering environments that not only meet the educational needs of students but also prioritise the wellbeing and professional development of educators. Addressing staff conflict is a multifaceted challenge, requiring explicit policies, ongoing professional development, and a deep understanding of the evolving role of post-primary principals within the intricate educational landscape.

Chapter 3: **Literature Review**

3.1 Introduction

This chapter undertakes an examination of conflict within educational context. This includes an exploration of the concept of conflict with, an analysis of staff conflict within the education sector, the consequences of staff conflict, strategies for conflict management, and the intersection of conflict with school culture. By engaging with these themes, this study aligns with its overarching research aims: to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture; to explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture; to develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture. Through this exploration, the chapter aims to provide a nuanced exploration of how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture.

3.2 Exploring the concept of conflict

Conflict within school settings is a complex phenomenon with far-reaching implications for organisational culture (Owens and Hekman 2016). In the context of post-primary schools, conflicts among staff members can significantly influence the school culture, impacting teaching practices, student experiences, and organisational dynamics. Therefore, understanding the concept of conflict and its application within school settings is essential for principals tasked with managing these conflicts and shaping school culture. This overview seeks to explore the concept of conflict and its relevance to the study, which aims to examine how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture in the Munster region of Ireland. By delving into conflict, insights are provided into the nature of staff conflicts experienced by principals, these conflicts' influence on school culture, and the development of strategies for conflict resolution and organisational development.

The following explores a range of conflict management models that offer invaluable insights and perspectives relevant to this study. Together, these models provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities of conflict within school settings and highlight school strategies for addressing such conflicts.

Thomas and Kilman identified five conflict management strategies for addressing conflicts: competition, collaboration, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating (Wood and Bell 2008). These strategies vary in their levels of cooperation and assertiveness, offering a spectrum of approaches for addressing conflicts within organisational settings. A principal might use a collaborative approach when seeking to foster team cohesion and trust, encouraging all parties to contribute toward a mutually beneficial solution. Conversely, in situations where decisive actions is required, a more competitive strategy may be appropriate.

The Dual Concern Model, as proposed by social psychologists, Pruitt and Carnevale (1993), offers valuable insights into the complexities of conflict resolution by examining the interplay between assertiveness and cooperativeness. This model suggests that individuals involved in conflicts must balance their concerns for self-interest with their considerations for the interest of others. Principals often find themselves navigating conflicts that involve balancing their assertiveness in addressing individual concerns with their cooperativeness in maintaining positive relationships and achieving collective goals within the school community. By examining how post-primary principals apply the Dual Concern Model, we gain valuable insights into the specific strategies they use to resolve staff conflicts while simultaneously preserving the school's culture. However, the Dual Concern Model may oversimplify the complexities of conflict dynamics by assuming a clear dichotomy between assertiveness and cooperativeness. Despite this limitation, the model serves as a framework to navigate conflicts, ensuring that the needs of both individuals and the school community are considered.

Conflict escalation and de-escalation align with the research aims of examining staff conflicts and developing conflict resolution approaches. Developed by social psychologist Friedrich Glasl in the 1980s, the conflict escalation model outlined a sequence of stages through which conflicts typically evolve, from latent issues to overt, escalating, and potentially destructive encounters. Understanding these stages is essential for post-primary principals in anticipating and addressing conflicts before they escalate and adversely affect school culture. Additionally, the de-escalation model, as highlighted by researchers like Kriesberg and Neu (2018), provide strategies and techniques for managing or reducing conflict intensity within school settings. By applying these concepts, principals can proactively intervene to prevent conflicts from spiralling out of control.

Structural functionalism, as conceptualised by Durkheim (1895) and Cornell and Laumann (2016) offers a lens through which to understand society as a complex system with interconnected parts working together to maintain social equilibrium. This theory sheds light on the interconnected roles of school staff and their collective contributions to maintaining the school's functioning and overall equilibrium. By examining staff conflicts through structural functionalism, insights can be gained into how disruptions in interpersonal relationships or organisational dynamics can impact the smooth functioning of the school community. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing conflicts and preserving the school's culture of collaboration and shared purposed. However, the reality of school dynamics can be more complex than the idealised version presented by structural functionalism, and conflicts may arise due to various factors beyond simple role interconnections. Therefore, while structural functionalism provides a foundational understanding of the interconnectedness of school staff roles, it must be complemented by more nuanced approaches to conflict resolution tailored to the specific challenges faced by post-primary principals, and address staff conflicts in ways that promote social equilibrium and support the overarching goals of the school community.

The concept of social identity, originating from research utilising the minimal group paradigm in the early 1970s by Tajfel et al. (1971), explores how individuals naturally differentiate themselves based on group affiliations and are included to maintain superiority relative to members of other groups, albeit with limited emphasis on individual differences within group affiliations. In the context of post-primary schools, this concept provides insights into how group affiliations among staff members can influence conflicts within the school community. Principals, teachers, and other staff often identify with various groups within the schools, such as departments, grade levels, or extracurricular teams, each with its own norms, values, and perspectives. Conflicts may arise when these group identities clash or when individuals feel threatened by perceived challenges to their group's status or reputation. By understanding the dynamics of social identity within the school setting, principals can address conflicts that stem from divergent perspectives and group affiliations. Strategies such as promoting intergroup cooperation, fostering a sense of shared identity and common purpose, and encouraging open dialogue can help mitigate tensions and cultivate a more collaborative and inclusive educational community.

The concept of resource dependency, developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1977), provides a framework in organisational psychology that explores the link between organisations

and the external resources they rely on to operate. This concept highlights the importance of external resources, such as funding, partnerships, and support from government agencies or the community, in shaping the behaviour and strategies of organisations. In the context of post-primary schools, resource dependency theory is relevant for understanding how conflicts related to resource allocation and external dependencies can influence school culture. Principals often face conflicts over limited resources, whether it's budget allocations, access to facilities, or support services for students. These conflicts can arise from competing demands from different stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and community members, each vying for a share of the resources. By applying the concept of resource dependency, principals can analyse the power dynamics involved in resource allocation decisions and develop strategies to manage conflicts. This may involve building strong relationships with external stakeholders, advocating for additional resources, or finding creative solutions to address resource constraints.

The concept of role, grounded in the work of researchers Ramsden and Landy (2021), posits that individuals naturally adopt and perform roles within social contexts. These roles encompass specific behavioural patterns reflecting particular mindsets, emotions, values, or actions, which evolve and adapt over time through individual experiences. In the context of educational leadership, principals assume multifaceted roles that encompass administrative, instructional, and interpersonal dimensions. However, these roles are not static; they evolve in response to contextual factors, interactions with others, and personal growth. Understanding the dynamics of role enactment is crucial for comprehending how conflicts emerge and unfold within school settings. Principals juggle various roles, such as mediator, decision-maker, and instructional leader, each influencing their responses to staff conflicts and their influence on school culture. The role concept provides a lens through which to analyse how principals navigate these roles amidst conflicts, shedding light on the complexities of their decision-making processes and interpersonal dynamics.

Groupthink, as introduced by Janis (1971), elucidates a behavioural tendency within group dynamics where the pursuit of consensus and cohesion supersedes critical evaluation of alternative viewpoints or potential consequences. This phenomenon, while aimed at maintaining harmony within the group, can stifle creativity, inhibit thorough decision-making, and lead to flawed outcomes. In the context of educational leadership, where collaboration and teamwork are paramount, groupthink poses a significant challenge. Post-primary principals, as leaders of their school communities, must navigate

the delicate balance between fostering a collaborative environment and mitigating the risks associated with groupthink. By understanding the dynamics of group polarisation, wherein group discussions tend to reinforce prevailing attitudes and inclinations, principals can proactively cultivate an atmosphere that encourages diverse perspectives and constructive dissent. This matters in the context of the current study, as it highlights the importance of promoting open dialogue, critical inquiry, and robust decision-making processes among school staff. Indeed, by recognising and addressing the potential pitfalls of groupthink, principals can contribute to the development of recommendations and approaches aimed at fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement within their schools.

Elsewhere, the concept of cognitive dissonance, formulated by Festinger (1950), delves into the discomfort individuals experience when they hold contradictory beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours. At its core, the theory posits that individuals strive for internal consistency, and when faced with conflicting thoughts or actions, they encounter psychological discomfort, known as cognitive dissonance. This is relevant in terms of the current study, as in the realm of educational leadership, cognitive dissonance among staff members can significantly influence school culture. Indeed, when educators grapple with conflicting beliefs or behaviours, it can lead to tension, confusion, and a lack of cohesion within the school community. Principals, as leaders tasked with shaping school culture, must be attuned to these dynamics. Thus, by recognising and addressing cognitive dissonance among staff, principals can foster a more harmonious and coherent educational environment. This clearly is important in the context of the current study since it underscores the importance of understanding the psychological underpinnings of staff conflicts and their implications for school culture. Thus, cognitive dissonance theory provides a valuable lens through which to examine the intricate interplay between staff conflicts and school culture, ultimately informing strategies for conflict resolution and organisational development within post-primary schools.

Another important concept, that of social exchange, rooted in the works of scholars such as Homan (1958), Thibaut and Kelley (1959), Blau (1964), and Adams (1965), offers additional insights into the underlying motivations behind communicative actions within relationships by drawing parallels between relationships and a financial market. At its core, exchange posits that individuals engage in relationships with the expectation of receiving something in return for their investments. This notion suggests that individuals are inherently driven by a desire to enhance their own circumstances while minimising

the effort required to do so. However, while social exchange provides a valuable framework for understanding interpersonal dynamics, its application to staff relationships within educational settings must consider the nuanced complexities inherent in such environments. In the context of the current study, the concept of social exchange is relevant, as it sheds light on the dynamics of staff interactions and their implications for school culture.

While social exchange theory provides valuable insights into the motivations driving staff interactions, understanding these interactions within the broader framework of organisational culture and climate is crucial. This perspective, as articulated by Schein (1985), helps to contextualise the underlying dynamics of staff conflict in school settings, revealing how deeply embedded cultural elements influence relationships and, ultimately, school culture. Organisational culture and climate, according to Schein (1985), offer a comprehensive concept for understanding the dynamics of staff conflict within educational institutions. Schein's model delineates three tiers of organisational culture: visible artifacts and symbols, conscious espoused values, and unconscious, ingrained basic assumptions. These tiers collectively shape the environment in which individuals within an organisation behave and interact. In the context of the current study, understanding the nuances of organisational culture and climate is paramount as it provides insight into the underlying factors contributing to staff conflict and its impact on school culture. Thus, by examining the visible artifacts and symbols present in the school environment, such as communication styles and physical layout, principals can gain a better understanding of the prevailing culture. Additionally, delving into the conscious espoused values, such as mission statements and strategic goals, enables principals to assess the alignment between stated values and actual practices. Furthermore, acknowledging the unconscious, ingrained basic assumptions prevalent among staff sheds light on the deeply rooted beliefs and norms that influence behaviour. By recognising these aspects of organisational culture, principals can develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

In conclusion, the concept of theory provides valuable frameworks for understanding the complexities of staff conflict within educational settings. By examining various concepts of conflicts, including conflict management strategies, the dual concern model, conflict escalation and de-escalation, structural functionalism, social identity, resource dependency, role, groupthink and group polarisation, cognitive dissonance, social

exchange, and organisational culture and climate, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. These concepts offer insights into the underlying motivations, behaviours, and interactions of staff members, as well as the broader organisational structures and cultures within which conflicts arise. By integrating these insights into the research, we can develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture. Ultimately, by leveraging the principles and strategies gleaned from conflict, post-primary principals can navigate conflicts, promote collaboration and cohesion among staff, and cultivate a supportive and inclusive educational environment for the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

3.3 Conflict

Conflict is a struggle over believed incompatible differences in beliefs between two or more interdependent individuals, with desires for esteem, values, correctness and control among the differences (Wilmot and Hocker 2011). The definition lays a foundation for understanding conflict in interpersonal and intergroup interactions, setting the stage for exploring conflict in educational contexts. Alessandra stated that conflict is known to be a contentious course of intergroup or interpersonal interaction that happens within a larger social context (1993). This perspective broadens the scope of conflict, acknowledging its embeddedness in social dynamics. Conflicts arises from the clash of goals, perceptions, or values in situations where individuals are invested in the outcome (Alessandra 1993), offering insights into the roots and expressions of conflict within school environments. Elsewhere, Thomas (2008) defines conflict as the condition in which the concern of two parties appear to be incompatible, elaborating that conflict is a condition rather than a behaviour; that concerns can be anything that anyone genuinely cares about, that the parties involved may be individuals, groups, organisations, nations, or even facets of a single personality. He suggests that conflict appears when any one party feels there is a conflict since conflict exists in the eye of the beholder. Indeed, Thomas's focus on perceptions introduces the idea of functional and dysfunctional conflict, offering a valuable lens for understanding the influence of conflict in school settings.

By recognising that concerns can vary and are subjectively perceived, principals may tailor their conflict management strategies to the specific needs and perspectives of individuals or groups involved. On the other hand, an overemphasis on perceptions introduces subjectivity that could complicate the assessment of conflict's impact in the

school setting. Conflicting perceptions might lead to ambiguity about what constitutes a functional or dysfunctional conflict, making it challenging to implement universally applicable conflict resolution strategies. If conflict is indeed in the eye of the beholder, those with more influence may shape the narrative of what is considered a functional or dysfunctional conflict and brings uncertainty about equity and fairness in the conflict resolution process.

Functional conflict refers to conflicts that are beneficial and constructive in nature. It is characterised by disagreements, differences of opinion, and tensions that lead to positive outcomes (Giner-Sorolla 2018). In contrast, dysfunctional conflict refers to conflicts that are detrimental, unproductive, and potentially damaging. It can hinder progress, create tension, and negatively impact individuals and the school setting (Giner-Sorolla 2018). The distinction between functional and dysfunctional conflict serves as a guide for evaluating the consequences of conflicts within educational cultures.

In the research study exploring how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, the knowledge derived from conflict, particularly from scholars like Wilmot and Hocker (2011), Alessandra (1993), and Thomas (2008), will play a crucial role in several ways. Firstly, understanding conflict as a struggle over incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and control sets the foundational understanding for examining conflict within interpersonal and intergroup interactions in educational contexts. This knowledge will inform an examination of the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture, aligning with the first research aim.

Secondly, Alessandra's perspective on conflict as a contentious course of interaction within a larger social context broadens the scope of conflict analysis, acknowledging its embeddedness in social dynamics. This understanding will contribute to exploring the experiences of Irish post-primary principals in the Munster region regarding the influence of staff conflict on school culture, aligning with the second research aim. By recognising the social context within which conflicts unfold, the research can assess how conflicts within the school setting intersect with broader social dynamics and influence the school culture.

Lastly, Thomas's (2008) focus on perceptions introduces a crucial dimension to understanding conflict, particularly in the school setting. His emphasis on conflict as a condition where concerns of parties appear incompatible highlights the subjective nature

of conflict, underscoring the importance of individual perceptions in shaping conflict experiences. This knowledge will inform the development of recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture, contributing to the third research aim. Here, principals can tailor conflict management strategies to the specific needs and perspectives of individuals or groups involved, considering the subjective nature of conflict perceptions.

Conflict happens when a person or a group believe that another person or group, is stopping one's beliefs and values being expressed in a way they perceive to be unreasonable (Giner-Sorolla 2018). In this definition, the use of the word "perceives", indicates conflict moves between functional or dysfunctional conflict based on our perceptions. The functional-dysfunctional dichotomy conflict is not without its critiques within the literature. Lederach (1997) encourages a more holistic and context-specific understanding of conflicts beyond the functional-dysfunctional dichotomy. The constructivist perspective challenges the idea that conflict can be neatly categorised into these two distinct types. Avruch (1998) highlighted the cultural dimensions of conflict, emphasising the role of cultural factors in shaping perceptions of conflict and challenges the universal applicability of functional-dysfunctional distinctions. Elsewhere, Kriesberg and Neu (2018) argue that conflict is inherently subjective and context-dependent, making it challenging to universally label conflicts as purely functional or dysfunctional, while Woolf and Hulsizer (2018) and Coleman (2003) advocate for a more dynamic understanding of conflict, acknowledging that what may be functional in one context could be dysfunctional in another. Additionally, Wilmot and Hocker (2011) propose that conflicts can be a mix of functional and dysfunctional elements simultaneously, depending on the complexity of the issues at hand. They highlight that conflicts can have both positive and negative consequences. Consensus on these perspectives within the scholarly community is not absolute. While there may be general agreement on the existence of both functional and dysfunctional conflicts, the degree to which these categories are seen as dichotomous, or fluid vary.

Doucet et al. (2009) suggest that the nature of conflict is commonly associated with tasks or interests. Conflict rooted in interests pertains to differences in goals or objectives among individuals or groups, while task conflict indicates disagreements related to the methods or processes of accomplishing an objective. Recognising that conflicts can emerge from differences in goals or methods helps tailor conflict resolution strategies to specific contexts. Additional researchers (Montes Rodriguez and Serrano 2012; Raeve et

al. 2008) concur with this perspective, noting that conflicts often arise from disagreement hindering goal achievement. Shetach (2012) indicates that teams, typically composed of individuals working under a leader, present natural settings for potential conflict due to the diverse characteristics found within groups.

Understanding the team context and its influence on conflict aligns with the collaborative nature of educational settings, where diverse groups often work together. Indeed, collective perspectives and definitions contribute to a comprehensive understanding of conflict in school cultures. The nuanced definitions, distinctions between functional and dysfunctional conflict, and the recognition of contextual factors enrich the exploration of conflict dynamics within school settings. The consideration of teams as potential conflict settings adds a practical dimension to the understanding of conflict in the collaborative landscape of education.

In this research study exploring how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, conflict will be understood and applied based on a comprehensive working definition derived from the literature. The working definition of conflict posits that it occurs when a person or group perceives that another person or group is obstructing their beliefs and values in a manner, they deem unreasonable. This definition shows the subjective nature of conflict, highlighting the importance of individual perceptions in shaping conflict experiences. Additionally, it introduces the distinction between functional and dysfunctional conflict, with functional conflicts being beneficial and constructive, while dysfunctional conflicts are detrimental and unproductive. This dichotomy serves as a guide for evaluating the consequences of conflicts within educational cultures, helping to assess their influence on school culture.

Additionally, the research considers the team context as a potential setting for conflict, aligning with the collaborative nature of school settings. Understanding the influence of the team context on conflict dynamics adds a practical dimension to the research, considering the diverse characteristics within groups and their implications for conflict resolution. Overall, the working definition of conflict in this research study is informed by diverse perspectives from the literature, acknowledging the nuanced and multifaceted nature of conflicts among staff within post-primary schools. By adopting this comprehensive understanding of conflict, the research aims to navigate the complexities of conflict dynamics and develop context-specific recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

3.4 Staff conflict

The education sector commands a substantial portion of public expenditure, with staffing costs representing nearly a third of the budget, placing it at the forefront of public sector spending (Lillis and Morgan 2012). Despite being a significant financial investment, the education sector, particularly in the public domain, grapples with elevated rates of staff conflict, bullying, and incivility, posing considerable risks to the wellbeing and health of employees (Fahie 2014; 2013). The literature consistently highlights the potential high costs for organisations failing to address conflict issues, ranging from industrial action to increased absenteeism and strained employee-management relations (Ury et al. 1989). Research by Fahie (2017), Boddy and Croft (2016), and Erikson et al. (2015) supports the notion that tense staff relations correlate with detrimental health outcomes for employees. Principals, who play a pivotal role in managing staff conflict, often approach this responsibility cautiously due to practical concerns, self-protection, and a lack of ongoing professional development. However, reducing staff conflict promises substantial educational gains, enhancing job satisfaction, wellbeing, and motivation among staff (Ortan et al. 2021). A decline in conflict can also nurture a collaborative culture, where educators work together, share ideas, and support each other in delivering quality education.

Contrary to the idealised portrayal of schools as harmonious environments with minimal conflict, Valente et al. (2020) offer a contrasting perspective, showing the substantial influence of conflicts on individuals and groups within an organisation. They highlight that unaddressed conflicts can lead to heightened tension, diminished productivity, and the development of a toxic work environment. In a similar vein, Goleman (2004) highlights the detrimental influence of conflict on the emotional climate of a workplace, influencing overall team performance. Recognising the significance of addressing conflicts, researchers such as Rowe (2018) and Gottman and Gottman (2017) emphasise the importance of fostering a culture that promotes open communication, active listening, and conflict resolution skills. Their collective findings contribute to the formulation of strategies for addressing and preventing conflicts among staff.

Educational researchers, Fullan (2014) and Hargreaves (1994), also challenge the idealised view of schools, advocating for a more realistic and nuanced understanding. Aligning with this perspective, recognising conflicts among staff as a natural aspect of human interaction becomes crucial. This recognition enables principals to develop

proactive strategies for cultivating a collaborative school environment. Furthermore, Bizzell (2014) delves into the far-reaching consequences of conflicts among staff members, asserting that such conflicts can extend beyond personal relationships and profoundly influence school culture. The negative atmosphere generated by conflicts has the potential to hinder collaboration and impede progress towards educational goals. This understanding is imperative for principals striving to develop school culture. Indeed, Bruce et al. (2022) explain that, although school principals play an important role in the management of staff conflict, this is often the aspect of the role they are most tentative to engage with for a range of reasons, often logical and self-protective.

Lewicki's emphasis on negotiation, dispute resolution, and constructive communication holds relevance in this context of managing staff conflicts within the school setting (2014). These principles can be adapted to address conflicts among staff, thereby fostering improved relationships and overall dynamics. The contemporary landscape is characterised by an increasingly assertive workforce, with employees demanding a wide range of organisational entitlements, including privileges, recognition, status, benefits, salary, decision-making power, and autonomy. Valente et al. (2020) highlight this assertiveness, suggesting a shift in power dynamics that challenges traditional hierarchies within school settings. This shift reflects a growing expectation among staff for greater involvement and recognition, reshaping the way authority and decision-making are distributed in schools.

Returning to Lewicki's emphasis on negotiation and dispute resolution aligns with the broader goal of organisational effectiveness (2014). However, this reveals a potential imbalance in power dynamics, indicating that certain stakeholders may have more influence over conflict resolution outcomes, potentially marginalising others. In school settings, for instance, principals or senior staff may hold more authority in negotiations, potentially marginalising less influential stakeholders, such as junior staff or minority groups, whose concerns may not be fully addressed. This power imbalance can lead to dissatisfaction and disengagement among those who feel overlooked or undervalued in decision-making processes. If not managed carefully, such dynamics can reinforce existing hierarchies and perpetuate conflict, rather than resolving it. To address this, it is crucial to ensure that conflict resolution mechanisms are transparent, inclusive, and equitable. Schools and organisations need to create spaces where all voices are heard, and where negotiation is not dominated by those in positions of authority but involves genuine collaboration across all levels. This approach not only promotes fairness but also

enhances organisational effectiveness by fostering a more inclusive and engaged workforce.

Freire's 1973 critical pedagogy becomes relevant for examining power structures within school settings. This perspective encourages an exploration of implicit hierarchies, amplification of marginalised voices, and the fostering of more equitable approaches to understanding and manging staff conflict (Ruth and Janowitch 2014). This prompts reflection on how principals can create spaces for inclusive dialogue, ensuring that all voices are considered in conflict resolution processes. By adopting Freire's critical approach, principals can engage in critical reflection on the distribution of power within their schools, identifying and challenging any inequities that may contribute to conflict. Principals can use Freire's approach to create inclusive spaces for dialogue, where marginalised voices are given the opportunity to express their concerns and contribute to the resolution of conflicts. By fostering an environment of inclusivity and respect, principals can work towards addressing underlying power imbalances and promoting more equitable approaches to managing staff conflict.

Furthermore, Freire's critical pedagogy prompts principals to critically examine their own roles and responsibilities in relation to staff conflict. Principals can use this perspective to reflect on how their actions and decisions may perpetuate or challenge existing power dynamics within their schools. By adopting a critical stance towards their own leadership practices, principals can work towards creating a more democratic and participatory school culture where conflicts are addressed collaboratively and with sensitivity to the diverse needs of all stakeholders.

The social dynamics within a school setting are intricate, shaped by ongoing rivalries, tensions, conflicts, and realignments that manifest both formally and informally. Here, Beneen et al. (2018) attribute the emergence of staff conflict to differences in background, characteristics, interests, work intensity, and goals among individuals within the organisation. Calvo Salguero et al. (2010) delves into the multifaceted roots of staff conflict, ranging from insufficient personal interests and communication issues to power struggles, previous conflicts, and ideological disparities. The competitive nature of schools, where promotions are limited, and the hierarchical system fosters career development and personal status, introduces a dynamic of competition that can breed division. Richardson (1973) and Nias (1985) highlight the cost of such dynamics, suggesting that warm solidarity among certain staff members may come at the expense of others' loneliness and feelings of rejection.

As school settings increasingly prioritise inclusivity and diversity, the existence of warm solidarity among some staff while others experience loneliness, and rejection raises questions about adherence to these ideals (Langdon 2022). This relevance lies in questioning the adherence to inclusivity when the research identifies disparities in staff relationships, particularly warm solidarity for some and loneliness for others. In fact, it suggests that there may be a discrepancy between stated values and the lived experiences of staff members. Beyond ideological considerations, the emotional wellbeing of employees becomes a critical concern. Those experiencing loneliness and rejection may suffer from stress, reduced job satisfaction, and adverse mental health effects (Gilmer et al. 2023). The impact of such disparities extends beyond individual experiences to influence school culture, potentially leading to divisions, conflicts, and disruptions in teamwork and collaboration (Overton and Lowry 2023). Divisions and conflicts may arise, potentially disrupting teamwork and collaboration. Understanding how these conflicts permeate the organisational fabric is essential for leadership and intervention.

Principals, as leaders within the school setting, bear the responsibility of fostering an inclusive environment and addressing issues related to staff relationships (Khaleel et al. 2021). It places responsibility on principals to shape the organisational culture. The presence of disparities necessitates a proactive approach, urging principals to actively create a culture where all staff feel welcomed, valued, and integrated into the team. Line managers can also address workplace conflict by engaging in sensemaking activity, according to Teague et al. (2015), in the school setting promotes a proactive effort by principals to understand organisational dynamics in order to prevent conflicts. This reinforces the importance of the sense-making perspective, to shed light on the cognitive processes and decision-making strategies employed by principals in response to staff conflicts. In instances where staff conflicts contribute to feelings of loneliness and rejection, established conflict resolution processes (Ullah et al. 2022) become crucial. Exploring how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture provides insights into the efficacy of existing systems and potential areas for improvement. One of the aims of the exploration is to develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing conflicts which can influence school culture.

3.5 Consequences of staff conflict

The consequences of staff conflict bring negative or positive, constructive or destructive effects. New ideas, re-evaluation of current priorities, clarity of goals, and stronger collaboration are some of the positive outcomes of conflict between colleagues. Schlaerth et al. (2013) emphasise that conflict can lead to stronger and more collaborative relationships. Conflict and diversity, within teams, have the potential to enhance collaboration by fostering a deeper understanding of complex issues and crafting superior solutions. Conflicts can prompt team members to seek more ideas, elevate their critical thinking, entertain opposing viewpoints, embrace open-mindedness, and amalgamate diverse ideas into high-quality, creative decisions, dedicated to fulfilling the objectives of a school organisation.

On the other hand, the emphasis on experience in the context of conflict suggests a broader perspective that goes beyond mere problem-solving. Experience in this context involves understanding, learning, and growth gained through the process of navigating conflicts. It recognises that conflicts, whether positive or negative, contribute to the overall experience of individuals within the school setting. The emphasis on experience broadens the perspective on staff conflict beyond merely a problem-solving approach. Conflicts are not isolated incidents and understanding how post-primary principals make sense of conflict contributes to a richer understanding of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. This aligns with a more holistic view that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of conflicts and their impact on individuals' professional and personal development. The mention of positive outcomes such as new ideas, re-evaluation of priorities, clarity of goals, and stronger collaboration indicates that conflicts, can lead to valuable experiences that go beyond immediate problem-solving. Researchers like Schlaerth (2013) highlight the potential for conflict to be a catalyst for positive change and growth, emphasising that the experience gained from navigating conflicts can contribute to better solutions and stronger relationships in the school setting. Exploring how principals view conflicts as potential catalysts for positive change provides insights into their leadership philosophies and strategies for fostering school culture. The idea is not just to find a solution but to engage in a learning process that enriches the experiences of individuals within the school setting. Understanding the experiences of post-primary principals' experiences of staff conflict on school culture contributes to this current study of exploring principals' experiences of staff conflict.

To foster positive staff conflict outcomes in a school setting, the research (Raines 2023) suggests a principal should possess certain qualities and employ influential leadership strategies. A principal who is a skilled communicator, empathetic, skilled in conflict resolution, and committed to creating a positive and inclusive school culture can greatly influence that staff's ability to resolve conflicts constructively (Raines 2023). Such a principal sets the tone for a work environment where staff members are empowered to address conflicts in a way that benefits both the individuals involved and the school (Stronge and Xu 2021). However, Sandwick et al. (2019) argues that, while qualities such as communication, empathy, conflict resolution skills, and commitment to school culture are undoubtedly important for a principal, they alone may not be sufficient to foster positive staff conflict outcomes. Instead, Sandwick et al. suggest that the complexity of staff conflicts in school settings often requires a more systemic and nuanced approach. In her study, she found that structural factors, organisational policies, and the broader institutional context significantly influence the resolution of staff conflicts. Indeed, according to Sandwick et al. (2019), a principal's ability to navigate and address systemic issues, along with individual qualities, plays a crucial role in fostering a genuinely constructive conflict resolution environment. This challenges the notion that personal qualities alone can dictate positive conflict outcomes, emphasising the need for a more comprehensive and systemic leadership approach in educational settings.

While conflict can serve as a catalyst for positive opportunities and progress toward shared goals, it also harbours the potential to damage relationships and yield adverse outcomes (Evans 2013; Kazimoto 2013). Principals must proactively address staff conflicts and cultivate a school culture that promotes constructive conflict resolution, open communication, and a shared commitment to student success (Stronge and Xu 2021). By doing so, school settings can leverage the potential for significant educational gains emanating from a harmonious and supportive work environment. The challenge thus lies in balancing the potential positive aspects of conflict with the need for proactive conflict management, ensuring that the school setting remains conducive to growth and collaboration.

3.6 Conflict management

The proficiency in managing conflict, an often, underestimated leadership quality (Guttman 2004), is a critical skill in personal and professional domains. A study conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership in 2019 found that leaders who

demonstrated strong conflict management skills were more successful in navigating complex organisational challenges and fostering positive team dynamics (Tamunodiepiriye et al. 2022). The study assessed leaders across various industries and correlated strong conflict management with leadership success, providing empirical evidence of the significance of conflict management as a leadership quality. Alimuddin et al. (2020) emphasise the role of conflict resolution in creating positive school culture and fostering educational leadership.

The adept handling of conflict is particularly vital for school principals, given their crucial role in nurturing school culture and addressing staff conflicts. Addressing conflicts demands a multifaceted approach—embracing communication, motivation, technical competence, inspiration, and articulating a vision for resolving interpersonal conflicts. School principals need to employ these strategies judiciously to efficiently advance organisational goals (Lu-Myers and Myers 2018). Communication involves active listening, clarity in conveying messages, and fostering open dialogue between conflicting parties. Principals who engage in clear communication create an environment where concerns can be voiced, misunderstandings clarified, and collaborative solutions explored (Jones and Brinkert 2007). Motivation entails understanding the underlying interests and needs of individuals, finding common ground, and emphasising shared goals (Jones and Brinkert 2007). Principals who motivate conflicting parties to focus on shared objectives create a collaborative atmosphere, reducing adversarial dynamics and fostering a sense of duty. Technical competence in conflict resolution refers to the knowledge and skills required to analyse, address, and resolve conflicts (Jones and Brinkert 2007). Principals with a strong understanding of conflict resolution principles can assess the root causes of conflicts, implement appropriate strategies, and provide knowledgeable guidance to those involved. Inspiring conflict resolution involves creating a positive and optimistic atmosphere, instilling confidence in individuals to work towards resolution (Jones and Brinkert 2007). Principals who inspire their staff to view conflicts as opportunities for growth and improvement contribute to a culture where conflicts are approached constructively, fostering a positive environment. Vision articulation involves clearly conveying the desired future state, aligning it with organisational values, and illustrating how conflict resolution contributes to achieving that vision.

In the context of the current research, proactive conflict resolution strategies align with the aim of developing recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture. The

proactive approach involves taking anticipatory and preventive measures to address conflicts before they escalate, focusing on planning, preparation, and strategic initiatives to minimise potential problems. Principals who adopt proactive conflict resolution strategies prioritise early intervention, conflict prevention, and the creation of a school culture, which directly contributes to fostering a positive environment conducive to collaboration, as outlined in the research aims.

The findings from Mahoney et al. (2021), which highlight the significance of a proactive approach to conflict resolution in fostering a positive school environment, further reinforce the relevance of proactive conflict resolution strategies in the context of this research study. By addressing conflicts before they escalate, principals can create a culture where all members of the school community can work without being hindered by persistent or escalating conflicts. Therefore, the discussion on proactive conflict resolution strategies directly informs and supports the research aims by providing insights into recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

Staff conflict is an inherent facet of management, requiring adept handling and resolution. The outcome is profoundly shaped by the principal's approach to managing and enhancing the understanding of interpersonal conflict to yield a positive impact. As an integral part of the decision-making process, the principal assumes a crucial role in ensuring the school achieves its goals, experiences growth, and attains success (Óskarsdóttir et al. 2021). This nuanced perspective contributes to a more profound exploration of the experiences held by Irish post-primary principals, aligning with the research examining the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture. Ball's research (2012) on institutional discourse adds depth to this exploration, emphasising the importance of understanding conflict within the broader context of everyday interactions and institutional dynamics. By delving into the routine aspects of institutional life, Ball's insights provide a nuanced understanding of how conflicts emerge and are perpetuated within the school setting. Indeed, by recognising conflict as embedded within the institutional discourse, post-primary principals can gain insights into the systemic factors influencing dynamics.

By integrating Ball's (2012) insights into the exploration of staff conflict within post-primary schools in Munster, principals can gain a deeper understanding of the systemic factors that influence conflict dynamics. Ball's research encourages principals to consider how institutional norms, values, and power relation contribute to the emergence and

perpetuation of conflicts. This broader perspective allows principals to move beyond viewing conflicts as isolated incidents and instead recognise them as symptomatic of deeper institutional issues. Moreover, by understanding conflict within the framework of institutional discourse, principals can identify opportunities for structural interventions that address underlying systemic inequalities or power imbalances. Rather than simply addressing conflicts on a case-by-case basis, principals can work towards fostering a more inclusive and equitable school culture that mitigates the root causes of conflict.

Conflicts are inherent in both personal relationships and organisational development, and the ability to resolve conflicts is crucial for progress and success (Cottringer 1997). One of the principal's primary responsibilities is conflict resolution, aiming to promote understanding among staff members and maintain impartiality. Failure to address conflicts constructively can undermine the principal's credibility and impede the school's development (Kazimoto 2013). When managed appropriately, conflicts can lead to positive outcomes, such as change, personal and professional growth, innovation, and various benefits. However, the outcomes hinges on the school principal's approach to conflict resolution. Runde and Flanagan (2012) offer a comprehensive insight into conflict management, emphasising the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural skills needed for conflict competence. Cognitive skills involve communication, critical thinking about solutions, and understanding emotional dynamics. Emotional skills encompass staying composed under pressure, while behavioural skills include active listening and employing various conflict resolution techniques. Developing these skills is a complex but learnable process, with individuals driven by the need for cognitive closure or recognising the importance of maintaining relationships (Montes et al. 2012; Shetach 2012; Giacmantonio et al. 2011). Principals who value conflict management and are motivated to acquire these skills can enhance their conflict competence over time (Runde and Flanagan 2012).

Ball's work emphasises the intricate nature of institutional life, shedding light on the routine aspects that contribute to the formation and perpetuation of conflicts within school settings. Firstly, Ball's (2012) research encourages a more nuanced examination of the routine interactions among staff members. By understanding the daily discourse within the school, one can identify the subtle ways in which conflicts may arise. This insight enables a more comprehensive analysis of the origins of staff conflicts, moving beyond isolated incidents to uncovering systemic patterns rooted in everyday communication. Moreover, Ball's emphasis on institutional dynamics broadens the perspective on conflict

resolution. Rather than viewing conflicts as isolated incidents, the institutional discourse framework encourages researchers and practitioners to consider the broader structural and cultural elements influencing conflict within the organisation. This involves critically examining power dynamics, implicit norms, and institutional hierarchies that may contribute to the manifestation and persistence of conflicts. Institutions with specific communication patterns and established norms may require tailored approaches to address conflicts. This involves questioning traditional conflict resolution models and adapting strategies to align with the institutional dynamics uncovered through the lens of institutional discourse. Additionally, Ball's research challenges assumptions about conflict being solely interpersonal. By incorporating institutional discourse, the analysis can extend beyond individual behaviours to explore how broader institutional factors contribute to the shaping of conflicts. While the main focus is on examining the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster regarding the influence of staff conflict on school culture, acknowledging the influence of institutional factors on conflict dynamics enhances the overall understanding of the needs in conflict resolution.

The relevance of including institutional discourse lies in its ability to highlight systemic issues that may contribute to conflicts within the school setting. While the primary focus remains on interpersonal interactions, understanding how institutional factors shape and perpetuate conflicts can inform recommendations and approaches to conflict resolution. By acknowledging the influence of institutional discourse, interventions can be designed not only to address individual behaviours but also to address underlying structural factors that may contribute to conflict. This broadens the understanding of conflict resolution needs, emphasising that interventions should, not only target individuals, but also address systemic issues embedded in the institution's discourse.

Doucet et al. (2009) argue that conflicts within school settings involve intricate dynamics at the interpersonal or group level, requiring principals to employ suitable conflict management styles. However, engagement with Curseu's (2011) perspective highlights that, if the principal's management approach itself triggers conflict, their methods may contribute to interpersonal or group-based conflicts within the organisation. Giacomantonio et al. (2011) concur, noting that principals often utilise specific conflict management styles tailored to address differences among individuals or groups within their institutions, these styles may either resolve or exacerbate conflicts. Other researchers (Montes et al. 2012) emphasise the principal's pivotal role in choosing conflict management styles based on the situation, urging a nuanced understanding of the context-

specific nature of conflict resolution. Principals, in assessing situations and employing suitable conflict management styles, can significantly contribute to fostering a positive school culture by addressing conflicts constructively.

Shetach (2012) suggests that managing conflict serves as a foundational element in human society, shaping contemporary human existence outcomes. However, this prompts questioning the broader societal implications of conflict management styles, considering potential power imbalances and unequal outcomes. This perspective aligns with Shetach's broader understanding that conflict has been a constant presence in human history, with the management of conflicts influencing societal trajectories. The ability to manage conflicts constructively has proven instrumental in culture development and dispute resolution. Recognising and enhancing conflict management skills remains a central concern, aiming to promote positive outcomes and minimise negative consequences. However, this raises questions about whose perspectives and values are prioritised in conflict management strategies and whether certain approaches may perpetuate existing inequalities within school settings. The literature underscores diverse reasons behind conflict management, reflecting researchers' varying perspectives on its significance, yet a critical approach involves questioning whether these motives align with equity and justice in school settings. Despite the diversity, the overarching goal remains of addressing conflicts to yield positive outcomes and enhance the wellbeing of individuals and organisations, ultimately facilitating a smoother school life for students, staff, and principals themselves (Kazimoto 2013). This nuanced exploration aligns with the research aim of examining the experiences of post-primary principals of staff conflict on school culture.

3.7 Conflict in this study

The conceptualisation of conflict for this study is grounded in a thorough exploration of the field of literature, drawing on various conflict concepts to offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of conflicts within school settings. The current study aims to explore how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. By focusing on staff-to-staff conflicts, the research aims to shed light on the experiences of post-primary principals of staff conflict on school culture, and to explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in managing staff conflict and its influence on

school culture. The framework encompasses a range of conflict concepts, each providing a unique perspective on the complexities involved in conflicts within school settings.

In this study, conflict is defined, understood, and applied based on a comprehensive working definition derived from the literature, focusing specifically on how post-primary principals experience staff conflicts and their influence on school culture. The exploration of conflict within the literature significantly shapes the conceptualisation and approach taken in this research study. The working definition posits that conflict occurs when a person or group perceives that another person or group is obstructing their beliefs and values in a manner, they deem unreasonable. This definition highlights the subjective nature of conflict, emphasising the importance of individual perceptions in shaping conflict experiences. Additionally, it introduces the distinction between functional and dysfunctional conflict, with functional conflicts being beneficial and constructive, while dysfunctional conflicts are detrimental and unproductive. This dichotomy serves as a guide for evaluating the consequences of conflicts within school cultures, helping to assess their influence on school culture.

However, the research also acknowledges critiques of the functional-dysfunctional dichotomy within the literature. Scholars advocate for a more holistic, context-specific understanding of conflict, challenging the universal applicability of these distinctions. They emphasise the fluid and subjective nature of conflict categories, suggesting that conflicts can be a mix of functional and dysfunctional elements simultaneously, depending on the context.

Furthermore, conflict is understood to stem from differences in goals or methods, with conflicts rooted in interests pertaining to differences in objectives, and task conflicts arising from disagreements related to methods or processes. Recognising these distinctions helps tailor conflict resolution strategies to specific contexts within school settings. Additionally, the research considers the team context as a potential setting for conflict, aligning with the collaborative nature of school settings. Understanding the influence of the team context on conflict dynamics adds a practical dimension to the research, considering the diverse characteristics within groups and their implications for conflict resolution. Overall, the working definition of conflict in this research study is informed by diverse perspectives from the literature, acknowledging the nuanced and multifaceted nature of conflicts among staff within post-primary schools. By adopting this comprehensive understanding of conflict, the research aims to navigate the

complexities of conflict dynamics and develop recommendations and approaches for addressing staff conflicts to positively influence school culture.

3.8 School culture

School culture encompasses the shared beliefs, values, norms, and practices that define a school's identity and shape its social dynamics. It serves as the backdrop against which all interactions, decisions, and initiatives unfold within the school setting (Deal and Peterson 1999). Understanding the intricate nuances of school culture is essential for understanding the broader context within which staff conflicts emerge and evolve. The significance of school culture extends beyond mere observation—it directly influences various aspects of educational outcomes, including student achievement, staff retention, and school. Therefore, exploring how staff conflicts intersect with school culture offers a holistic perspective on the factors contributing to the overall functioning educational institutions.

Evolution of school culture

The evolution of school culture reflects a dynamic interplay between organisational theory, sociology, and education. Early contributions by McGregor (1960) and Schein (1985) laid the groundwork. In the late 1970s and 1980s, researchers adapted the concept to school settings, exploring its influence on teaching and learning. Deal and Kennedy (1983) introduced the concept of organisational culture in their influential work. While they primarily focused on corporate culture, their ideas have been adapted to school settings. They conceptualised organisational culture as a combination of values, beliefs, and rituals, asserting that a strong and positive culture can enhance organisational performance. The adaptation of concepts designed for the business world to schools may oversimplify the diverse and multifaceted nature of school settings. However, Deal and Kennedy's work laid the foundation for understanding the cultural aspects of schools. Their framework provided a lens through which researchers and educators could analyse and improve school culture.

Rosenholtz (1989), delves into the social organisation of schools and its impact on teachers' experiences and practices. Rosenholtz explored how school culture influences teacher collaboration, professional development, and student outcomes. She emphasised the role of social relationships within schools, highlighting also the interpersonal dynamics within schools, contributing to the understanding of how social organisation

and relationships shape the overall culture, affecting both teachers and students. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) focused on the challenges and possibilities of educational change, arguing for the importance of shared values and collaboration in schools. They explored the dynamics of change and the role of school culture in facilitating or hindering reforms, their work emphasising the connection between school culture and the capacity for change, stressing the need for a positive culture to support sustainable educational reforms.

Dalin and Rolff focus on the social context of learning and teaching (1993), exploring how group dynamics and organisational culture impact instructional practices. Their work contributes to the understanding of how school culture influences school environments. Dalin and Rolff's work provides insights into how the social context, shaped by school culture, can either enhance or hinder the instructional processes within schools. Elsewhere, Hargreaves (1994) discusses the evolving role of teacher in the changing educational landscape, on how external factors, policy changes, and cultural shifts impact teachers and school cultures. He emphasises the need for responsive and adaptive school cultures. Hargreaves' work contributes to the understanding of the intersection between external influences, teacher experiences, and the evolving nature of school cultures.

Stoll and Fink (1996) explore the concept of professional learning communities within schools. Stoll focuses on the collaborative aspects of school culture and how professional learning communities can enhance teacher collaboration, instructional practices, and student outcomes. Stoll's work underscores the importance of fostering a collaborative and supportive culture within schools to improve professional development and educational outcomes. Stoll et al. address the design of significant learning experiences in higher education (2005). While Stoll's work extends beyond post-primary education, his ideas on designing learning experiences are relevant. He emphasises the importance of creating a positive learning environment, aligning with the broader concept of school culture. Fink's ideas contribute to the discourse on how intentional design of learning experiences can shape the culture of a school, fostering a positive and engaging environment.

Deal and Peterson's *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership* (1999) introduces a comprehensive approach to school culture. They emphasise the importance of leadership in shaping and sustaining school culture, aligning with the research study's focus on how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. The framework outlines key elements such as symbols,

rituals, stories, and power structures that contribute to the creation and maintenance of school culture. Deal and Peterson highlight the role of principals in influencing the cultural aspects of schools shaping the collective identity of the school community. In 2004, Hinde specifically highlights an oversight in acknowledging the intricate nature of school culture as a significant contributor to resistance against reforms. His focus is on drawing attention to the complexity of school culture and the nuanced impact it has on the resistance to changes and reforms in school settings. Hinde suggests that there has been a lack of acknowledgement regarding the intricate nature of school culture in the context of resistance. His work aims to fill this gap by emphasising the importance of understanding the complexity inherent in school culture. Hinde's key contribution lies in emphasising that school culture is not a simple or uniform entity. Instead, it is complex, with various layers of values, beliefs, traditions, and practices that interweave within the school community.

Lynch's work (2007) stands as a pivotal exploration into the societal and cultural dimensions of education. Lynch's focus on the sociology of education signifies a commitment to dissecting schools as cultural entities. Her research lens scrutinises the deep-rooted cultural elements within school settings, unveiling the implicit norms and power structures that contribute to the formation of school culture. This sociological perspective is vital for comprehending the cultural intricacies shaping responses to staff conflict. Lynch's work emphasises cultural sensitivity within school settings. By promoting an understanding of the cultural nuances at play, her insights empower post-primary principals to approach staff conflict with heightened awareness, potentially fostering more informed and empathetic resolutions. Lynch's work suggests a need for professional development that enhances cultural competence among principals. This can empower principals to navigate staff conflicts with a keen understanding of the cultural context, potentially fostering a more positive and harmonious school culture. However, it is important to continuously refine these concepts for practical application, ensuring that they are responsive to the unique challenges presented by staff conflicts within diverse educational environments.

Ball (2012) explores the school as an organisation from a micro-political perspective. His work emphasises the intricate dynamics within schools, particularly the subtle power relations and political nuances that shape decision-making processes. Ball's approach involves looking closely at the micro-political dynamics and cultures within schools. Instead of solely focusing on broader structural changes or improvement initiatives, he

investigates how power operates at the individual and small-group levels within the school setting. Here, Ball brings attention to the internal workings of schools, acknowledging the impact of day-to-day interactions, relationships, and power struggles. By examining the micro-political landscape, he sheds light on how individuals and groups within the school organisation navigate power relations and influence decision-making processes. This perspective contributes to a more nuanced understanding of school culture. By exploring the micro-political perspective, Ball acknowledges the complexity of school culture. It is not a monolithic entity but rather a dynamic interplay of individuals and groups with diverse interests, values, and power dynamics.

Jensen et al. (2012) emphasise the pivotal responsibility of the principal in fostering a collaborative working environment as a crucial element of school culture. Their focus is on highlighting the role of the principal in shaping the working environment, particularly by fostering collaboration among the school staff. These insights align closely with the aims of the research study, which seeks to explore post-primary principals' experiences of staff conflict on school culture in Munster. Jensen et al. highlight the principal as a key figure whose actions have a profound impact on the overall working environment within the school. The interactions and relationships established through collaboration contribute to a shared sense of purpose, shared values, and a collective commitment to the success of the school. Kohl et al. (2013) delineated four layers of personal experiences, emphasising the multi-layered nature of school culture. These layers include perceptions of the environment, participation in different settings, relationships within these settings, and the resultant culture derived from these interactions. Caprara et al. (2006) emphasised the necessity for a positive school culture supporting student achievement, requiring the harmonious collaboration of principals, staff, and families. The influence of principals and staff significantly shapes student success (Konold et al. 2018). Conversely, unhealthy school cultures can impede progress and diminish motivation for learning among students, staff, and leadership teams (2018).

Liu et. al (2021) conducted research with their focus on leadership practices that emphasise shared decision-making in influencing and shaping the overall school culture. Their work underscores the connection between leadership approaches, teacher motivation, and the creation of a positive and collaborative educational environment. These insights contribute to a comprehensive understanding of school culture and its practical implications for educational leadership.

The literature on the evolution of school culture theory offers a comprehensive overview of key contributions from various decades, disciplines, and scholars, providing a rich tapestry for understanding the complex dynamics of school settings. The initial recognition of organisational theory, sociology, and education as integral components of school culture development sets the stage for subsequent exploration. The shift to school settings in the late 1970s and 1980s reflects a natural progression, highlighting the adaptability of organisational concepts to diverse contexts. Notably, Deal and Kennedy's corporate culture framework, although initially focused on businesses, emerges as a pivotal contribution to educational discourse, shaping the lens through which researchers and educators analyse and improve school culture (1983). The transition to the 1980s and 1990s with each scholar adds a unique perspective, addressing aspects such as social organisation, collaboration, change dynamics, and micro-political intricacies within schools. Jensen et al. (2012) spotlight the pivotal responsibility of principals in fostering collaboration, underlining their profound impact on the overall working environment. Kohl et al.'s delineation of four layers (2013) adds depth, recognising the multi-layered nature of school culture.

Dichotomy of school culture: strong vs. weak

Research on school culture underscores the critical dichotomy between strong and weak school cultures, which is important in understanding how staff conflict influences school culture. In schools with a robust culture, there is high motivation for learning and teaching among both students and teachers (Karadağ and Özdemir 2015). Within this environment, the foundation is built on genuine relationships and a shared sense of purpose among school members. Principals in such settings take on clearly defined roles, foster positive connections within the organisation, and cultivate the school into a learning environment where all partners contribute (Şimşek 2003); recognising the impact of school culture on motivation for learning and teaching, emphasising the importance of genuine relationships and a shared sense of purpose (Şimşek 2003). Here, the role of principals is central in fostering positive connections and cultivating a conducive learning environment where all stakeholders contribute.

Conversely, a weak school culture is characterised by limited communication and fewer interconnections, resulting in challenges for staff to navigate the school's culture, leading to faintly noticeable characteristics and sporadic commitment. School culture significantly shapes the perception of the school and the behaviour of all members, especially teachers and students, emphasising the importance of shared leadership styles.

It's a phenomenon deeply entwined with the quality of human relationships within school settings, influencing and being influenced by these relationships. The behaviour styles, assumptions, values, beliefs, and other facets that forge the identity of school members are foundational aspects of school culture (Aslan et al. 2009). Central is understanding the impact of weak school cultures on the behaviour of school members, emphasising the importance of shared leadership styles, and recognising the interconnectedness of human relationships within school settings. School culture encompasses reliance, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and both written and verbal regulations that shape every facet of a school's mission. A positive school culture plays a pivotal role in fostering professional satisfaction, morale, and effectiveness, and significantly contributes to student learning, fulfilment, and achievements (Wang'ombe 2023).

As school culture is pivotal in fostering positive outcomes for both staff and students. understanding the influence between school culture and staff conflict is crucial for post-primary principals. By examining the nature and forms of staff conflict experienced in different cultural contexts, principals can better interpret the underlying dynamics at play. Additionally, exploring how perceptions of staff conflict influence school culture, sheds light on the broader organisational climate. School culture, with its multi-layered and complex nature, plays a pivotal role in shaping school settings. Principals must navigate the complexities of their school's cultural landscape, leveraging strengths and mitigating weaknesses to foster positive outcomes for both staff and students. The literature, spanning decades, reflects the evolving understanding of school culture theory and its implications for educational leadership and management.

3.9 Schools of leadership thought

By engaging with schools of leadership thought, this research study sheds light on the nuanced ways in which leadership theory informs the examination of the experiences of post-primary principals of staff conflict on school culture. The evolution of leadership, provides a framework through which post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict can be explored.

Since leadership dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping the overall culture in the school setting, this evolution of leadership literature is important. Here, the evolution of leadership can be understood as a dynamic process that has changed and adapted over time in response to various historical, social, and economic contexts. The evolution of leadership encompasses a shift from early trait-based models, which focused primarily

on the characteristics of individual leaders, to more nuanced, contemporary approaches that take into account the influence of followers, the significance of situational factors, and the complexities of the modern workplace. "Leadership theories represent an evolving set of constructs" (Watkins et al. 2017, 155). Earlier leadership centred on the traits and behaviours of individual leaders, while later theories shifted focus towards followers, relationships, and situational contexts. Gumus et al. (2018) establish the management discourse around enhancing organisational effectiveness, while the leadership discourse centres on the practices that lead an organisation toward its goals. The prevailing literature highlights leadership as a critical factor for organisational advancement, as highlighted by Bolden (2004, 4):

> Seldom, however, has the need for effective leadership been voiced more strongly than now. It is argued that in this changing global environment, leadership holds the answer not only to the success of individuals and organizations, but also to sectors, regions, and nations.

The presented overview of leadership evolution, encapsulated in Table 1, identifies salient authors and their contributions.

Table 1: An overview of leadership evolution

Leadership Evolution	Description
Great man theory	The Great Man Theory, considered one of the earliest concepts in the study of leadership, introduced a more scientific approach to understanding leadership. It suggested that leaders possessed inherent traits and natural abilities from birth that enabled them to wield influence and power over their followers (McCleskey 2014; Daft 2008), yet had significant critics, particularly its gender bias and the oversimplification of leadership as an inherent quality.
Trait approach theory	The Trait Approach Theory suggests that certain individuals are born with inherent traits that predispose them to become natural leaders. These traits encompass distinctive personal characteristics, including intelligence, values, self-confidence, and appearance, which successful leaders tend to possess (Daft 1999). There are ongoing debates about the trait theory's empirical validity and the evolving understanding

Leadership Evolution	Description
	that leadership involves a combination of traits and behaviours.
Behaviour approach theory	The Behaviour Approach Theory suggests that anyone can become an effective leader by adopting appropriate behaviour. It highlights that leadership behaviour can be acquired and, therefore, is within the reach of everyone (Daft 1999). However, there are challenges associated with changing behaviour and the influence of situational factors.
Contingency theory	Contingency Theory suggests that a leader adapts their leadership styles to fit the situation, aiming to enhance the effectiveness of their leadership. Fiedler (2015) emphasised the significance of context in effective leadership and supported the notion that there is no singular, universally applicable set of leadership traits or behaviours. There are practical challenges of contingency approaches and their limitations in providing concrete guidance for leaders.
Influence theory	Within Influence Theory, the central focus lies on the interaction between leaders and followers. The core principles emphasise the negotiation of personal power trade-offs (French and Raven 1959) and positional power (informational, reward-based, ecological, legitimate, and coercive).
Relational theory	Relational Theory highlights the interaction and influence between leaders and followers. It focuses significantly on the communication processes and interactions that foster collective learning and mutual influence (Fletcher 2004).

Early theories such as the Great Man Theory and Trait Approach Theory emphasised the innate qualities and characteristics of individual leaders. Understanding these theories can help researchers explore how principals perceive their own leadership abilities and how they approach conflict resolution based on perceived traits. The Behaviour Approach

Theory suggests that leadership behaviour can be acquired, indicating that principals may adopt specific strategies or behaviours to manage staff conflicts. This perspective offers insights into the role of training and development in enhancing leadership skills related to conflict resolution. Contingency theory highlights the importance of adapting leadership styles to fit different situations. Principals may employ this approach when dealing with various forms of staff conflict, recognising that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and that their leadership strategies may need to be flexible based on the context. Influence and Relational theory focus on the interaction between leaders and followers, emphasising negotiation, communication, and mutual influence. Understanding these theories can shed light on how principals engage with staff members during conflict resolution processes and how they build positive relationships to foster a supportive school culture. By examining the evolution of leadership theories, patterns and trends can be identified in how principals conceptualise and approach staff conflict within their schools. This knowledge will inform the development of recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

The relevance of these theories is significant when considering the practical implications for principals. Early models, such as the Great Man Theory and Trait Approach Theory, shed light on how principals might perceive their own leadership abilities in conflict resolution. On the other hand, Behaviour Approach Theory suggests that leadership behaviours, including those related to conflict management, can be learned, emphasising the importance of training and professional development. Contingency Theory adds another layer, indicating that effective leadership in conflict resolution requires adapting to the specific circumstances and the unique dynamics of each school.

Relational Theory focuses on the interactions between leaders and followers, making it especially relevant to this study. In school settings, where staff conflicts can deeply affect culture, this theory's emphasis on communication and mutual influence provides a critical framework. It supports the idea that principals must engage in positive, ongoing interactions with staff to resolve conflicts and maintain a supportive, collaborative environment. By drawing on this theory, the research explores how principals use relational dynamics to influence school culture amidst conflict, offering valuable insights into leadership in educational contexts.

In connecting the overview of leadership evolution to the research focus of exploring how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff

conflict on school culture, Relational Theory stands out as a contemporary and relevant perspective. Its emphasis on communication processes and mutual influence aligns with the nuanced and complex nature of interpersonal dynamics in handling staff conflicts within school settings. The theory acknowledges the importance of relationships and interactions in shaping leadership, providing a suitable lens for understanding how post-primary principals experience staff conflicts and their influence on school culture.

3.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review highlights the nuanced landscape of school culture, leadership, and conflict within school settings. It traces the evolution of school culture theory from its roots in organisational culture, exploring the seminal works of McGregor and Schein, extending to Deal and Kennedy's application in school contexts. The journey through leadership theories, underlines the dynamic nature of leadership constructs, recognising the shift from trait-based models to contemporary perspectives. The comprehensive overview of diverse conflict theories provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of staff conflict within schools. Additionally, the exploration of conflict management emphasises its critical role as an often, underestimated leadership quality, as highlighted by Guttman (2004) and supported by empirical evidence from the Center for Creative Leadership (2019). The study also highlights the potential positive outcomes of staff conflict, aligning with a broader perspective that recognises conflicts as catalysts for growth and positive change, particularly in school settings. As we explore post-primary principals' experiences of staff conflict, this literature review establishes a robust foundation for the subsequent chapters, offering a holistic understanding of the complex interplay between school culture, leadership, and conflict in the school setting.

Chapter 4: **Theoretical Framework**

4.1 Introduction

The intent of this qualitative study is to explore how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture.
2. To explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture.
3. To develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

At the core of this current study lies relational leadership theory, which serves as the overarching framework. This theory positions leadership as a dynamic and social process where emergent change is constructed through interactions. Recognising the unique role of post-primary principals, the study emphasises the individuality of each leader. By adopting a relational lens, I delve into how these principals navigate conflicts, recognising that leadership is not a one-size-fits-all model but a nuanced, context-specific, and socially embedded process. The framework incorporates sensemaking theory to delve into the cognitive processes through which post-primary principals actively seek and process information during conflicts. Sensemaking is not merely about discovering an absolute truth but understanding actions by searching for meaning. This approach is especially relevant in exploring how principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture within the retrospective and ongoing nature of sensemaking. Drawing from a social constructivist perspective, the study acknowledges that organisations, including schools, are intersubjective realities continuously constructed and enacted through communication and interaction. Post-primary principals, as key decision-makers, hold a central role in shaping this intersubjective reality. Focusing on the principal allows us to delve deep into how their interpretations contribute to the broader organisational tapestry.

4.2 Relational leadership theory

Relational leadership theory is used as an overarching framework for the study of principals' experience of staff conflict in the Irish post-primary school setting, considering leadership as a social influence process through which emergent change (e.g., new approaches, values, attitudes, behaviours, ideologies) are constructed and produced. In the context of this current study, the unique role and experiences of post-primary principals in Munster brings the sense of the individual to the fore, as they navigate staff conflict and contribute to shaping school culture (Ospina et al. 2020; Uhl-Bien 2006). Indeed, this current study acknowledges the individuality of each principal, recognising that leadership is not solely defined by fixed traits or behaviours but is a dynamic and interactive process emerging from social connections and interactions. As such, the sense of individual is crucial to understanding how each principal constructs, interprets, and makes sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture within their specific context.

The first objective of this research, which is to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict and its influence on school culture aligns with the sense of individual as it seeks to explore the unique experiences and challenges faced by post-primary principals in Munster regarding staff conflict. By understanding these experiences, the study aims to capture the individualised aspects of their leadership roles in conflict resolution. The second objective, which is to explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture, relates to the sense of individual by focusing on the personal perspectives of Irish post-primary principals. It aims to uncover how each principal perceives and understands the influence of staff conflict on school culture within their specific school setting. The third objective in developing recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture, is justified by the sense of the individual as it recognises that recommendations and approaches for addressing staff conflicts need to be context specific. By acknowledging the individuality of post-primary principals and their schools, the study aims to contribute to more effective ways of addressing conflicts that are tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities within each school.

The study adopts a relational lens because relational leadership theory, as highlighted by contemporary researchers like Uhl-Bien (2006) and Ospina et al. (2020), offers a

comprehensive framework for understanding leadership as a social influence process. It emphasises the importance of relationships, interactions, and social processes in leadership. The focus on principals within this lens is justified by the unique and pivotal role they play in shaping school culture through their interactions, communication practices, and conflict resolution efforts. Research by Hallinger and Truong (2016) further supports the relevance of relational leadership in managing relationships and preserving harmony in schools, describing relational leadership for "effective leadership in managing relationships, preserving harmony in schools and teacher empowerment, acknowledging that leadership is socially constructed" (2016, 677). The choice of a relational lens is, not only theoretically sound, but also aligns with the practical wisdom, intersubjectivity, and dialogue emphasised by scholars like Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), making it a suitable approach for exploring the intricate social dynamics at play within Irish post-primary schools.

The literature review explicitly links to the relational leadership theory, emphasising that leadership is a dynamic and interactive process emerging from social connections and interactions, highlighting its relevance to understanding conflicts as opportunities for evolving social orders and the collaborative nature of leadership involving multiple stakeholders. The choice of methodological approach adopted in this thesis (outlined in detail in the next chapter) aligns with the principles of relational leadership theory, emphasising the importance of understanding the nuanced interpersonal dimensions involved in how school principals navigate staff conflicts. Saunders' Research Onion and Reflexive Thematic Analysis are chosen for their compatibility with qualitative research and their ability to uncover complex themes and patterns within the data.

According to Uhl-Bien (2006), relational leadership is a social process through which emergent coordination, such as evolving social order; and change inclusive of new approaches, attitudes, values, ideologies and behaviours, are constructed and produced. Relational leadership theory, as highlighted by Ospina et. al (2020) and Uhl-Bien (2011), posits that leadership is a social process that involves building and maintaining positive relationships with others. Given that the current research aims to explore how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, understanding the relational dimensions is crucial. Uhl-Bien and Ospina's insights align with the research focus on principals, emphasising the significance of examining how these principals engage in and manage interpersonal dynamics during staff conflicts. The relational aspect is reflected in the research objectives by

acknowledging that the experiences and influence of staff conflict are inherently tied to the quality of relationships within the school community, particularly as experienced and managed by school principals. Relational leadership prioritises interactions and communication processes as the focal points for collective learning and mutual influence (Fletcher 2004). Instead of being conveyed solely from a leadership position, shared vision and trust are collaboratively created through the ongoing process of engaging with and relating to others. Relational leaders specifically attend to personal interactions and every-day conversations, placing importance on these aspects rather than concentrating solely on control or authority (Endres and Weibler 2017; Denis et al. 2012). In qualitative research, particularly when studying leadership and conflict within school settings, understanding the nuances of personal interactions and the relational context is crucial. The theoretical framework, incorporating relational leadership theory, is in harmony with this emphasis on personal interaction and co-creation, as highlighted by researchers such as Endres and Weibler (2017) and Denis et al. (2012). This alignment ensures that the research design is attuned to capturing the intricate interpersonal dimensions involved in how school principals experience staff conflicts and its influence on school culture.

The specificity of the chosen relational leadership theory in this context lies in its application as an overarching framework for understanding the experiences of principals in the Irish post-primary school setting, specifically in the context of staff conflict. In fact, relational leadership theory is selected due to its conceptualisation of leadership as a socially influenced process, emphasising the construction and production of emergent change, such as new approaches, values, attitudes, behaviours, and ideologies.

The focus on principals, within the broader spectrum of stakeholders in relational leadership, is purposeful. While relational leadership theory acknowledges the importance of various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, community members, the principal holds a central and unique role within the school. Principals serve as key decision-makers, influencers, and mediators in the complex school setting. Therefore, understanding their experiences in the face of staff conflict is crucial for comprehending how leadership dynamics influence school culture.

By centring on principals, the study aims to delve into the specific challenges and opportunities they encounter in the relational processes of leadership, especially when addressing staff conflict. The emphasis on principals aligns with the notion that they, as leaders, significantly contribute to the construction of school culture through their interactions, communication practices, and the ways in which they handle conflicts. The

relational leadership framework allows for an in-depth exploration of how shared vision and trust are co-created through interactions, emphasising the nuanced aspects of leadership beyond the traditional control and authority. The choice of relational leadership theory, within the focus on principals, offers a nuanced lens to unravel the intricate social dynamics at play within Irish post-primary schools.

While scholars such as Ospina et al. (2020) and Uhl-Bien (2011), Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), and Uhl-Bien (2011; 2006) have extensively delved into relational leadership, its incorporation into the educational leadership discourse has been relatively limited. Research by Hallinger and Truong (2016) offers a comprehensive portrayal of relational leadership, emphasising its role in managing relationships, preserving harmony within schools, and empowering teachers. Uhl-Bien (2006) defines relational leadership theory as a framework for studying leadership as a social process of influence, asserting that the theory evolves through relational and social processes.

A relational leadership approach reflects the quality of relationships that school principals cultivate with staff, students, parents, and the community. These relationships are crucial in schools, influencing the essential leadership aspect of persuading others to accomplish tasks (Uhl-Bien 2007). Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) describe relational leadership as a way of existing in the world, encompassing practical wisdom, intersubjectivity, and dialogue. They propose that relational leadership requires engaging with the world in a manner where the leader acknowledges their constant connection and moral accountability to others, engaging in meaningful relational dialogues.

Relational leadership entails not only relational dialogue but also integrity and responsibility. The responsibility to be responsive, accountable, and ethical in everyday interactions signifies a moral commitment to caring relationships and ethical responsibility, embedded within relational integrity. Principals exhibit this sense of responsibility in their interactions with staff, students, and the community, recognising their obligation to act and relate in ethically sound ways. Du Plessis et al. (2015) support a relational perspective on school leadership, emphasising that leadership focusing on social processes, rather than merely on leader actions and behaviours, is inherently relational. These social processes are characterised by openness, contestation, and negotiation, reflecting relational dynamics in interactions with others and the broader social system (Uhl-Bien 2006).

The intent of this current study is to explore how post-primary principals in Munster construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, within the framework of relational leadership. By choosing principals as research participants, the study aligns with the relational leadership perspective that highlights the quality of relationships leaders have with various stakeholders. Principals, as leaders, play a central role in influencing others to achieve goals within the school context (Uhl-Bien 2007). Relational leadership, as described by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), involves a way of being in the world characterised by practical wisdom, intersubjectivity, and dialogue. This resonates with the notion that educational leadership, particularly in the school setting, goes beyond mere actions and behaviours; it entails an ongoing engagement with others, moral accountability, and relational dialogue.

Relational leadership theory represents a shift from traditional hierarchical leadership models, which are often seen as authoritative and disempowering because they concentrate power in a single individual at the top (Lephoto 2019; Rice 2012; Uhl-Bien 2006). This theory aligns with the principles of distributed leadership and the Department of Education circular (2018), emphasising that leadership can "occur in any direction" (Uhl-Bien 2006, 667).

The core values of relational leadership include trust, integrity, accountability, and care (Smit 2018; Smit and Scherman 2016; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). Demonstrating these values can significantly influence a school's culture, as evidenced by Smit (2018), who found that a principal's demonstration of care and relational leadership attributes is often mirrored in the students. Understanding relational leadership is crucial because it emphasises the importance of interactions between people and how these relationships influence behaviour and effectiveness (Uhl-Bien 2006; 2004). Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership, relational leadership is evident at all levels, fostering a more inclusive and collaborative environment (Smit 2018; Uhl-Bien 2006). International research supports the positive impact of relational leadership on schools and students, indicating its benefits in fostering a supportive and effective learning environment (Priyono and Anggorowati 2020; Smit and Scherman 2016). By focusing on relational dynamics, principals can create a school culture that promotes engagement, collaboration, and mutual respect.

The focus on school principals in this current study is suitable for relational leadership theory for several reasons. Principals, as educational leaders, play a pivotal role in shaping the culture of schools. Their interactions with staff, students, and other stakeholders are

critical in influencing the overall dynamics of the educational environment. By concentrating on school principals, the study aims to delve into the specific relational dynamics within the leadership context of schools. This focus allows for an in-depth exploration of how principals, as relational leaders, engage with conflicts, foster positive relationships, and contribute to the overall culture of school. While other roles within the school community are undoubtedly important, the principal's role makes their relational engagements particularly significant and influential on the broader school culture. Therefore, narrowing the focus to school principals aligns with the core tenets of relational leadership theory and provides a targeted examination of leadership dynamics within the school setting.

4.3 Sensemaking

The objectives of the study are directly linked to the use of the sensemaking theory in the research framework. Firstly, to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture; sensemaking, as a theory, emphasises the continuous understanding of complex situations. The second objective, to explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture. Thirdly, the objective to develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture; this will include developing recommendations and approaches and involves understanding the cues extracted from the environment during conflicts. The plausibility-driven sensemaking aligns with the practical decision-making required to address conflicts and contribute to school culture. The methodological approach (outlined in the next chapter), allows for a dynamic exploration of participants' sensemaking processes, enabling a deeper understanding of how principals actively seek and process information during conflicts.

Sensemaking is the theory I use to analyse the research because it is not about truth and getting it right but rather the attempt to search for meaning in the actions. Sensemaking is about the interplay of action and interpretation rather than the influence of evaluation of choice (Weick and Sutcliffe 2015). This aligns with the qualitative nature of the research, where the goal is to explore how post-primary principals construct, interpret and make sense of staff conflict. Weick highlights that individuals and organisations are continually engaged in making sense of the world around them, especially in complex and ambiguous situations. Weick's conceptualisation of sensemaking, which highlights

the interplay between action and interpretation, remains a foundational theory. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking involves the retrospective development of plausible images that rationalise what people are doing. This retrospective aspect is essential for understanding how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. However, it is important to note that even though these theories were developed some time ago, their core principles continue to be relevant. Dervin (2015) made a significant contribution to communication theory with her sensemaking methodology, emphasising the active process individuals undertake to fill gaps in information. Dervin's insights provide a foundation for comprehending the cognitive processes involved in sensemaking during conflicts. Principals, much like the information-seekers in Dervin's framework, grapple with informational gaps when dealing with staff conflicts. Applying Dervin's sensemaking methodology allows for a nuanced examination of how principals actively seek and process information to construct meaning and navigate through conflicts. From a social constructivist perspective, organisations are viewed as intersubjective realities that are continuously constructed and enacted through communication and interaction among their members (Weick and Sutcliffe 2007). This perspective remains influential in understanding how principals and other organisational members co-construct their social reality.

Weick's sensemaking theory aligns with social constructivist approaches to organisations. Social constructivism emphasises that social reality is not an objective entity but rather a product of the subjective and intersubjective experiences of individuals within a social context. By adopting Weick's perspective, the study acknowledges and embraces the idea that organisational realities are socially constructed, shaped by interpretations and sensemaking efforts of individuals involved. Post-primary principals hold a central and influential role within the school environment. As key decision-makers and leaders, their interpretations and sensemaking processes can play a crucial role in shaping the overall organisational culture. Focusing on principals allows for an in-depth understanding of how their perspectives contribute to the intersubjective reality within the school. The principal's actions, decisions, and interpretations significantly impact the interactions and relationships within the organisation. Thus, exploring how principals construct meaning from staff conflicts directly addresses the leadership influence on the continuous construction and enactment of intersubjective realities. Indeed, their role is pivotal in shaping the overall social fabric of the organisation. Principals possess decision-making authority and agency, allowing them to implement strategies and interventions in response

to staff conflicts. Understanding how principals interpret and make sense of conflicts contributes directly to comprehending the agency they exert in shaping the organisational reality. This lens is crucial for identifying potential areas of improvement and intervention. While recognising the intersubjective nature of organisations, focusing on the principal allows for a comprehensive exploration of how individual sensemaking contributes to the broader organisational tapestry. The principal serves as a focal point through which the study can gain a nuanced understanding of how intersubjective realities unfold and evolve.

Weick's sensemaking theory and relational leadership share a common thread in their emphasis on social processes, interactions, and the intersubjective nature of reality construction. Weick's sensemaking theory complements relational leadership by providing a framework to understand how these relationships contribute to the construction of shared realities within the organisational context. While sensemaking theory is often discussed in terms of individual cognition and interpretation, its application within the organisational context recognises that these individual sensemaking efforts occur within a social framework. Individuals within an organisation are interconnected, and their sensemaking is influenced by social interactions, communication, and shared narratives. This study, therefore, acknowledges the individualistic aspect of sensemaking while situating it within the broader social and relational dynamics of the organisation.

Weick (1995) summarised his theory through seven properties that, together, stress its dynamic, social, and retrospective nature. The seven features may be summarised as follows:

Table 2: Weick (1995)

1. Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction.	"How can I know who I am until I see what I say?" is one of the most illustrative sayings of Weick's sensemaking perspective. Sense if in the eye of the beholder, which means that when people make sense of whatever happens around them, this has implications for the way people (ideally) see themselves.
2. Sensemaking is retrospective.	After a certain time, the process is reflected upon. This is always done afterwards. This aspect, looking afterwards at a process, depends on the success of the process. Weick states that

		sensemaking is influenced by what people notice in elapsed events, how far back they look and how they remember what they were doing.
3.	Sensemaking enables sensible environments.	Action is crucial for sensemaking; we cannot command, and the environment will obey. Moreover, we cannot predict exactly something that will happen, because everything is part of a larger truth. Entity and environment are factors that influence each other. You are neither a plaything of the environment nor independent of it. Somewhere in between is the meaning.
4.	Sensemaking is social.	While it is easy to consider sensemaking to be primarily an introspective process, in fact, we make sense of things in organisations while in conversations with others, while reading communications from others, while exchanging ideas with others. That is how sense becomes organisational. To quote Weick: "When social anchors disappear and one feels isolated from a social reality of some sort, one's grasp of what is happening begins to loosen" (Weick 2001, 461).
5.	Sensemaking is ongoing.	People are continuously trying to make sense of their daily activities. Sensemaking never stops; it is an ongoing process.
6.	Sensemaking is focused on, and by, extracted cues.	In life, people are confronted with several cues, too many to notice. A person will notice only a few cues, because of their own filter. One's interests and unconsciousness, as well as coincidental situational factors, determine what cues will be focused upon.
7.	Sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.	Organisational decision making is often based on the odds and can involve more intuition than careful analysis and systematic elimination of suboptimal choices. Beyond decision making, people construct the meanings of things based on reasonable explanations of what might be happening rather than through scientific discovery of the 'real story'.

Weick's emphasis on the subjective nature of leadership experiences resonates with relational leadership theory. His notion that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction aligns with the relational perspective, where leaders' identities are shaped through continuous interactions with others. The retrospective nature of sensemaking, involving reflecting on processes after they occur, corresponds to the idea that organisational realities are socially constructed over time through continuous interactions. Social interdependence, linked with relational leadership, emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals within an organisation. The retrospective nature of sensemaking acknowledges that individuals are influenced by past interactions, shaping their current understanding of conflicts and relationships. Weick's sensemaking theory, in conjunction with relational leadership, offers a comprehensive framework. The social nature of sensemaking, its continuous and retrospective aspects, and the focus on interactions contribute to a holistic understanding of how principals make sense of staff conflicts within the organisational context of a school.

Additionally, focusing on principals allows an examination into the intricacies of how their past experiences fundamentally shape their current approach to conflicts and relationships. As principals navigate staff conflicts, they draw on previous encounters and resolutions, which inform their strategies and decisions. This reflective process is not merely a cognitive exercise but is embedded in the relational dynamics and social fabric of the school. Each interaction with staff members, whether positive or contentious, contributes to a repository of experiences that influence their leadership style and conflict management techniques. By understanding how principals past experiences inform their present actions, we can gain insights into the development of relational leadership practices. This perspective underscores the importance of continuous learning and adaptation in leadership roles, as principals must constantly integrate new experiences into their sensemaking processes to foster a harmonious and productive school culture. Through this lens, the study of relational leadership and sensemaking provides a rich context for exploring how principals construct meaning and navigate the complexities of school environments.

Weick's sensemaking theory is particularly valuable in the social dynamics captured through semi-structured interviews which will form part of this research. The emphasis on the subjective nature of leadership experiences aligns with the qualitative nature of interviews, providing a platform for participants to express their personal experiences and interpretations of staff conflicts. Weick's emphasis on the subjective nature of leadership

experiences resonates in the interview context. The notion that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction is highly relevant in understanding how leaders define their roles in the school environment. In interviews, participants can articulate how their professional identities, shaped by continuous interactions, influence their sensemaking processes during conflicts. The retrospective nature of sensemaking aligns with the interview process, where participants are encouraged to reflect on past experiences. This retrospective lens allows principals to delve into specific instances of staff conflict, shedding light on how these events have shaped their current understanding and responses.

The following table shows Weick (1995) directly linked with the aim of this research:

Table 3: Weick and the aim of this research

1. Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction.	This study will delve into the concept of sensemaking grounded in identity construction. Weick's theory posits that individuals employ their professional identities as a framework for interpreting and making sense of their experiences. Understanding how post-primary principals' identities shape their sensemaking processes in the context of staff conflict becomes pivotal for personal and professional growth and has broader implications for school culture.
2. Sensemaking is retrospective.	By recognising that sensemaking is retrospective, the study aims to explore how post-primary principals retrospectively reflect on past instances of staff conflict. This exploration is crucial for understanding how these leaders perceive and interpret the unfolding dynamics of conflicts within their schools. This retrospective lens contributes to a nuanced understanding of their perceptions and viewpoints and principals, by reflecting on past conflicts, can draw on valuable insights to propose effective strategies for addressing staff conflicts. Therefore, acknowledging the retrospective dimension of sensemaking serves as a foundational element linking the study's exploration of sensemaking processes to the overarching intent and specific aims related to staff conflict and its influence on school culture.

3. Sensemaking enables sensible environments.	The assertion that sensemaking enables sensible environments is directly relevant to understanding how post-primary principals navigate and comprehend the nature and forms of staff conflict. By making sense of these conflicts, principals contribute to fostering a more comprehensible and coherent school environment. Examining the influence of staff conflict on school culture involves recognising how sensemaking enables sensible environments. Principals, through their sensemaking processes, play a crucial role in shaping a school culture that is responsive and adaptive to the challenges posed by staff conflicts. The concept of sensemaking enabling sensible environments informs the development of recommendations. Principals, by leveraging sensemaking, can propose approaches that contribute to more effective conflict resolution, thereby creating an educational environment conducive to positive interactions and growth.
4. Sensemaking is social.	Understanding that sensemaking is a social process is integral to examining the nature and forms of staff conflict. Recognising the social nature of sensemaking contributes to understanding how these principals collectively perceive and respond to the influence of staff conflict on school culture. Given that sensemaking is inherently social, the development of recommendations and approaches is influenced by this understanding. Principals, as social actors in the educational environment, can leverage their collective sensemaking processes to contribute to more effective conflict resolution strategies that foster a positive and conducive educational atmosphere.
5. Sensemaking is ongoing.	Acknowledging that sensemaking is an ongoing process is fundamental to examining the nature and forms of staff conflict. The study recognises that post-primary principals continuously engage in the sensemaking of ongoing conflicts within the Munster region to comprehend the evolving dynamics. Understanding that sensemaking is ongoing directly informs the exploration of Irish post-primary principals' perceptions. The

		continuous nature of sensemaking influences how these principals perceive and respond to the persistent influence of staff conflict on school culture. Given that sensemaking is a continual endeavour, the development of recommendations and approaches is influenced by this understanding. Principals, engaged in an ongoing sensemaking process, can contribute to more effective conflict resolution strategies that adapt to the evolving nature of conflicts, fostering a positive and conducive educational environment.
6.	Sensemaking is focused on, and by, extracted cues.	Understanding that sensemaking is focused on extracted cues is crucial to principals' experiences of staff conflict on school culture. Post-primary principals, relying on extracted cues, navigate through the complexities of conflicts, shaping their interpretations and responses. The acknowledgment that sensemaking is focused on extracted cues directly informs the exploration of Irish post-primary principals' experiences. These cues become vital elements in how principals experience the influence of staff conflict on school culture. Recognising that sensemaking is guided by extracted cues contributes to the development of recommendations and approaches. Principals, attuned to relevant cues, can formulate more effective strategies for addressing staff conflicts, thereby positively influencing school culture.
7.	Sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.	The acknowledgment that sensemaking is driven by plausibility significantly informs the exploration of conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture. Principals, guided by plausible interpretations, contribute to shaping the understanding of conflicts within their schools. Understanding that sensemaking is driven by plausibility is essential for exploring Irish post-primary principals' experiences. Their experiences of the influence of staff conflict on school culture are inherently shaped by what seems plausible within the context. Recognising that sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy

	contributes to the development of recommendations and approaches. Principals, focusing on plausible explanations, can formulate more effective strategies for addressing staff conflicts, thereby influencing school culture.

In the realm of school leadership, scholars such as Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2019) argue that principals function as sense-makers who respond flexibly in a dynamic environment. The reflective leadership approach, as proposed by Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2016), shows how post-primary principals can make sense of staff conflict, fostering a collaborative, distributed sensemaking process contributing to school culture. The sensemaking process involves the construction of reality through the interpretation of prior knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs (Spillane and Anderson 2014; Coburn 2001; Weick 1995). Principals' sensemaking becomes nested within multiple contexts, guided not only by their values but also by colleagues' values and established norms. In my findings and discussion chapters, I will draw upon Weick's (1995) model of sensemaking to explore how these elements coalesce to shape principals' responses to conflicts. This model provides a structured framework for examining the iterative process through which principals experience challenging situations, highlighting the importance of context, identity, and social dynamics. This interactive process, shaping and being shaped by school culture, has the potential to either reinforce existing practices or facilitate educational change (Schein 2009; Coburn 2005). As such, analysing principals' sensemaking offers valuable insights into how they negotiate, mediate, and manage staff conflict within their local contexts (Koyama 2014).

4.4 Conclusion

As we navigate these theoretical lenses, we recognise the intricate layers of leadership, and sensemaking. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how post-primary principals construct meaning from staff conflicts, contributing to the continuous construction and enactment of school culture. This theoretical foundation positions the study to unfold the complex narratives embedded in the experiences of post-primary principals, offering valuable insights for conflict resolution strategies and the cultivation of school culture.

Chapter 5: **Methodology**

5.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the intricacies of the research design and methodology employed in this study, providing a comprehensive understanding of the choices made to explore the influence of staff conflict on school culture. The research design is conceptualised through the lens of Saunders et al.'s (2007) research onion, ensuring a systematic and layered approach to the research process. The underlying philosophical foundations are rooted in social constructivism, shaping the ontology, while interpretivism guides the epistemological stance. The chosen methodology embraces a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews to uncover the experiences of school principals in the Munster region.

Furthermore, this chapter will illuminate the researcher's positionality, offering insights into the lens through which the study is conducted. Ethical considerations underpin the entire research endeavour, with a robust ethical framework providing a safeguard for the participants. In addition, data analysis is undertaken using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step reflective thematic analysis approach, ensuring a rigorous exploration of themes emerging from the rich qualitative data. Finally, the concept of credibility will be discussed, emphasising the steps taken to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the study findings. Together, these elements form the foundation of the research design, contributing to the depth and quality of insights garnered from the exploration of principals' experiences of the influence of staff conflict on school culture.

The study's methodology is well-aligned with the principles, concepts, and tenets of the theoretical framework. The methodology's emphasis on exploring how post-primary principals in the Munster region construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture aligns with relational leadership theory. This theory emphasises the importance of relationships, communication, and collaboration in leadership, which is pertinent to understanding how principals navigate staff conflict and its influence on school culture. The methodology's focus on interpretivism, where understanding is constructed through the interpretation of experiences, resonates with the sensemaking aspect of the theoretical framework. Principals' sensemaking of staff

conflict is central to the study, and an interpretive approach is well-suited to capture the nuanced meanings and interpretations they assign these experiences.

5.2 Research design

The following section in this chapter was steered by the layers of the research onion, developed by Saunders et al. (2007), as depicted in Figure 2. These provide a progressive framework that enables the design of various research methodologies. As per Saunders et al. (2012), the research process unfolds like peeling an onion layer by layer, with each step taken in the right sequence to achieve the desired outcome, aligning with the methodology's progression from one step to the next. The initial layer represents the research philosophy, setting the groundwork for the research process and defining the adopted research approach in the subsequent step. The subsequent layers include the adopted research strategy, followed by research choices and identification of the time horizon. The methodology for data collection is then developed in the next stage. The research onion's benefit lies in its provision of a series of stages that assist in comprehending different data collection methods, outlining the steps through which methodological studies can be articulated.
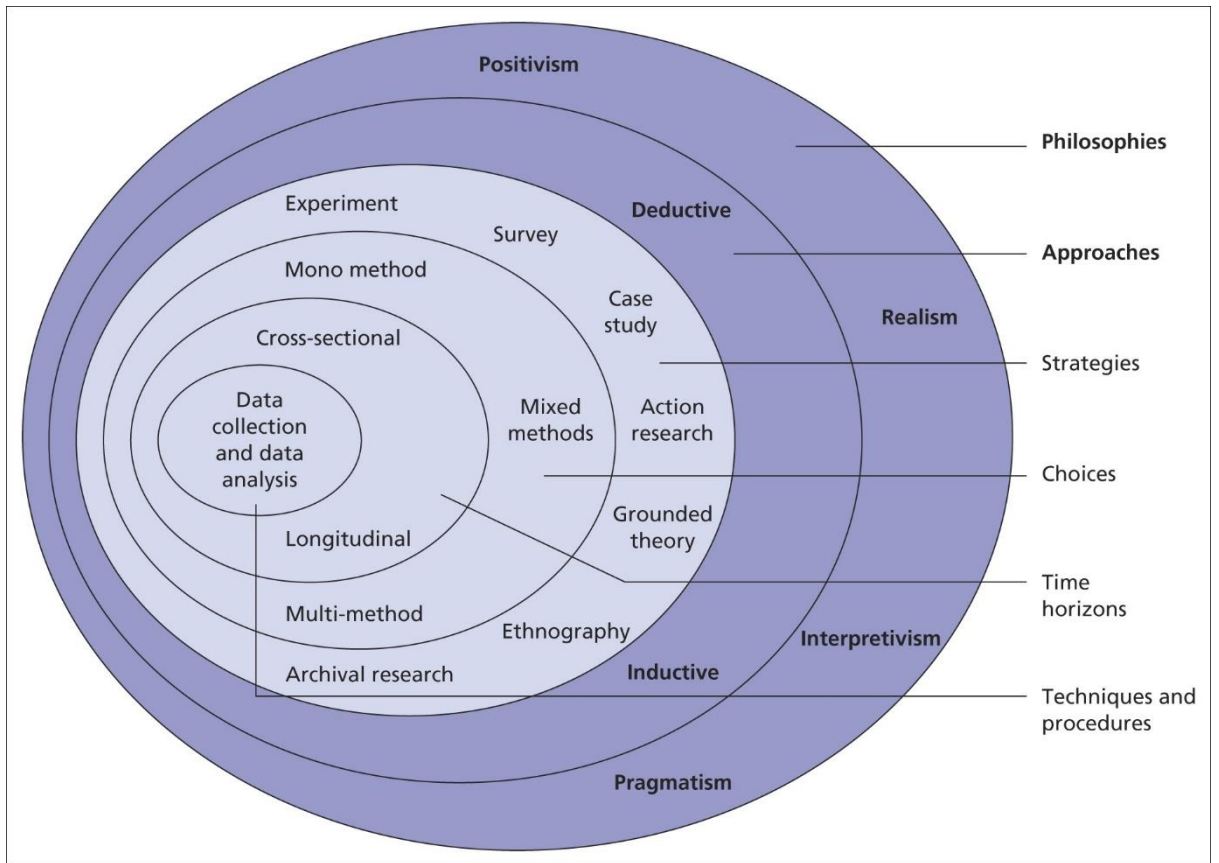
Figure 2: The research onion

(Source: Saunders et al. 2012)
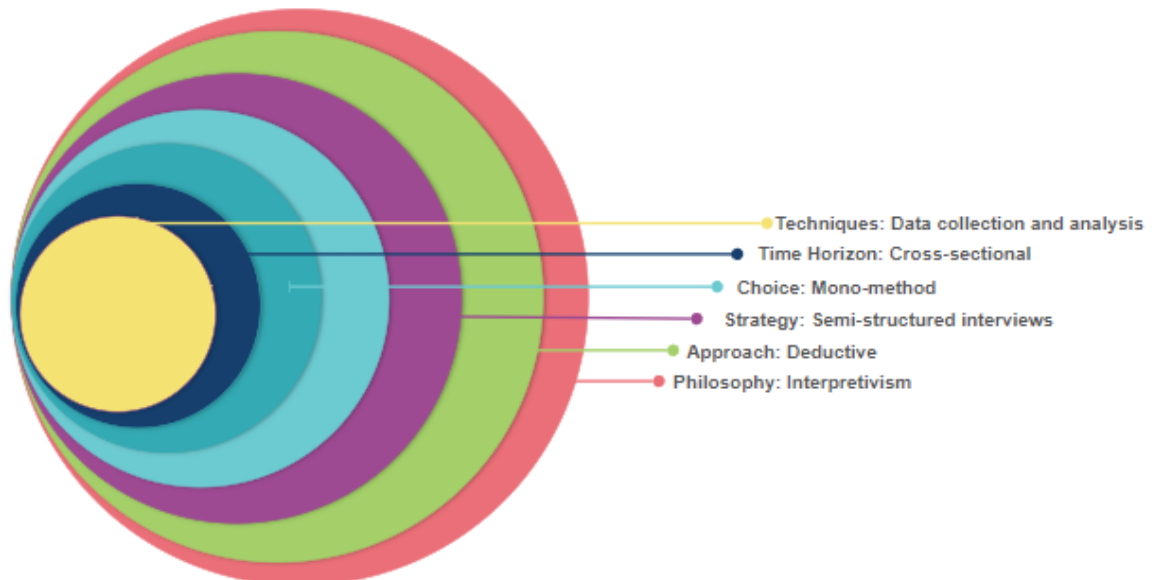
Figure 3: The research onion mapped to this research

Figure 3 shows this research study mapped onto Saunders et al. research onion (2019). As per the research onion, various crucial considerations precede the core of the onion—data collection and analysis. The sequence begins with defining the research philosophy, which sets the foundation for the chosen research approach. This leads to choosing the research strategy, followed by the identification of the time horizon as the fourth step. Finally, the fifth step focuses on how to collect the research data.

5.3 Philosophical underpinnings of this study

The philosophical underpinnings of this study show the interconnection of my worldviews, design and research methods (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

Ontology – social constructivism

The choice of social constructivism as an ontological commitment is in harmony with the emphasis on understanding how individuals, in this case, principals, actively construct knowledge and meanings in their social context. The study recognises that reality is socially constructed, and meanings are contingent upon the interactions and interpretations within the social environment. Social constructivism, a theory within sociology and the philosophy of knowledge, places a significant emphasis on the role of social interaction and shared meaning in the formation of knowledge and reality. When adopting social constructivism as an ontology, we delve into the foundational beliefs that underpin the social constructivist perspective regarding the nature of reality and existence. This perspective challenges the notion that reality is an objective, independent entity awaiting discovery. Instead, it contends that reality is actively constructed and moulded by individuals and groups through their social interactions, language, and shared meanings.

From an ontological standpoint, social constructivism challenges the idea of a fixed and predetermined reality. It suggests that reality is socially and culturally contingent, proposing that our understanding of the world is not merely a reflection of an external, objective reality. Rather, it is a product of the social processes through which we interpret and make sense of our experiences. In summary, social constructivism as ontology posits that the nature of reality is socially constructed, contingent on human interactions, language, and shared meanings, thereby challenging the concept of a fixed and independent reality.

Aligned with a social constructivist standpoint, this research views the world through the lens of creating and constructing experiences. Social constructivism, rooted in Vygotsky's social learning theory, asserts that individuals actively participate in constructing their knowledge (Schreiber and Valle 2013). Vygotsky's perspective emphasises that learning occurs significantly within social and cultural contexts, not just within an individual's mind (Schreiber and Valle 2013). Social constructivism highlights the strong influence of interpersonal interactions and dialogue on school culture.

This current study embraces a social constructivist perspective, prioritising the exploration of how school principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. Creswell (2014) emphasises the importance of, attending to relative interactions, understanding the subjective meanings and worldviews of others, recognising the intricacies inherent in those perspectives for interpretation. The researcher's objective is to centre on participants' viewpoints, with the questions posed in this study intentionally broad and general, typically allowing participants the space to construct meaning from the situations they discuss, typically emerging from dialogues or interactions with others (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Given the current study's focus on principals' experiences of staff conflict within school culture, the acquisition and interpretation of individual and subjective realities that participants contribute to the discussion are crucial in addressing the research objectives.

While the research exclusively captures the perspectives and experiences of post-primary principals, the choice to adopt a social constructivist approach is advantageous for several reasons. Social constructivism, as the chosen ontological commitment, aligns with the emphasis on understanding how individuals actively construct knowledge and meanings within their social context, a notion particularly relevant to the current study's focus on principals' experiences of the influence of staff conflict and school culture. By recognising that reality is socially constructed and meanings are contingent upon interactions and interpretations within the social environment, the study acknowledges the dynamic nature of knowledge formation. Moreover, social constructivism challenges the idea of a fixed and predetermined reality, proposing instead that reality is socially and culturally contingent, which is pertinent when exploring subjective experiences such as principals' interpretations of staff conflict. Additionally, rooted in Vygotsky's social learning theory, social constructivism underscores the strong influence of interpersonal interactions and dialogue on school culture, which is crucial for understanding how principals construct, interpret, and make sense of staff conflict within the broader context

of school culture. Therefore, by embracing a social constructivist perspective, the research aims to delve into the intricacies of principals' subjective realities, allowing them to actively participate in constructing knowledge and meaning in their social context, thereby enriching the understanding of the influence of staff conflict on school culture.

Epistemology – interpretivism

Epistemology, the study of knowledge and understanding, involves different approaches like positivism, realism, and interpretivism (Bryman 2012). A researcher's epistemological stance influences how they study social behaviour (Bryman 2012), with Moses and Knutsen (2007) defining epistemology as the philosophical study of knowledge and its nature. Cohen (2011) notes that it involves the bases of knowledge, its forms, acquisition, and communication. However, social science, distinct from natural science, requires a different research logic (Bryman 2008), whereby understanding human behaviour is subjective, leading researchers to engage with participants, and thus rejecting natural science approaches (Cohen 2011). Here, the epistemological stance of interpretivism aligns with the current study's objective of exploring the experiences of principals. It therefore acknowledges that knowledge is subjective, context dependent, and shaped by the participants' interpretations.

In addition, a social constructivist perspective naturally aligns with a qualitative interpretive approach, wherein the researcher's role is to comprehend the meanings embedded in participants' data, serving as the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis (Creswell and Creswell 2018). While ontology delves into the philosophical realm concerning the nature of reality, epistemology focuses on knowledge, posing inquiries about how we acquire our understanding (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). Interpretivism, as an epistemological framework, lends support to qualitative research endeavours. It empowers researchers to derive meaning from the world through social contexts, allowing researchers to actively engage in the ongoing process of meaning-making for a more profound understanding (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

Interpretivism supports this qualitative research, in researching post-primary principals' experiences of staff conflict. As a practitioner and current post-primary principal, my personal experiences enable empathetic interactions, fostering meaningful discussions on nuanced aspects of principalship. As a practitioner, my experiences as a current post-primary principal contribute to a contextual understanding. The focus is on constructing meaningful insights through interpretations and in-depth exploration (Creswell and

Creswell 2018). This interpretive lens guides the research design, bringing the study's methodology into focus.

5.4 Methodology – qualitative approach

Saunders et al. (2012) and Creswell (2012) outline quantitative and qualitative methodological paradigms. Qualitative research is an emergent process that gradually accumulates knowledge without preconceived notions, whereas quantitative data's strength lies in numerical values, making it unsuitable for this study's emphasis on the how and why questions (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2007). Quantitative methods can restrict subjective insights into human learning scenarios (Cohen et al. 2011). Thus, the study adopted a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research delves into a phenomenon, gathering and interpreting comprehensive information to derive meaning (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The qualitative approach allows researchers to engage with participants and understand their perspectives (Corbin and Strauss 2015). The focus of this research is to understand the experiences of post-primary principals regarding staff conflict, which was gathered through semi-structured interviews. The aim isn't to provide population-level data but to illuminate a particular set of meaningful perspectives (Smith et al. 2009). The choice of a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, is consistent with the interpretive paradigm. This method allows for in-depth exploration and interpretation of the participants' experiences, providing rich data that aligns with this current qualitative study.

5.5 Research method

Semi-structured interviews are invaluable tools for extracting knowledge through interactive conversations, drawing on subjects with diverse life experiences. In a semi-structured interview, there is room for participants to share their experiences. This narrative exploration allows for a deeper understanding of the interviewees' experiences, and the context in which they operate. Participants are not constrained to simple yes-or-no responses but are encouraged to elaborate on their experiences and provide rich, qualitative data. The use of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview facilitates this elaboration of perspectives and experiences. The emphasis on perspectives and experiences aligns with the idea that knowledge is not solely derived from abstract concepts or statistical data. In a semi-structured interview, the exploration with participants provides a qualitative depth that can enrich and expand the knowledge base.

This firsthand, contextual knowledge contributes to a more holistic comprehension of the subject of principals' experience of staff conflict on school culture. The semi-structured nature of the interview allows for adaptability. If a participant begins to share a particularly insightful experience, the interviewer can explore that avenue further, deviating from the predetermined set of questions. This flexibility ensures that the interview captures the richness of the participants' experiences and allows for unexpected revelations that can significantly contribute to the research.

The interview structure adopted in this research adhered to a semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell 2014). The construction of the interview questions for this protocol was a meticulous iterative process, drawing from a comprehensive analysis of various sources to create a robust and well-informed set of inquiries (Appendices 2 and 3). The foundation of these questions was laid through an examination of policy documents (as set out in the policy chapter), a thorough review of existing literature (as detailed in the literature review chapter), personal professional experiences, and insights derived from a preliminary pilot interview (discussed in more detail below). The first step involved a detailed examination of policy documents. This included analysis of the legal framework, Department of Education and government guidelines and policy, specific school policies, and other pertinent documents that provided insight into the subject matter. By scrutinising these documents, I aimed to ensure that the interview questions aligned with established policies and regulations, fostering a connection between theoretical framework and real-world applications. An example of this alignment can be seen in the interview question related to handling conflict: *"What approaches or strategies do you employ to address or mitigate staff conflict within the school?"* This question is directly informed by the detailed examination of policy documents, legal frameworks, and government guidelines, as well as insights derived from existing literature and personal professional experiences. By integrating established policies and regulations into the formulation of interview questions, the study ensures that the exploration of principals' experiences with staff conflict remains relevant and applicable within the context of educational governance and institutional regulations. Additionally, by soliciting principals' experiences on their strategies for addressing conflict, the research aims to uncover practical insights that can inform and enhance leadership practices in real-world school settings, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and on-the-ground implementation.

The development of questions was further enriched by an extensive literature review. Emerging themes including school culture, school policies, and principalship were identified from academic sources and incorporated into the interview protocol. This ensured that the questions were rooted in current knowledge and allowed for the exploration of up-to-date experiences. For instance, one key theme that emerged from the literature was the importance of understanding perspectives in staff conflict within school contexts. Drawing upon this insight, the interview question, *"How do you define or conceptualise 'staff conflict' within the context of your school?"*, seeks a nuanced understanding of the role of individual perceptions in shaping conflict dynamics. By incorporating insights from the literature on conflict resolution and interpersonal dynamics, this question aims to elicit principals' subjective understandings of staff conflict, thereby providing valuable insights into the diverse ways in which conflict is interpreted within school environments. Furthermore, the question *"What approaches or strategies do you employ to address or mitigate staff conflict within the school?"* directly reflects the integration of established strategies from academic sources into the interview protocol. Through the literature review, the researcher identified various conflict resolution techniques and leadership strategies used by principals. By incorporating this knowledge into the interview question, the study seeks to explore the practical approaches employed by principals in managing conflicts within their schools, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and real-world applications. This ensures that the questions are, not only rooted in current knowledge, but also allow for the exploration of up-to-date perspectives and practices in addressing staff conflict within the context of school culture.

Drawing from personal professional experiences added a practical and contextual dimension to the interview questions. The integration of insights gained from hands-on involvement in the field provided a realistic and pragmatic foundation for the inquiries. This step aimed to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and the practical challenges encountered in the professional domain. Drawing from personal professional experiences added a practical and contextual dimension to the interview questions, enriching the inquiry process with real-world insights and challenges. For instance, a principal who has navigated through various staff conflicts firsthand can offer valuable experiences on the complexities and nuances involved in managing such situations within the school environment. These personal experiences can bring depth and authenticity to the interview questions, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of the subject matter.

The interview question *"What approaches or strategies do you employ to address or mitigate staff conflict within the school?"* This question is connected to the exploration of how principals draw from the personal professional experiences when responding to the question. Drawing from personal professional experiences, I have encountered specific strategies and techniques that were used in resolving conflicts within my own school setting. For example, having implemented structured mediation sessions between conflicting parties, established clear communication channels to address grievances, or introduced collaborative problem-solving approaches to foster resolution. By integrating insights gained from hands-on involvement in conflict resolution, I was able to provide concrete examples and practical recommendations, thereby enhancing the relevance and applicability of the interview questions. Moreover, the integration of insights gained from personal professional experiences aims to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and the practical challenges encountered in the professional domain. For instance, while theoretical frameworks on conflict resolution may offer valuable insights into underlying dynamics and best practices, they may not always fully capture the complexities and nuances of real-world scenarios. Personal experiences provide a pragmatic lens through which to understand and contextualise theoretical concepts, offering valuable lessons and practical strategies that can inform decision-making and practice in educational leadership.

In the process of refining the interview protocol, a pivotal step involved conducting a pilot interview as part of the protocol development process. This preliminary interview served as a crucial testing ground for both the questions and the overall format intended for the study. The pilot interview was managed, beginning with the selection of a post-primary principal who met the study's criteria and was willing to participate in the pilot phase. Throughout the pilot interview, attention was paid to various aspects, including the clarity and relevance of the questions, the appropriateness of the interview format, and the overall flow of the conversation. For example, the interviewer closely monitored the participants' responses to assess their understanding of the questions and whether they elicited the desired information.

Insights gleaned from the pilot interview were instrumental in refining and finalising the interview protocol. Adjustments were made to enhance question clarity, better address response nuances, and improve the overall conversational flow. For instance, feedback from the pilot interview highlighted certain questions that were perceived as overly broad or ambiguous by the participant. As a result, these questions were revised to provide more

specific prompts or examples to guide the participants' responses (e.g. for clarity with the question "*How does the broader school community impact or respond to staff conflicts, and how does this influence the school culture?*" examples were given to include students, parents). Moreover, observations on the pacing and sequencing of the interview informed adjustments aimed at ensuring a more coherent and engaging experience for both the interviewer and participant alike. These refinements were essential in ensuring that the interview protocol captured the intended information and facilitated meaningful discussions with participants, enhancing the study's rigour and validity.

The overarching goal of this protocol was to create a set of questions and a format that demonstrated consistency and allowed for adaptability to the diverse responses of the interviewees. By synthesising information from policy documents, the literature review, personal experiences, and the pilot interview, the resulting protocol was designed to be versatile and comprehensive in gathering insightful and meaningful responses (refer to Appendix 2 for the finalised questions).

Semi-structured interviews, as highlighted by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), promote real-time dialogues, enabling participants to elaborate on various themes and topics raised. The study utilised open-ended questions, allowing participants to provide additional information, including their emotions, attitudes, and perceptions of the subject matter (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). For example, the first question from the interview guide, delves into the understanding of perspectives regarding staff conflict within a school. Participants might define staff conflict based on their experiences and observations within the school environment, shedding light on the nuanced aspects that contribute to such conflicts. Participants were invited to share a specific instance of a disagreement between staff that significantly influenced the school culture, illustrating the tangible influence of staff conflict on the overall atmosphere of the school. The iterative nature of the process ensured a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the research topic.

The decision to conduct one-off semi-structured interviews with principals exclusively was driven by the need to gather in-depth, context-specific insights from those directly responsible for managing staff conflict and shaping school culture. This focus allowed for a concentrated examination of leadership perspectives and practices. The one-off nature of the interviews ensured that each session captured fresh, unfiltered reflections, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at plan. By selecting principals as the sole participants, I was able to maintain a focused, yet rigorous, approach,

eliminating potential dilution of insights from other sources. This method, was both comprehensive and robust, ensuring that the data gathered was rich in qualitative depth, firmly grounded in real-world leadership experiences.

Purposeful sampling and recruitment

In qualitative research, purposeful sampling is commonly employed to gain a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon and experiences of participants, providing the researcher with focused and detailed data (Patton 2015). The selection of participants was crucial in aiding the researcher's comprehension of the problem and addressing the research question (Creswell 2014).

The current study included fourteen school principals involved in the voluntary, education and training board, and community/comprehensive sectors. To facilitate access to participants, the assistance of school patron and management bodies—such as An Foras Pátrúnachta, CEIST, ERST, ETB, JMB, and Le Chéile—was sought to act as gatekeepers. These bodies played a crucial role in petitioning participation for the study. During the 2021/2022 academic year, these national support bodies disseminated the research invitation to principals in the Munster region via email (Appendix 4). Principals who were interested in participating signalled their willingness to be involved. This interest was confirmed through email correspondence, formalising their participation.

Principals provided a clear insight into the research problem. Creswell (2014) emphasises the importance of researcher access to participants through gatekeepers within their natural environment, and the involvement of principals offered unique insights into policy implementation and the challenges faced by schools across different contexts.

Upon confirmation of participation, I supplied each participant with the University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee's ethical approval letter (Appendix 1), the research information sheet, and the consent form. Participants were informed of the opportunity to discuss any queries or concerns via phone or email, although no participant took up this opportunity. It's important to note that the participants involved in the research did not represent a comprehensive sample of schools in the specific area; instead, they were a selection of post-primary school principals who volunteered for the study in the Munster region. Therefore, the researcher acknowledges that this study does not encompass all post-primary school principals and their perspectives. This recognition is in line with the theoretical framework, which encourages a deep understanding of specific experiences rather than aiming for an exhaustive representation. The emphasis is on quality over

quantity, with a focus on capturing the richness and complexity of how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture.

Despite not specifically targeting diversity in terms of gender, years of experience, or school type during the recruitment process, the resulting cohort of participants in the research study on staff conflict in Irish post-primary schools reflects a fortuitous diversity. The primary focus of the recruitment process was to engage post-primary principals from schools in Munster, aiming to capture a comprehensive understanding of staff conflict within the post-primary education landscape. This diversity enhanced the richness of perspectives on staff conflict within the Irish post-primary school setting, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and strategies employed by principals. The post-primary school sector in Ireland comprises different types of schools, including voluntary secondary schools, community schools, comprehensive schools, and education and training board schools. There are approximately 730 post-primary schools in total, distributed across these categories. Voluntary secondary schools account for 52% of these schools, education and training board schools for 36%, and community and comprehensive schools for 12% (Department of Education 2023).

The diverse sample encompasses a range of experience levels, with principals serving for various durations in their roles. The number of staff in the schools also varies, providing a mix of school sizes. Additionally, the participants represent different school patrons, contributing to a well-rounded and comprehensive exploration of experiences within the study. This was achieved through the dissemination of the research invitation to principals in the Munster region, through the national support bodies.

Table 4: Participants for post-primary principals' interviews

Participants	Gender	Years in Principal role	Number of staff in school (teaching, SNA, admin, support)	Patron
Mary	Female	16 years	36 staff	ERST
James	Male	5 years	70 staff	CEIST
Julie	Female	9 years	80 staff	ETB

Brian	Male	3 years	80 staff	ERST
Catherine	Female	1 year	30 staff	ETB
Rita	Female	5 years	30 staff	Le Chéile
Derek	Male	2 years	34 staff	CEIST / ETB
Michael	Male	1 year	55 staff	ERST
Breege	Female	5 years	37 staff	ETB

This was followed by semi-structed interviews with former principals, now employed with the national support bodies. The smaller sample focuses on representatives from national support bodies, providing insights from key stakeholders involved in educational leadership and management. The participants represent a range of support bodies, offering diverse perspectives and a comprehensive understanding of the support structures influencing school leadership. Including participants from these diverse bodies was crucial because they brought a wide range of experiences and insights that extended beyond the day-to-day management of individual schools. Ther perspectives on policy implementation, resource allocation, conflict resolution, and broader strategic challenges helped create a more comprehensive understanding of the external structures that influence school leadership. This diversity of viewpoints enriched the research by ensuring that the findings reflected not just the experiences of current principals, but also the broader systemic factors shaping leadership practices across different types of schools. This approach was vital to obtaining a holistic view of the support mechanisms that affect leadership, thereby contributing to a thorough and robust analysis of the issues at hand. This sample was achieved through the dissemination of the research invitation to the national support bodies with participants based in the Munster region.

Table 5: Former principals, now employed with national support body representatives' interviews

Participants	Gender	Body
Pat	Male	ERST
Anne	Female	JMB
Jacqueline	Female	NAPD/ CSL
Margaret	Female	CEIST

5.6 Data collection

This research study is particularly significant, as it addresses a notable gap in the existing literature. Specifically, there is a lack of studies focusing on the experiences of Irish post-primary principals in dealing with staff conflict. Despite the crucial role principals play in managing conflicts within school settings, there is limited research exploring their perspectives, strategies, and challenges in this area. Thus, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing valuable insights into the nuanced experiences of principals in navigating staff conflict within the Irish post-primary education system.

As highlighted by Silverman (2009), interviews serve as a powerful tool for amplifying voices that may have been previously concealed or marginalised in research. This is especially pertinent in the context of staff conflict, where specific information may be scarce, and the voices of principals may not have been adequately represented in academic literature. By conducting semi-structured interviews with post-primary school principals, this current research aims to provide a platform for these voices to be heard, offering a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges associated with managing staff conflict in school settings.

Furthermore, Silverman's emphasis on the importance of amplifying these voices highlights the significance of this study in shedding light on an underexplored aspect of educational leadership. By delving into the experiences of principals who grapple with staff conflict behind the scenes (NAPD 2022), this research seeks to elevate their experiences and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of leadership practices in fostering positive school cultures. This aligns with the commitment made in

the theoretical approach to delve into how conflict shapes school culture, the experience of principals of staff conflict, and the impact of past experiences on future approaches to conflict resolution. These areas of inquiry are essential for understanding the complex dynamics of staff conflict within school settings and informing strategies for conflict resolution.

5.7 Positionality

In the initial year of my doctoral studies, I served as Deputy Principal in a co-ed DEIS school in a deprived urban area. The contrast between this experience and my current role as the principal of an all-boys, rural secondary school highlighted the diversity within educational leadership contexts. Regardless of the setting, staff conflict emerged as a common thread, further aligning with my interest in conducting broader research on leadership of conflict in diverse contexts. My experience emphasised the universality of staff conflict across different educational leadership settings, regardless of their demographic, socio-economic, or geographical characteristics and how this resonates with existing research on leadership, as exemplified by scholars like Gunter (2003). My involvement as a part-time Associate with the Junior Cycle for Teachers support service added another layer to my understanding. Interacting with staff and principals while implementing crucial changes in teaching, learning, assessment, and reporting showed the significance of school culture and collaborative efforts.

Simultaneously, my role in delivering the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership provided insights into the interpretive process of school principals as they navigate policy implementation. Sensemaking, a concept explored by Weick, became a crucial lens through which I observed the translation of policy into school practices. Participating in a national-level community of practice for school principals, facilitated by the Centre for School Leadership, reinforced the importance of collective learning. Wenger and Snyder's (2000) work on communities of practice highlighted the collaborative efforts of school principals, aiming to enhance outcomes for students through shared experiences and practices.

5.8 Ethical framework

Positionality detailing the researcher's background, experiences, and perspectives, aligns with the ethical framework underpinning this research study. The ethical considerations outlined in the study reflect a commitment to upholding the highest standards in research

integrity and participant protection. Practices inclusive of ethical guidelines, codes of conduct, and oversight by ethics committees serve to delineate acceptable and unacceptable practices in academic research. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was secured from the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Committee (Appendix 1). The ethical framework of this study aligned with the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018) guidelines for educational research, Maynooth University Ethics Policy (2019), and Maynooth University's Research Integrity Policy (2021). Ethical considerations are often complex and require individuals to shoulder responsibility for their ethical choices and the consequent actions.

Informed consent procedure

Upon expressing their interest in participating in the study, prospective participants were provided with an information document via email (Appendix 3) along with a consent form. This comprehensive document outlined various aspects of the study, including its purpose, the roles of participants, potential benefits and risks of participation, the right to withdraw from the study at any point, confidentiality and privacy considerations, data collection procedures, and how the results would be utilised and disseminated. Additionally, participants were assured that both their identity and the identity of their school would remain confidential, and they would remain anonymous throughout the study process.

Following the dissemination of this information document, participants were given the opportunity to seek further clarification or information as needed. They were encouraged to carefully review the provided information and make an informed decision regarding their participation in the interview stage of the study based on the details provided. Upon reviewing the information and consenting to participate, participants were asked to complete and sign the consent form, indicating their voluntary agreement to take part in the study. The consent form outlined key points such as understanding the purpose and nature of the study, voluntary participation, permission for audio recording of the interview, the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the management of data collected. Participants were also given the option to agree or disagree to the quotation or publication of extracts from their interview. Furthermore, participants were informed of the procedures to follow in case of any problems or concerns during their participation in the study, including contacting the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee. Additionally, information regarding the Data Controller and Data Protection Officer for the research project at Maynooth University was provided for participants'

reference. Overall, this multi-step process ensured that participants were fully informed about the study, understood their rights and responsibilities, and provided their voluntary consent to participate before proceeding with the interview stage.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality assumes paramount significance within this study, given its reliance on one-to-one interactions with participants who willingly share insights into their professional experiences and deeply held beliefs. In the realm of research ethics, confidentiality involves the researcher possessing knowledge of a subject's identity while implementing rigorous precautions to shield that identity from external entities, as emphasised by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Upholding confidentiality in this study was not merely a procedural requirement. Indeed, it functioned as a crucial safeguard, ensuring the protection of sensitive information gathered during the research process.

To uphold the anonymity of participants, I assigned pseudonyms to participants, providing an additional layer of protection to their identities. This deliberate measure fostered an environment where participants felt secure in sharing candid perspectives, fostering trust and open communication. The connection between interviewees and their assigned pseudonyms, along with all recorded data, was subject to rigorous, high-level security measures. All information was securely stored and encrypted on my personal computer, which was password-protected to prevent unauthorised access. Furthermore, the reported data intentionally excluded any information that could potentially lead to the identification of individuals or specific schools, ensuring that participant confidentiality was maintained at every stage of the research.

Data storage and usage

Turning to data storage and usage, a comprehensive and secure protocol was established to protect the integrity of interview recordings and transcripts. These materials were securely maintained on my university Microsoft 365 account, guaranteeing restricted access and encrypted data accessible solely by the researcher. In addition, hard copy information sheets were securely stored in a locked cabinet, providing physical protection for sensitive materials. To protect the confidentiality of participant identities, the key to pseudonyms and codes was stored on a separate computer located in a different physical location than the raw data. This spatial separation added an extra layer of security against any potential breaches or unauthorised access to sensitive information.

Compliance with data protection laws and institutional ethical guidelines, as outlined in Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy (2019) and Research Integrity Policy (2021), was meticulously maintained throughout the research process. This commitment extended to data collected on mobile devices, where prompt removal and secure storage on a Maynooth University server were undertaken, ensuring adherence to ethical standards and legal requirements.

Looking ahead, a commitment to responsible data management includes securely storing the data for a period of ten years to facilitate future reassessment or verification. Following this period, a thorough and permanent destruction process will be implemented for all data, encompassing both manual (shredded) and electronic (reformatted) forms. This rigorous approach to data management aligns with ethical principles and safeguards the confidentiality and integrity of the research findings.

5.9 Data analysis

Braun and Clarke (2012; 2013; 2014; 2020; 2022) have outlined a six-phase process that aids in conducting thematic analysis, emphasising its importance in identifying and addressing crucial aspects during analysis. While these phases follow a logical sequence, the analysis is an iterative process, allowing movement back and forth through the phases as required (Braun and Clarke 2022; 2020). Thematic analysis is a time-intensive procedure that evolves as the researcher progresses through different phases, often leading to new data interpretations, which might necessitate further revisions of earlier phases. Thematic analysis, with its time-intensive and evolving nature, aligns with the intricacies involved in understanding how school principals construct, interpret, and make sense of staff conflict on school culture. This iterative process allows for a rich and nuanced exploration of the research questions. Hence, the six-phase process serves as a set of guidelines adaptable to fit the data and research question(s) rather than strict rules (Braun and Clarke 2022; 2020; 2012).

Throughout various publications, Braun and Clarke have sought to clarify many misconceptions in the literature and reinforce the principles of reflexive thematic analysis. This is particularly valuable to this research as it ensures a more accurate and robust application of thematic analysis principles in experiences of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. The term reflexive thematic analysis emerged in response to these misconceptions (Braun and Clarke 2019). It's recognised as an easily accessible, adaptable, and theoretically flexible method that aids in identifying patterns or themes

within a dataset (Braun and Clarke 2012). The reflexive nature emphasises the active role of the researcher in knowledge creation. This research involved exploring the experiences of school principals on staff conflict. Reflective thematic analysis aligns with this study, emphasising the active role of the researcher in knowledge creation. Codes are viewed as the researcher's interpretations of meaning patterns within the data. Reflexive thematic analysis involves the researcher's interpretive analysis at the intersection of the dataset, the analytical skills, and the theoretical assumptions (Braun and Clarke 2019). The term reflexive thematic analysis highlights the importance of the researcher's active engagement and reflexivity in the analytical process. In this study, where the aim is to understand the construction of meaning by school principals regarding staff conflict, the reflexive nature aligns with the need for thoughtful engagement with the data. It is understood that these intersecting criteria will differ between researchers, meaning that codes or themes developed by one researcher may not be replicated by another (though it is possible). The understanding that codes represent the researcher's interpretations of meaning patterns within the data is particularly relevant to this study. It acknowledges the subjective nature of interpretation, which is crucial when exploring the nuanced and complex topic of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. This method highlights the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with the data and the analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2019). Given the intricate nature of the research topic, this emphasis on thoughtful engagement aligns with the depth required to explore the perspectives of school principals in the context of staff conflict. The following figure identifies the six steps involved in reflective thematic analysis, provides a systematic framework for identifying and analysing patterns, themes, and meanings within qualitative data.
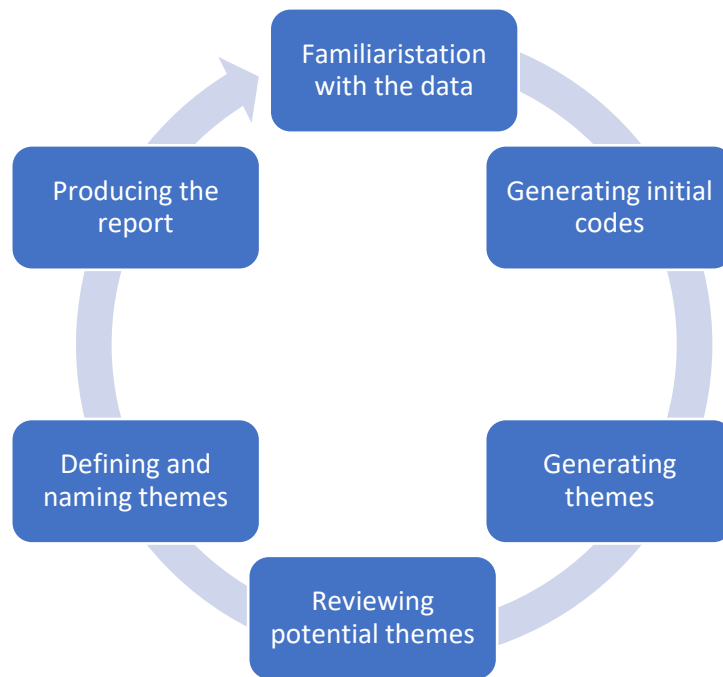
Figure 4: The six steps in reflective thematic analysis

(Source: Braun and Clarke 2022; 2013; 2006)

Phase one: familiarisation with the data

Phase one involved becoming familiar with the data. This phase is essential for the researcher to immerse themselves in the raw data, gaining a thorough understanding of its content. To facilitate this immersion the researcher decided to personally transcribe the recorded data. Analysis began during data collection and transcription, then listening to the recordings and reading transcripts. According to Merriam "collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research" (Merriam 2009, 169).

A recognised difficulty with transcript data is that it can be difficult to capture the nuances of the spoken word when it is in text form. To ensure accuracy during interpretation and analysis this was overcome by listening to the audio recording whilst reading the transcript data. This was found to be the best way to overcome omissions, repetition, sentence structure, punctuation and inference. The data was transcribed orthographically, carefully capturing inflections, pauses, tones, and other subtle nuances in the speech of both the interviewer and participant, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013). Equal attention was given to the entire dataset to avoid selective reading or overlooking any part of the transcription process (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The overarching goal of phase one was to develop deep familiarity with the dataset, laying the groundwork for a nuanced and insightful exploration of themes and patterns in the subsequent phases of thematic analysis.

Phase two: generating initial labels

Phase two involved generating initial labels. This phase built on the familiarisation with the data in phase one and focused on identifying and labelling specific features or patterns within the dataset. Labels serve as the foundational elements in the formation of subsequent themes. They should be concise yet offer enough detail to independently inform about the shared elements within the data regarding the research topic (Braun et al. 2016; Braun and Clarke 2012).

In starting the process of systematically labelling the data, I attached labels to segments of the data that represented meaningful concepts, themes, or patterns as demonstrated in the following table. These labels served as shorthand representations of the content. A label symbolises interpreted meanings attributed to individual data points for later pattern detection, categorisation, and theory building (Miles et al. 2013). It is a constructed representation of data.

Table 6: Initial labels in phase 2 of data analysis

Continuous professional development
Description of conflict
Dignity / code of conduct
Emotional intelligence
Existence of school conflict
Grievance/ discipline / WRC / union
How not to respond to conflict
Interventions
Legislation / procedure
Patron
Personal effect of conflict
Reason for conflict
Responding to conflict
Role of principal
School culture/ethos
Support
Whole school effect of conflict
Whole school effect of conflict > Staff room
Whole school effect of conflict > Students

Labelling, as Miles et al. (2013) argue, is an act of analysis and forms the initial step toward a rigorous analysis and interpretation of research findings. During transcript reading and re-reading, I added comments and queries in the margins, known as open labelling (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Moving to the next interview transcript, I continued the process by exploring interesting aspects that address the research questions, extracting

new labels as necessary. I moved through each transcript, extracting new labels as needed. The labelling process was not static; it evolved as new insights emerged from the data. I actively undertook a dynamic and iterative process of reading, labelling, and extracting meaningful information from interview transcripts.

For this study, qualitative software (MAXQDA) supported the analysis by organising and managing data, allowing labels to be assigned and retrieved. It is crucial to note that the software did not conduct the analysis but aided in data organisation (Biklen 2011). The combination of hand-coding and software-supported codes provided an efficient balance for data management and analysis.

Phase two involved the breakdown of the data into meaningful units through the generation of initial labels, laying the foundation for the identification and development of overarching themes in the later phases of thematic analysis.

Phase three: generating themes

This phase initiated once all pertinent data had been labelled. The focus shifted from interpreting individual data items to interpreting aggregate meaning across the dataset. The labelled data was reviewed to understand how different labels might combine to form themes or sub-themes.

Emergent patterns and themes became apparent from individual interview data, identifying shared points across multiple cases. This evolved into an interpretative account, fostering a dialogue between me as the researcher, labelled data, and my understanding of the context and participants (Smith et al. 2009). The development of relationships between various themes further enriched the narrative and these are explored in the findings chapter which follows.

A theme-by-theme interpretation with reflective commentaries benefitted the analysis process. Collating labels into initial themes such as 'school culture' or 'reflective practice' created a coherent and lucid picture of the dataset. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), there are no strict criteria for defining a theme. For this study, the themes were distinctive yet interconnected, weaving together to present a comprehensive understanding of the dataset. The process also involved cross verifying the themes against the dataset to ensure they communicated the story within the data and addressed the research questions.

Table 7 presents an overview of the initial themes and their associated labels, showing how the data was organised during the thematic analysis process. The table highlights the

main themes of – Relationships and Partnerships, Sustainable Principalship, and School Culture – each with corresponding labels that reflect key concepts emerging from the data. These labels were derived from patterns identified across individual interviews and represent the core elements that contributed to a deeper understanding of principals' experiences.

Table 7: Initial themes and associated labels

Theme: Relationships and partnerships	Theme: Sustainable principalship	Theme: School culture
Labels	**Labels**	**Labels**
• Duty of care	• Emotional intelligence	• Ethos
• Self-awareness	• Personal accountability	• Mission statement
• Code of conduct	• Retention	• Stakeholders
• Professional conduct	• Continuous professional development	• Whole school approach
• Dignity in the workplace	• Support network	• Leadership

Phase four: reviewing potential themes

This stage involved the researcher conducting a thorough and iterative review of the emerging themes in connection to both the labelled data and the entire dataset (Braun and Clarke 2022; 2020; 2012). While the process is typically structured into six phases, it is crucial to understand that the analysis isn't strictly linear but rather an iterative and cyclical process, requiring the researcher to move back and forth through the stages as necessary (Braun and Clarke 2022; 2020). These phases should be seen as guidelines rather than rigid rules, allowing flexibility to fit the data and align with the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2022; 2020; 2013). This study applied several key questions, set out in Table 8 below, in reviewing potential themes relevant to staff conflict.

Table 8: Braun and Clarke (2012; 2013; 2014; 2020; 2022) key questions applied to this study

Braun and Clarke (2012; 2023; 2014; 2020; 2022)	This research study:
• Is this a theme (it could be just a label)?	The theme identified is staff conflict.
• If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and the research question)?	The theme of staff conflict is central to the research question, with emerged subthemes incorporating reason for conflict and experiences of conflict.
• What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?	The theme of staff conflict includes: Responding to conflict, whole school effect of conflict on staff and students. This theme is related to the other themes, with reference to continuous professional development, ethos and culture.
• Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?	The theme of staff conflict had sufficient data to support it. The theme is specific yet broad enough to capture ideas.
• Are the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?	The data within the theme of staff conflict coheres together meaningfully, with a clear and identifiable distinction to the other themes.

After qualitative labels were identified, they were clustered based on commonalities, thus forming connections that facilitated category development. By way of example, labels related to professional ethics are clustered together, emphasising the importance of a principled approach in relationships and partnerships. Another cluster focused on personal and professional development, highlighting aspects related to sustainable

principalship. These clusters provided a structured way of organising the qualitative labels, forming connections that facilitate the development of broader categories within each theme. The process involved reasoning and intuitive judgment, grouping and regrouping data until they coalesced into categories sharing common traits (Miles et al. 2013). Themes were selected based on their resonance with personal or disciplinary concerns rather than just frequency. MAXQDA's functionality streamlined the identification and selection of data related to each theme. For example, an initial theme, 'surrounding environment', was discarded due to insufficient data and its overlap with similar themes.

Phase five: defining and naming theme

At this stage, the researcher's role involved presenting a comprehensive analysis of the thematic framework. Each theme and sub-theme should be described in relation to both the dataset and the research questions. According to Patton's (1990) dual criteria, every theme should offer a coherent and internally consistent representation of the data that cannot be conveyed by other themes. However, all themes should collectively construct a clear narrative consistent with the dataset content and aligned with the research questions. The names of the themes will undergo a final revision.

The selection of Braun and Clarke's six-step reflective thematic approach is particularly relevant to the sensemaking aspect of the theoretical framework. This approach allowed for the identification and interpretation of themes, which proved crucial in understanding how principals make sense of staff conflict and its influence on school culture. Themes included staff conflict, interplay between school culture and conflict resolution, perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship, and reflective practice in the context of staff conflict. MAXQDA allowed the researcher to select and assign codes that could be ordered hierarchically in a coding system. These in turn were easily merged, renamed, deleted or moved to a different code. It was also possible to assign more than one code to a fragment of text or to develop codes. The interface allowed for a colour coded system that was displayed in the margins of working documents. The results were then integrated into an in-depth description of the phenomenon. Ultimately, the researcher aimed to thoughtfully choose fitting and suitable examples for each theme, ensuring that each theme was reinforced by quotes from various participants (Smith et al. 2009).

Phase six: producing the report

The qualitative research write-up is deeply entwined with the entire analysis process, as noted by Braun and Clarke (2012). As the labels and themes shifted and developed throughout the analysis, the report writing also followed a recursive approach. This phase involved finalising and examining the report, a task initiated by the researcher before the thematic analysis commenced. The order in which the themes would be presented was meticulously planned, aiming to create a cohesive and logical narrative of the data. The theme of "staff conflict" was presented first, focusing on the causes and nature of conflicts experienced by post-primary school principals. Following this, "the interplay between school culture and conflict resolution" was discussed, revealing participants' engagement with staff expectations, habits, assumptions, and beliefs. The subsequent themes included "perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship" and "reflective practice in the context of staff conflict", with the significance of relationships evident across all participants' interviews. The following figure offers an overview of the Braun and Clarke (2022; 2012) framework applied in this research.

Familiarisation with the data

- Using Microsoft Teams, interviews were recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Analysis began during data collection and transcription. Listening to the audio recordings while reading the transcript data, to ensure accuracy during interpretation and analysis.

Generating initial codes

- Codes assigned to data chunks, and assembling these chunks further condensed the data into themes. Transcripts were read noting comments, observations and queries in the margins of the transcripts. MAXQDA supported this process, aloowing codes to be assigned to pieces of data and then retrieving all the data under aparticular code.

Generating themes

- This phase began when all the relevant data items had been coded. The coded data was reviewed and analysed, to consider how different codes may be combined according to shared meanings to form themes and sub-themes.

Reviewing potenital themes

- The Braun and Clarke (2012) key questions were applied in reviewing potential themes. Repeated listening to the audio recordings and numerous readings and re-readings of transcripts ensured a growing familiarity with the tect and led to a richer and deeper understanindg of how the participants viewed the issue of staff conflict.

Defining and naming themes

- A detailed analysis of the thematic framework was presented, with each indiviual theme and sub-theme expressed in relation to both the dataset and the research questions. Themes consisted of staff conflict, interplay between school culture and staff conflict, unsustainability of post-primary principalship, and reflective practice in the context of staff conflict.

Producing the report

- The write-up of thie qualitative research was very much interwoven into the entire process of the analysis. The order in which the themes would be reported was established following careful consideration.
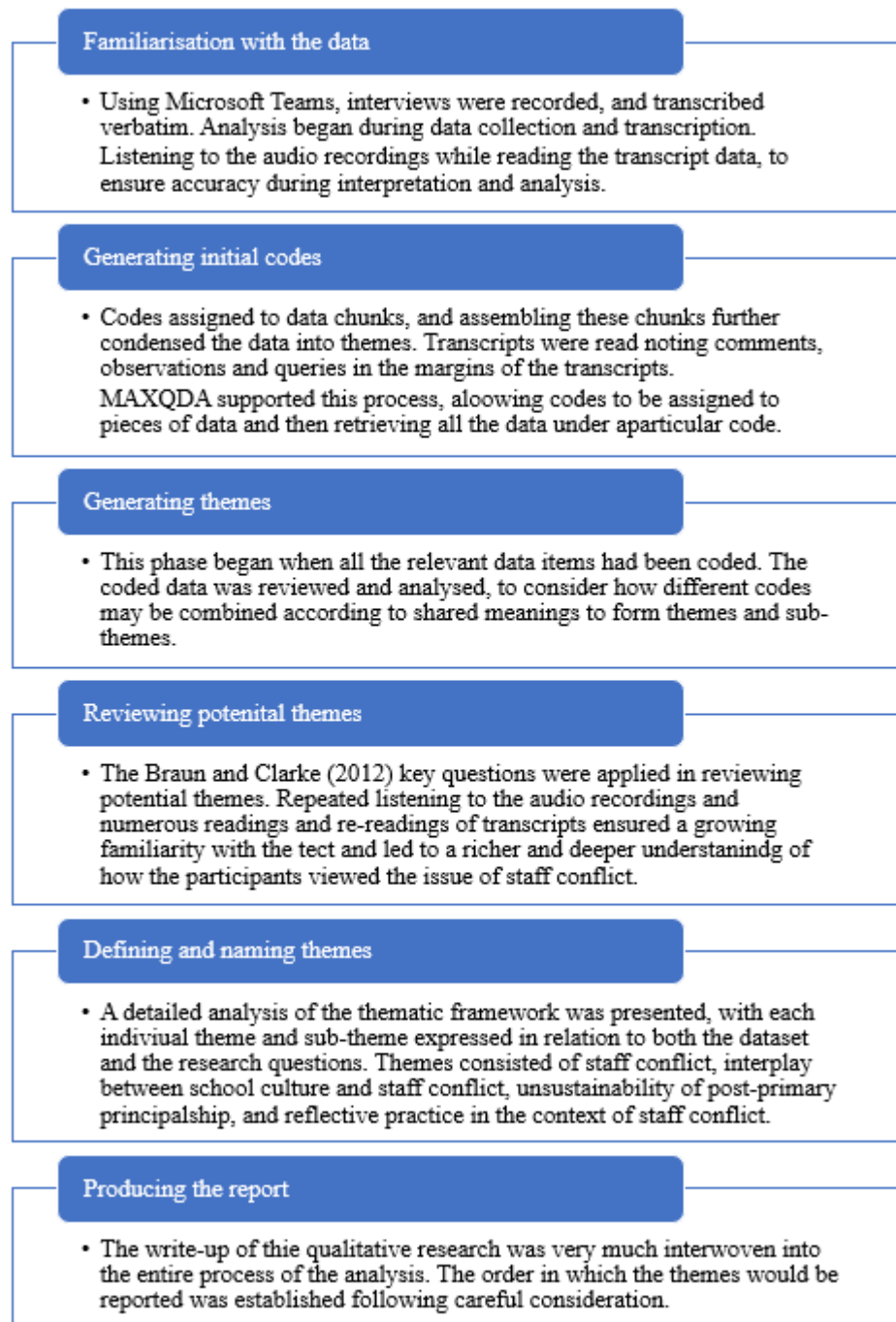
Figure 5: Braun and Clarke (2022; 2012) applied to this research study

5.10 Credibility

Different terms and perspectives have emerged as criteria for evaluating the quality of social research, sparking substantial debate among qualitative researchers (Olmos-Vega et. al 2022; Strauss 1998). While the need for establishing credibility and utility in specific contexts and communities is acknowledged, the notion of a universal code of practice for qualitative methodologies is generally dismissed (Yardley and Bishop 2017; Yardley 2000). According to Creswell (2010), the primary criteria for evaluating qualitative research encompass credibility, transferability, and dependability. While this provides a foundational framework, Yardley's model (2000) offers further elaboration with four key principles: Sensitivity and Context, Commitment and Rigour, Transparency and Coherence, and Impact and Importance, aligning well with qualitative methods.

In this current study, the application of Yardley's principles was crucial to ensuring credibility in technique, interpretation, and accurate representation of results. For instance, Sensitivity and Context necessitated an extensive literature review to deeply understand the experiences of the participants. This allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of their experiences within the broader context of existing research. Commitment and rigour, as defined by Yardley (2000), demanded prolonged engagement, skill development in methods, and immersion in the relevant data. This involved thorough data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes, ensuring that the research was conducted diligently and rigorously. Transparency and coherence were maintained by providing rich descriptions of labelling levels and presenting an organised analysis of the data. Additionally, the study openly acknowledged its limitations and delimitations, ensuring transparency in the research process. Concerning Impact and Importance, the focus was not solely on producing replicable findings but on offering valuable, engaging, and important insights. This meant prioritising the depth of understanding and the significance of the findings over sheer quantity or replicability.

As a school principal researching other principals, some of whom I knew personally, it was crucial to remain mindful of the potential influence of my dual role as both as researcher and a peer might have on the study. To address this, I took specific steps to ensure that the research was conducted in a robust and objective manner. I was conscious of the possibility that participants who knew me might tailor their responses based on our existing relationship, or that my preconceptions as a principal could shape the way I interpreted their answers. To mitigate these risks, I adopted a reflexive approach

throughout the research process, continuously reflecting on my own position and its potential impact on the data collection and analysis.

One of the key measures I implemented to ensure the rigour and credibility of the study was member checking. After each interview, I provided participants with their interview transcripts, giving them the opportunity to review their statements, clarify any points, and ensure they were satisfied with their responses. This process not only ensured accuracy but also allowed participants to add or modify their contributions if needed, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the data. This step was particularly important in reducing the risk of misinterpretation or bias and demonstrated my commitment to representing their perspectives faithfully.

In addition to member checking, I employed several other strategies to ensure the robustness of the research. I followed a systematic approach to thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved cross verifying the themes against the dataset to ensure they accurately captured the participants' experiences. This rigorous process was complemented using direct quotes from interview to provide clear evidence for the merging themes and enhance the credibility of the findings. Furthermore, I was transparent about the research limitations, openly acknowledging any potential influence my position as a principal may have had on the study and ensured that my interactions with participants were professional and neutral, regardless of our prior relationship.

It is imperative to consider trustworthiness when evaluating the quality of social research, especially within the context of a small group study. To achieve an acceptable saturation, point for sample selection, purposeful sampling was employed, aiming for reasonable coverage of the research question (Patton 2015). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) emphasises a quality over quantity approach in qualitative research, prioritising a rich understanding of the experience of a small group of participants rather than a large number. Trustworthiness, a term often used synonymously with rigour and dependability, encompasses various dimensions that contribute to the reliability and validity of qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

King (2012) suggested employing tactics such as incorporating direct quotes to enhance comprehension of specific findings and to showcase the prevalence of themes, illustrating the intricacies, conflicts, and convergences within the data. This viewpoint is supported by Braun and Clarke (2006), who argue that such an approach heightens credibility and provides confirmation of the findings when employing forms of thematic analysis.

Boejie (2009) emphasises that evaluating research quality primarily revolves around assessing the accuracy of insights gained. Merriam (2009) shares this sentiment, acknowledging the necessity for credible and accurate insights while recognising the multiple constructions of experiences or meanings in various research studies. The call for criteria to judge research quality remains essential, ensuring the reliability and credibility of study findings. A continuous effort was invested in maintaining credibility and trustworthiness. This involved a rigorous application of established principles including: a rigorous research design, systematic data collection, thorough analysis and interpretation, transparency and openness, and ethical considerations. The approach taken in this study was thorough and methodical. The researcher adhered to well-defined and recognised methodologies in conducting the study. The rigorous application shows a careful and systematic implementation of research procedures to ensure credibility. Thoughtful engagement with participants shows that the researcher actively and considerately interacted with the participants in the study, with an emphasis on understanding participants' perspectives, experiences, and insights. An unwavering commitment to the study's ethical considerations were given top priority throughout the research process. The researcher maintained a steadfast dedication to ensuring the study was conducted ethically.

5.11 Conclusion

The study's methodology is intricately woven into the fabric of the theoretical framework. The alignment of ontology, epistemology, and the methodological approach, along with the systematic use of the research onion and the thematic analysis method, ensures a robust approach to explore the relational dynamics, and sensemaking processes involved in principals' experiences of staff conflict and its influence on school culture.

This chapter situated the study within the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, demonstrating how the data collection method supported an inductive approach to data analysis. It elucidated the critical decisions concerning the methodology, design, and methods employed in this research. The summary encompassed the rationale and considerations regarding participants, the formulation of the interview schedule, data collection and analysis strategies, ethical concerns, and aspects related to trustworthiness. Following the research onion model as proposed by Saunders et al. (2016), the research design was developed, layer by layer, systematically guiding the research process. The

pursuit of themes in the data was a deliberate strategic choice that aligns with the research questions, objectives, conceptual framework, and the literature review.

Chapter 6: Findings and Analysis

6.1 Introduction

The qualitative study, situated within the context of exploring how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the experiences held by Irish post-primary principals. Organised around four central themes – staff conflict, interplay between school culture and conflict resolution, the perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship, and reflective practice in the context of staff conflict – the chapter's findings offer nuanced insights derived from the rich tapestry of data collected. These themes emerged through detailed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) of participant interviews.

6.2 Themes and subthemes

The exploration of how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, is central to this research study. Through a qualitative lens, the study delves into the intricate dynamics of staff conflict and its influence on school culture. The themes and subthemes uncovered in this investigation provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of staff conflict in post-primary schools.

Aligned with the overarching aim of the research study, the identified themes and subthemes offer valuable insights into the experiences faced by post-primary principals in managing staff conflict and fostering school culture. These themes include staff conflict, the interplay between school culture and conflict resolution, the perceived sustainability of post-primary principalship, and reflective practice in the context of staff conflict. Each theme and its corresponding subthemes shed light on different aspects of the phenomenon, contributing to a holistic understanding of the issue at hand.

Furthermore, these themes are intricately linked to the policy context chapter which sets the stage by highlighting the legislative framework and policy landscape within which post-primary principals operate. This alignment ensures that the exploration of staff conflict and school culture is grounded in the relevant legal and policy considerations, providing a comprehensive backdrop for understanding the principals' experiences. The literature review chapter provides theoretical foundations and conceptual frameworks to contextualise the findings. Additionally, the methodology chapter outlines the research

design and data analysis approach employed in uncovering these themes. By integrating these themes with other chapters, this research study aims to provide recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture.

Table 9: Themes and subthemes

Theme 1: Staff conflict	Theme 2: Interplay between school culture and conflict resolution.	Theme 3: Perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship	Theme 4: Reflective practice in the context of staff conflict
Subthemes	Subthemes	Subthemes	Subthemes
• Challenges in managing staff relationships. • Leadership style.	• Adaptive leadership and policy evolution. • Impact of staff conflict on school culture and teaching.	• Impact of principal turnover on school stability and culture. • Continuous professional development as crucial for principals.	• Emotional toll and time constraints in managing staff conflict.

6.3 Theme 1: Staff conflict

Understanding the post-primary principals' experiences of conflict, and their responses to it, became evident throughout the participants' interviews. When participants were asked to share words they can think of to describe conflict, nine of the fourteen participants acknowledged that conflict could bring positive and negative outcomes. These positive and negative outcomes had an influence on an array of areas including: whole school, individual student and/or staff member and school culture.

Margaret identified positive and negative conflict:

"Positive conflict, when people are prepared to disagree with you, but disagree with you in a dignified fashion, that would be the positive conflict and the handling of that then. The negative conflict is then for whatever reason, they have decided that the way you are organising or administering something is not the way they want it, no matter what you do they are going to disagree with your modus operandi".

Margaret's distinction between positive and negative conflict provides valuable insights into the dynamics of conflicts in the school setting. Margaret emphasises positive conflict as situations where individuals are willing to express disagreement in a dignified manner. Negative conflict, according to Margaret, occurs when individuals persistently disagree with the approach, irrespective of attempts to address their concerns. Recognising positive conflict as an opportunity for growth and collaboration while addressing the challenges posed by negative conflict is crucial for fostering school culture. It emphasises the need for conflict resolution strategies that differentiate between disagreements that contribute to positive discourse and those that hinder the school's functioning and culture.

While describing conflict as difficult and challenging, Catherine commented that "it [staff conflict] can be a cause of growth as well. Sometimes after a conflict, you have a growth in a relationship, or a strengthening within a relationship". This study shows, with all participants confirming that conflicts are absolutely normal for staff in schools, and come about where there are conflicting differences in culture, personality, values, beliefs, attitudes, needs, tastes, goals, interests, and power. Conflicts are unavoidable in any organisation since it is a natural, everyday phenomenon in each individual, each group or organisation (Safeena and Velnampy 2017). Pat recognised that: "Sometimes I see that people don't have a fear of conflict, the principalship is a unique position because you are dealing with so many people in different situations, you get quite skilled at dealing with people, it can be a very positive thing and development."

In answering the research questions, the findings show that staff conflict can have a negative and positive influence within the school, with Yin et al. detailing that staff conflict can lead to instability or it can bring positive results to an organisation (2022), and with overarching reasons given for the nature of and causes of staff conflict which will be further explored in the related subthemes.

In analysing the cross-sectional data on dealing with staff conflict, female participants shared common perspectives. Mary emphasised the importance of confidence, documentation, and adherence to established rules, stating, "having the documentation to back-up the viewpoint was critical… I'm following the rules, there's the documentation,

there is no way around this." Rita highlighted positive conflict resolution through support and willingness to help. Catherine's approach involved honest conversations and assistance, leading to favourable outcomes. She stated, "I try to be solution-based, so this happened, where can we go forward from here." Descriptors of conflict varied among the participants, reflecting different perspectives and approaches. Mary expressed negative sentiments, indicating the challenges and difficulties inherent in conflict situations. In contrast, Catherine used neutral descriptors, portraying conflict in a balanced and objective manner without overly positive or negative connotations. Rita, on the other hand, employed a combination of terms, acknowledging the complexities and adversities involved in conflict resolution while also recognising the potential for positive outcomes. Catherine's emphasis on honest conversations and a solution-oriented approach suggests a pragmatic and constructive stance toward conflict management, leading to favourable outcomes. Conflict management strategies included confidence-building, documentation, restorative practices, and open communication. The female principals recognised the inevitability of conflict in a school setting, acknowledging its negative impact on staff wellbeing, extracurricular activities, and school committees. The research shows that staff conflict undermines collaborative efforts, weakens staff engagement, and the culture of the school. They implemented restorative practice training, circle time, and mentorship programs as innovative conflict management approaches. This was aimed at fostering communication and building relationships. These approaches require staff buy-in and consistent implementation, and this research showed resistance to these methods, with some staff viewing these practices as time-consuming or unnecessary.

Contrastingly, the male perspectives on staff conflict showcased unique characteristics. Positive outcomes were achieved through minimal intervention, active listening, and resolution approaches such as facilitated dialogue and seeking external advice. James described a situation when:

> "the staff member was abusive to me on the phone when they were informed of the outcome [of an interview process], and continued like that for several weeks in school. So much so that I actually kind of had to wonder whether I would have to intervene and just draw the process to an end for her. But I didn't and I allowed her to blow herself out".

However, negative outcomes, as seen in prolonged abusive behaviour and personal costs, were handled with a more passive approach, indicating limited intervention. Common views among male perspectives included the importance of active listening, mediation, and reflective approaches in conflict resolution. Brian highlighted the importance of

"making sure they're [staff members] listened to, like they feel they've said their piece." Personal and organisational influences were recognised, emphasising the toll conflicts take on principals and the intangible influence on the school atmosphere. Divergent perceptions of conflict were noted, with some viewing it as an unavoidable challenge, while others saw it as a stimulating opportunity for growth and change. Recommendations from Michael highlighted the potential benefits of conflict, emphasising the need for a balanced approach, whilst acknowledging that "every school is different, and the challenge for the school principal is to reduce the amount of conflict in your staff, and continue that over time".

Comparing the male and female perspectives reveals both similarities and differences. Positive outcomes were achieved through various strategies, but the handling of negative outcomes differed, with males opting for a more passive approach. Both genders recognised the personal and organisational influence of conflict (Buonomo et al. 2020), emphasising the need for continuous improvement and proactive measures. Divergent perceptions of conflict and varying attitudes toward its desirability highlighted the complexity of leadership roles. While both faced challenges due to limited disciplinary authority, females showed a proactive stance with innovative conflict management practices, whereas males leaned towards passive approaches. Overall, the nuanced understanding of staff conflict emphasises the importance of tailored strategies in fostering a positive school environment.

The differences in gendered approaches to staff conflict among post-primary principals reveal complex dynamics influenced by social norms, cultural expectations, and individual experiences. Margaret's distinction between positive and negative conflict highlights the nuanced understanding of conflicts in the school setting, suggesting a deeper reflection on interpersonal dynamics and communication styles. Catherine's pragmatic approach, characterised by honest conversations and a solution-oriented mindset, reflects a proactive stance towards conflict resolution, potentially shaped by societal expectations of women as nurturers and communicators (Chaudhary and Dutt 2022). In contrast, male perspectives, exemplified by James' account of minimal intervention and passive handling of negative outcomes, may stem from traditional masculine norms emphasising stoicism and non-confrontation (McKenzie et al. 2018). The divergence in conflict management strategies highlights the intersectionality of gender and leadership, with females demonstrating a more assertive and collaborative approach, while males tend towards a less direct and reactive stance. These differences

highlights the need for inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to leadership development and conflict resolution, recognising the diverse strengths and perspectives each gender brings to school leadership roles. Schein (2001) stated the need to examine the relationship between sex role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics in the international arena.

6.3.1 Subtheme: Challenges in managing staff relationships

One of the objectives of this study was to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture. In response to the question exploring the nature and causes of conflicts that principals experience in their role, seven principals identified issues related to the promotion process through posts of responsibility. James described one scenario: "…somebody was unsuccessful in a post of responsibility outcome, believed they were there long enough to get it. They were very upset by the outcome, …They were abusive to me."

Anne described:

> "…Some of them have had their genesis as well, in being overpassed for a post of responsibility. Which might explain actually, the little bit of a surge in them [complaints], because the new circular came out in 2018, and by 2021, they had been passed over once or twice for a post, and actually maybe that's the link, why numbers went up over the last two years in term of school complaints."

Circular 0003/2018 introduced new guidelines for allocating posts of responsibility, and its impact became particularly clear in 2020 and 2021. Staff who were repeatedly overlooked for these roles faced significant changes and challenges, leading to growing dissatisfaction and frustration. This sense of being bypassed for promotions or key positions fostered feelings of resentment, which, in many cases, escalated into conflict. The frustration of being consistently overlooked also contributed to instances of workplace tension, and in some cases, even abusive behaviour as staff members struggled with feelings of unfair treatment.

The scale of staff conflict, particularly regarding promotions through the post of responsibility process, emerged as a significant issue during the interviews conducted for this study (Räsänen et al. 2020). It became apparent that this was the most prevalent cause of conflict, especially following the introduction of the revised Circular (0003/2018). The interviews revealed instances where staff felt overlooked or disregarded in their pursuit of professional goals, leading to staff conflicts framed within commitment and involvement. This issue seemed to escalate following the implementation of the new

circular, with staff experiencing dissatisfaction and frustration due to perceived unfairness in the allocation of posts of responsibility. The interviews highlighted a need for a more detailed examination of this issue, considering its widespread impact on staff morale and organisational dynamics. Staff who felt disregarded may have begun questioning their value within the school, their role in decision-making processes, of the fairness of how responsibilities and opportunities were distributed. This sense of exclusion can diminish motivation and engagement, leading to tensions between staff who feel unsupported and those in leadership positions or peers who may ne perceived as more favoured.

Table 10 highlights these impacts, illustrating the diverse range of challenges encountered and the varied approaches required for resolution. These behaviours are categorised as overt or covert, reflecting the spectrum of conflict dynamics experienced by participant principals in their school. The responses provided by participants shed light on the nuanced nature of staff interactions, revealing a complex interplay of overt actions such as heated staff meetings and individual aggression, alongside covert behaviours such as grudges held for years and dangerous whispering campaigns. These insights emphasise the need for comprehensive strategies to address conflict resolution, tailored to the specific nature of each manifestation. In the participants' interviews, heated staff meetings emerged as the most prevalent overt behaviour, reflecting significant tension and conflict within the school environment. Following this were individual aggression and abusive behaviour over the phone. Other notable overt behaviours included ignoring a staff member, avoiding the staff room, and forming exclusive staff groups, all of which contributed to disunity. Covert behaviours, such as disengagement with extra-curricular activities, were the most prominent. This was followed by private acts of ignoring colleagues, whispering campaigns, and disengagement from committees. These behaviours, though less visible, were critical in understanding the undercurrents of staff conflict influencing school culture.

Table 10: Overt and covert behaviours

Overt behaviours	Covert behaviours
• Heated staff meetings. • Individual aggression. • Abusive on the phone.	• Disengagement with extra-curricular activities.

• Ignoring a staff member.	• Not speaking to / ignoring a fellow staff member, but not in the company of others.
• Avoiding the staff room.	
• Only mixing with certain staff groups.	• Dangerous whispering campaign.
• Disunity.	• Disengagement with committees.
• Staff member(s) conscious of what they are seen to be doing.	• Staff member isolation at work.
• Shouting in the car-park.	• Not engaging in a subject department with a colleague.
• Grudges being held for years.	• Silent at staff meetings.
• Threatening letters and/or emails.	• Discussion in sub-groups.
• Invading personal space.	• Staff member competency.
• Shouting aggressively.	• Staff member isolation socially.
• Sarcasm and belittling behaviour.	• Splitting of staff.
	• Withholding information needed for a school activity / meeting.
	• Creating an inaccurate impression of a person or situation.

These behaviours noted by the research participants, whether overt or covert, contributed to a challenging work environment, requiring careful consideration and intervention for resolution. The overt behaviours are more explicit and visible, while covert behaviours operated subtly, often impacting relationships and collaboration within the school community.

All principals described conflict situations with terms and conditions of work, with the most prominent being in relation to timetabling issues, as Breege details: "Ingrained practices in relation to timetabling, and in relation to people's kind of perceptions of their entitlements… the person that had a half-day every Thursday for years, or the person who was never on first or last class."

Derek agreed stating: "there are issues in some departments (subject) whereby who'll take the higher-level class, this or next year." All participant principals highlighted those conflicts which related to terms and conditions of work, particularly in the context of timetabling issues, were pervasive and problematic sources of conflict.

In a minority of cases, underperformance or health issues with staff members was mentioned as a reason for conflict arising. Anne spoke of how when, "a teacher may not be health-wise in a good space, coping skills are lower than you would expect. And sometimes because of that their perception of reality is not the same, as to what the norm might be." She further explained that when someone's physical or mental health is compromised, their ability to manage stress decreases, which can cause them to struggle to meet the expectations or standards of the school environment. This disconnect can result in behaviour or actions that deviate from what is considered typical or acceptable within the school, potentially leading to conflict or tension with colleagues. This suggests a tacit understanding or expectation of how situations should be interpreted, which can contribute to communication breakdowns and conflicts. However, external pressures, workload, and the availability of support structures all play a role in shaping the experiences of staff members. Anne's insights underscore the complex interplay between health, coping skills, and perception, but they also highlight the need to critically examine institutional factors that contribute to conflicts (Betoret 2006). Rather than solely attributing conflict to individual characteristics, a more nuanced understanding acknowledges the broader systemic influences at play in school cultures. Margaret acknowledged that staff come to school with their own worries and troubles, with spillover effect of other interpersonal or intrapersonal conflicts: "they all have personal lives, it's not possible to have complete separation, we all have a human side. Often when staff are causing conflict, there is something else going on in their lives."

Other causes for staff conflicts noted by participants included approaches to teaching and learning and storage of equipment. Conflicts were seen to arise when teachers have varying approaches to teaching and learning. Principals noted how some staff members may resist changes in teaching methodologies, while others advocate for more innovative approaches. Rita remarked that within their staff, there exists a spectrum of attitudes towards innovation in teaching methodologies. While some teachers are open to embracing new approaches, others exhibit resistance. This was evident when discussing the implementation of a new teaching methodology aimed at enhancing student engagement. While some staff members hesitated to trial the new approach, preferring to

stick to familiar methods, others actively participated in professional development sessions, implemented the new methodology in their classrooms, and shared their experiences with colleagues. Interestingly, a segment of the staff expressed contentment with their current practices, perceiving no need for change. Rita spoke of the spectrum of experience on staff and described that while the issue was a teaching methodology, "you ended up dealing with younger staff feeling less respected by their colleagues, and older or more experienced staff feeling usurped by their younger colleagues". The dynamic interplay between age, experience, and perceived respect among staff members, particularly in the context of discussions about teaching methodology came to the fore. Recognising how differences in age and experience can influence perceptions of respect and authority among colleagues is crucial for fostering a collaborative and supportive work environment. Moreover, understanding these dynamics can inform strategies for addressing conflicts and promoting mutual respect and understanding among staff members.

Conflicts were also shown to emerge regarding the organisation of storage spaces or difficulties in accessing shared equipment, Pat gave an example of conflict about the storage of science equipment. Further conflicts arose with ambiguity regarding ownership and responsibility for maintaining or replacing equipment. Rita's observation regarding teaching methodologies introduces a nuanced layer to conflicts, demonstrating how disagreements in pedagogical approaches can manifest as generational tensions among staff. There is a significant relationship between generational cohorts and conflict created by generational work-value differences (Hillman 2014). The mention of resistance in teaching methodologies and the perception of younger staff feeling less respected while older staff feel usurped indicates a complex interplay between professional practices and interpersonal dynamics. This insight unveils the potential influence of staff conflicts on the school culture, emphasising the need for not only addressing the surface-level issues but also understanding the underlying factors contributing to tensions among staff with varying levels of experience. Furthermore, the example of conflicts arising from the storage of science equipment sheds light on the importance of clarity in organisational matters. Ambiguity regarding ownership and responsibility for maintaining or replacing equipment was noted as a catalyst for disputes. This underscores the significance of clear policies and communication channels within the school setting to mitigate conflicts arising from logistical issues. A further finding from the research indicates that conflicts in school settings often extend beyond mere interpersonal clashes or leadership issues.

They frequently originate from divergent teaching methodologies and challenges related to resource allocation and shared spaces. For instance, disagreements over whether to adopt traditional or innovative teaching approaches can lead to friction among staff members. Younger teachers may advocate for technology-driven, student-centred methods, while older teachers might prefer more traditional, lecture-based approaches. This contrast in pedagogical philosophies can exacerbate generational tensions within the staff body, with younger educators feeling undervalued and older ones perceiving a threat to their expertise. Rita's observation highlights how these conflicts are not just about differing teaching styles but also about power dynamics and perceptions of respect. Moreover, issues surrounding the organisation of shared spaces and equipment, such as classroom allocation and access to technology, can further fuel tensions.

The acknowledgement by Margaret, that staff members bring their personal worries and troubles to school, introduces a crucial dimension to conflict analysis. Recognising the spillover impact of personal conflicts on professional interactions emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals' personal and professional lives. This insight prompts a more holistic approach to conflict resolution, advocating for support mechanisms that consider the broader wellbeing of staff members. These mechanisms could include providing access to counselling services, implementing policies that promote work-life balance, fostering a supportive and inclusive school culture, and offering professional development opportunities focused on emotional intelligence and conflict management skills. By addressing the root causes of conflicts and supporting staff members in managing their personal challenges, schools can create a more conducive environment for healthy professional relationships and conflict resolution.

A common relational tie within the conflicts was that they all were primarily interpersonal staff relations. Pat described "Personal clashes, between members of staff, grudges being held, for things that might have happened years ago. Sometimes, it goes so far back, they forget what it was…. Breakdown of relationships…". Brian further explored that "Familiarity breeds contempt because people are here for such a long time. I think staff members feel that they're here for 40 years, and there's entitlement there." The depth of these conflicts is shown by Pat's observation that, at times, the origins of these disputes become so distant that individuals forget the initial causes. Then there is "conflict between those who have a vocation, and those who feel entitled. So, you've staff who advocate for students, and staff who advocate for themselves" (James).

In one school setting,

> "a staff member said that I should stop thanking staff for doing extra-curricular because it's not fair on the others, because they said that's putting us under pressure, but you have to thank people for the good work they're doing. If it does put you under pressure, well that's saying its own piece" (Brian).

As explained by Margaret and Jacqueline, "It has the effect of different groups of people taking sides, it has the effect of splitting staff"; indeed, "it can divide the staff".

The conflict acknowledging extra-curricular activities, as mentioned by Brian, provides a specific example of how differing perspectives on recognition can lead to tensions among staff. The disagreement on whether expressing gratitude puts undue pressure on individuals underscores the subjective nature of conflict triggers within the school setting. This example highlights the importance of recognising and addressing diverse viewpoints and expectations among staff members. The influence of conflicts was articulated by Margaret and Jacqueline, who noted that conflicts can lead to the formation of opposing groups within the staff, resulting in division and taking of sides. This fragmentation of the staff body has far-reaching consequences, affecting the overall cohesion and functioning of the school community. As evidenced this study focused on the experiences of the participants, to examine and analyse their multiple constructed realities.

As identified in the methodology section, the study aims to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture, explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture, develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture. By way of summary, the findings from this study highlight the multifaceted nature of staff conflicts, which often stem from interpersonal relations, leadership issues, and divergent approaches to learning and teaching. These conflicts manifest in various forms, including disagreements over teaching methodologies, organisational challenges such as the allocation of shared spaces and equipment, and issues related to terms and conditions of work. For instance, conflicts may arise when staff members hold differing views on adopting innovative teaching methods, leading to tensions based on age, experience, and perceived respect among colleagues. Additionally, logistical issues such as timetabling and class assignments can contribute to conflicts related to terms and conditions of work, further exacerbating staff dissatisfaction and frustration.

The research findings highlights the importance of addressing staff conflicts in a holistic manner, considering both the interpersonal dynamics and organisational factors at play. It is crucial for principals to recognise the interconnectedness of personal and professional

lives, as conflicts often spill over from personal worries and troubles. This necessitates the implementation of support mechanisms that prioritise staff wellbeing and foster a culture of open communication and collaboration. Moreover, the study highlights the need for clear policies and communication channels to mitigate conflicts arising from organisational challenges such as resource allocation and equipment storage.

6.3.2 Subtheme: Leadership styles

Participants in the interviews highlighted a mixed nature of conflict experiences, influenced by the conflict's nature and the individuals involved. Principals often expressed positivity in resolving conflicts through negotiation, despite some negative aspects in the final outcome. When principals say conflict was resolved through negotiation but with a negative outcome, it highlights both the success of reaching an agreement and the challenges or drawbacks of the resolution. Some participants shared a pessimistic view of the negative influence that staff conflict can have on people, describing the emotional turmoil and other negative effects.

> "But the conflict where somebody is saying, you're the principal and I'm going to get you, you didn't give me the promotion, and you didn't give me my AP1 [assistant principal] post, that's the conflict that doesn't go away and it can create a toxic atmosphere." (Jacqueline).

While the grievance procedures offer an avenue to resolve conflict, Jacqueline described the process as very slow:

> "It's not just simply go into it, do it. Everything is challenged, every little thing is challenged, every investigator is challenged, there's a delay put on everything. When the report comes back, there's a query and challenge on the report, they want to go into an appeal, then they delay coming before the Board of Management where they want to sign off on it. So, you could have a principal dealing with that for a year and a half. It is extremely, extremely, the most stressful factor on a principal."

Participants drew attention to a loophole in the mediation process. It requires the constructive participation of all parties, which may not be forthcoming. Furthermore, because the process is not compulsory, parties can refuse to engage. Unless all parties constructively participate in the mediation process and subsequently accept the recommendations of the mediator, the matter is referred to the Board of Management. Participants spoke of the importance of professional standards amongst staff, placing students at the centre of decision making and personal accountability. Anne detailed,

> "In nine out of ten cases, the complainants are not interested in resolving the issue. Sometimes where a mediator is appointed, they will say that they will go to

it to say that they've tried it. They will walk out of the first session and say, 'this is not what I thought it was' and go to the next stage. There's a tactical move sometimes. If people do agree to it, it's not genuine in most cases. But most people don't agree to it."

When describing experiences of conflict all principals mentioned the importance of listening to and discussion with the parties involved. James said: "It is so important to listen to the full presentation, … Don't interrupt because I feel by interrupting, they aren't getting it all off their chest."

Three principals highlighted the importance of staying calm, with Breege saying: "Discuss it, calmly… It's all coming down to your choice and choosing how you react." Giving time to prepare and consult the necessary documentation was listed as vital by six principals: "Take time, analyse it and look at ways to approach it" (Michael). Another principal said they would:

> "Never go into conflict without having thought it through very carefully and planning it strategically in my mind, oh is this person going to say this, so I'm going to say this and doing my homework and do my reading up on this and circulars" (Brian).

Certain behaviours might pose minimal obstacles to the resolution process, whereas others could significantly impede conflict resolution. Julie suggested that the mindset of the involved parties plays a crucial role in determining the success or failure of conflict resolution. Additionally, James highlighted how the attitudes and levels of tolerance among the parties significantly impact the resolution process. The participants recognised that conflict resolution is more likely to succeed when staff exhibit a positive attitude toward the process and have a high tolerance for understanding others' actions and emotions. Jordan and Troth (2004) detail that emotional intelligence indicators were positively linked with team performance and were differentially linked to conflict resolution methods. Participants noted how possessing prosocial skills is crucial, enabling collaborative problem-solving and fostering respectful, open, and flexible communication where everyone feels heard and validated. Anne explained "There is a responsibility on a principal to ensure they are communicating, and that they are keeping the lines of communication open, you set the tone of the interactions where you speak openly."

Similarly, conflict resolution becomes nearly impossible when parties exhibit dishonest behaviour. Michael and Derek exemplified this, indicating that a lack of honesty among the involved parties hindered conflict management, with Michael stating: "True conflict

resolution hinges on genuine engagement and honest participation from all parties involved. When individuals feign involvement without sincerity, they not only impede progress but also erode the foundation of trust which is essential for meaningful resolution." According to Derek, "All parties need full commitment to resolve the conflict for any progress to be made." Thus, while not entirely impossible, it's undeniably challenging to resolve conflict when parties demonstrate a lack of commitment to a successful resolution. The participants highlighted the importance of personal accountability, emphasising the need to take ownership and responsibility for one's behaviour rather than deflecting or blaming others for their choices. Accountability, it was noted, also fosters reflective practice by acknowledging strengths, areas for improvement, and taking necessary steps for enhancement.

The subtheme of leadership styles provides valuable insights into the dynamics of conflict resolution within school settings, particularly among post-primary principals in Munster. Principals' approaches to conflict resolution, as highlighted by the participants, encompass a spectrum of strategies influenced by their leadership styles and personal dispositions. However, the policy context highlighted the lack of explicit guidance on staff conflicts, leaving principals to navigate complexities independently. That said, the emphasis on the role of principals in fostering school cultures aligns with the subtheme, emphasising the importance of leadership in addressing staff conflicts. The exploration of conflict management strategies in the context of school culture sheds light on how principals' leadership styles influence conflict resolution outcomes.

6.4 Theme 2: Interplay between school culture and conflict resolution

In exploring principals' experience of staff conflict, a clear understanding of school culture and the responsibility of the principal and staff members, was rated significant in all interviews with participants. Post-primary principals sensemaking shapes and is shaped by school culture and this can either reinforce existing practice or bring about change. Post-primary principals' sensemaking is closely tied to school culture, as seen when a principal must navigate staff conflicts within a resistant culture to either maintain the status quo or drive change.

The reciprocal relationship between culture and conflict is a central theme in the exploration of principals' experiences in managing school conflicts within post-primary schools. The interviews conducted with participants consistently highlighted the importance of a profound understanding of school culture and the shared responsibilities

of both principals and staff members in addressing conflicts. Features of existing cultures need to be challenged, and successful change is dependent on trustful relations between principals and staff (Nehez 2020). This highlights the notion that the cultural context within a school significantly influences how conflicts are perceived and managed. Post primary principals play a pivotal role in this dynamic interplay between culture and conflict through their sensemaking processes.

The findings from this research highlight the significant consequences of this dynamic interaction, showcasing how it can either entrench the status quo or serve as a catalyst for transformative change within the school community. One potential outcome is the perpetuation of established practices, where the interplay between sensemaking and culture maintains existing norms and approaches to conflict resolution. Conversely, this interaction can also act as a powerful force for change, sparking shifts in cultural dynamics depending on how principals experience and address conflicts. The response to conflict within the broader school culture emerges as a pivotal determinant in whether the school maintains continuity or undergoes transformative evolution. Cultures can be transformed through interactions between principals and staff that focus on shared vision, goals, and ideas of ideal behaviours. Sometimes, principals also foster change by creating an infrastructure that supports and encourages new practices and innovation (Nehez 2020). The following findings of principals' sensemaking provides a useful insight into ways in which principals and staff within school culture negotiate and mediate the school setting. When asked about the effects of staff conflict within the school setting, eleven of the fourteen principals, highlighted implications on school culture, with particular emphasis on staff and students. For example, Anne shared "a complete understanding of the ethos of the school, and what that means in terms of relationships. I think that it has to be spelt out, I think it has to be talked about, it has to be debated and understood."

The sensemaking lens allows us to understand how principals and staff collectively navigate conflicts, contribute to the school culture, and negotiate the guiding ethos through open dialogue and explicit communication. The influence on school culture, particularly concerning staff and students, showcase the interconnectedness of sensemaking and the broader dynamics within the school setting. Pat's motivation was similar when he said,

> "Bring in the charter, and I really do believe in it, that partnership, promoting partnership in the school, creating a caring school community, all of the culture and the atmosphere helps. Schools, teaching, education is all about relationships, it's so important".

Margaret was also moved to emphasise that "the kind of culture that you create in a school is really important in the context of dealing with staff, students, and parents. There needs to be an openness to resolve issues…try to create a culture which is conducive to mutual respect". Rita emphasised that schools are human relational places,

> "I think that's the core of the whole business because you have a variety of ages of adults working together working with young people all day every day. Our job is very interactional, for us all day, you're surrounded by people all of the time, you're meeting people all day long, so you're meeting emotions and moods. You're meeting people's baggage that they come in with in the morning. You have your own baggage that you come in with in the morning too."

A school's culture is framed by a shared set of beliefs and values that bind the school community together. It's characterised by various structural dimensions (space, time, teaching materials, strategies) and social dimensions (relationships among staff, with students), and reflects the established customs and practices within the school, forming a visible and recognisable culture. This interplay between the diverse dimensions of school culture markedly influences the quality of education and student life within the school. The perception of this culture by staff significantly influences how they experience events, anticipate outcomes, and assess the appropriateness of their subsequent actions.

Participants shared that while some schools are supportive and safe environments for the school staff other schools are steeped in poor relationships and conflict among staff. As Margaret stated, "a staff member can have their own agenda, … students aren't that person's concern. That conflict can bring a staff room down, a senior member can have a toxic influence on a staff room and affect the overall atmosphere of a school".

Pat added, "a person might have a contrarian attitude toward many things." Indeed, the relationship between the principal and the staff mirrors that between the teachers and the students, with Michael describing how he "wanted to create that relationship between the teachers and the students". As principal, he described how important it was to deliver for the students by creating a quality learning environment and the important part that leadership plays in this process. "I love my job, I always have. My role is to lead staff, to support them in their roles, and allow them to go with things that they have a passion for." Indeed, as the principal plays a crucial role in setting the tone of the school culture, particularly in fostering an atmosphere of trust, when staff members feel their efforts are making a positive impact on students, it thus creates a conducive environment. In turn, students thrive when dedicated and qualified staff, including teachers and principals,

invest time and effort in their learning and overall development. As James described, "I genuinely believe the students know if there's a divide in the staff. They can feel it, they know if there's disharmony and disunity around the place, and that influences the students' learning."

The data from the interviews show that school culture encompasses the attitudes, beliefs and values that are shared by the people that make up the school community. Margaret said, "There would be negative talk in the community about the school, people have their own agenda, students aren't a person's concern when they do that." Pat went on to say, "It can affect how the school is perceived by parents and within the school community, it does lead to falling enrolment". Certain conflicts exist within broader contexts entrenched in the school's history, its cultural fabric, and the larger educational and professional landscape in which the school operates. Michael reminded that one has to remember the history of the school, the importance of being up to date with Department of Education guidance, and an awareness of long-standing grudges between staff members. Thus, the principal is "tangled up in experiences" which were created at an earlier point in time before any conflict experience is recounted.

The findings of principals' sensemaking provide valuable insights into the negotiation, mediation, and contribution of principals and staff within the school culture. Principals' descriptions of schools as human relational places highlight the interactive and emotional nature of their roles and shows how emotional intelligence offers opportunities for conflict resolution (Skordulis et al. 2020). The acknowledgement of dealing with emotions, moods, and personal baggage emphasises the intricate interpersonal dynamics within the school. This recognition further highlights the role of principals in shaping the emotional and relational aspects of school culture. The shared set of beliefs and values that characterise school culture influences how events are interpreted by staff, affecting their subsequent actions. The variation in school environments, illustrates the diverse impact of culture on staff relationships and overall atmosphere. The interconnectedness between the relationships within the staff and those between teachers and students highlights the ripple effect of school culture on the entire school community. The recognition of negative talk in the community, individual agendas, and the potential impact on enrolment shows the broader societal and community implications of school culture. The existence of conflict narratives within the broader context of the school's history, cultural fabric, and professional landscape further enriches the understanding of the complex interplay between culture and conflict.

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The participants' perspectives unravel the intricate web of relationships between culture, conflict, and the roles of principals and staff within post-primary schools. The shared recognition of the significance of school culture and the responsibilities of principals and staff members underscores the holistic nature of conflict resolution within the broader educational context. The interviews reveal a collective effort to understand, navigate, and contribute to the school culture, emphasising the profound impact on staff, students, and the overall learning environment. The school is a living space where meaning is created. Schools are products of the culture in which they exist, and school principals contribute to the creation and development of school culture.

The cross-sectional analysis of female interviews delves into the intricate interplay between school culture and staff conflict, offering valuable insights from experienced principals. Margaret noted her evolving approach involves becoming a better listener and advocating for support in confronting serious conflicts. In contrast, Julie, with a background in leading two schools, highlights a positive outcome from a conflict, emphasising forensic analysis and pointing out policies for resolution. Both principals stressed the inevitability of conflicts in schools due to diverse personalities and perspectives.

Rita contributed insights, reflecting the practical and emotional investment. Conflict's multifaceted cost includes time, personal toll, and impacts on productivity. Rita acknowledged conflict inevitability in schools and highlights its effects on staff wellbeing, participation, and the overall learning environment. Her strategies include circle time, restorative conferences, and positive interventions. Rita's approach to conflict was factual, focusing on self-preservation, depersonalisation, and continuous learning. Breege provided a broader perspective, noting conflict's inevitability due to human relationships in education. Anne emphasises conflict prevention through communication and understanding of the school's ethos. She discussed systemic conflicts' cyclical nature, stressing the stress on staff and principals and mentioned the importance of innate qualities, communication skills, and support networks in conflict management. From the data it seems patterns emerge regarding the inevitability of conflict, the understanding of its costs, and the emphasis on proactive strategies such as prevention, communication, and continuous learning. Both Rita and Anne stressed the importance of addressing conflicts through depersonalisation and focusing on self-preservation, indicating a pragmatic approach to conflict resolution within school settings. The interviews with

them collectively provided a nuanced understanding of the challenges, costs, and management strategies associated with conflicts in educational settings.

The analysis of male interviews brought to light the intricate interplay between school culture and staff conflict, capturing diverse experiences and perspectives on conflict management within the school setting. James, with five years of experience, recounted a recent conflict related to promotion, emphasising a patient and reflective approach, "I will listen to the other person, not intervene and not explain, and let them ventilate their feelings," highlights his emphasis on understanding and allowing individuals to realise their own shortcomings independently.

Contrastingly, Michael, with two years in the role, admitted to enjoying conflict, finding it exciting. His statement that "I am a very different person at work, than I am at home," shows the distinct professional persona he adopts. His proactive approach included implementing restorative practices and prioritising positive staff relations through social outings. Derek brought a structured and inclusive approach to conflict resolution. His emphasis on mediation training and formal techniques was evident, "creating space for both parties to hear each other." Seeking external legal advice, particularly in challenging cases involving unions, added a layer of complexity to his conflict management approach. Brian highlighted the multifaceted challenges of conflicts, emphasising the emotional toll and time constraints associated with conflicts and the need for comprehensive professional development. In his words such professional development was "limited." The ongoing development of a Dignity in the Workplace policy was discussed and acknowledged by both as a proactive step in conflict resolution.

In conclusion, the cross-sectional analysis of male interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between school culture and staff conflict. Themes of patience, reflective listening, proactive conflict prevention, and seeking external advice emerge as crucial elements in navigating the complexities of conflicts within the school setting. Both genders highlighted the importance of proactive conflict prevention, comprehensive professional development, and external support in navigating the complexities of conflicts within the school setting. The nuanced interplay between school culture and staff conflict, as revealed in the interviews, underscored the intricate and multifaceted nature of conflict management in school settings. Guncavdi Alabay (2024) confirms this tangible link between harmonious school cultures and efficient conflict resolution.

The cross-sectional analysis of female interviews offered a deep dive into the complex relationship between school culture and staff conflict, showcasing insights from seasoned principals. Margaret's perspective emphasises the importance of evolving as a listener and advocating for support in addressing serious conflicts, was indicative of a commitment to personal growth and collaborative problem-solving. Julie, drawing from her experience of leading multiple schools, highlighted a positive conflict resolution outcome through forensic analysis and policy-driven approaches. Both principals acknowledged the inevitability of conflicts in school settings due to the diversity of personalities and perspectives. Conversely, the analysis of male interviews illuminated a different facet of conflict management within the educational landscape. James exemplified a patient and reflective approach to conflict resolution, prioritising understanding and allowing individuals to express themselves. Michael, in contrast, embraced conflict as exciting, adopting a proactive stance and prioritising positive staff relations. Derek's structured approach emphasised mediation techniques and seeking external legal advice, showing the complexity of conflict management in educational leadership. Brian acknowledged the emotional toll and time constraints associated with conflicts, highlighting the ongoing need for professional development. While both genders emphasise proactive conflict prevention and the importance of external support, the nuanced differences in their approaches shed light on the diverse strategies employed to navigate conflicts within school settings.

6.4.1 Subtheme: Adaptive leadership and policy evolution

The findings uncover the significance of adaptive leadership and policy evolution in school settings, showcasing the dynamic and responsive nature of policy development, implementation, and revision. This highlights the crucial role of adaptability and contextual responsiveness in leadership within school settings. The findings show the need for principals to continually assess and adjust policies to meet the evolving needs and challenges of the educational environment, ensuring that they remain relevant in fostering positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

The existence of a dignity in the workplace policy varied across all of the interviews with eight of the nine school settings having one in place. However, the extent to how these Dignity in the Workplace policies were lived out varied vastly. Four of the policies pre-dated the appointment of the principal, and only two of the policies had input from school

staff. Margaret advised that the policy needs to be revisited every year and stressed the importance of continuous adaptation and responsiveness in changing circumstances:

> "A living document, it needs to be something that is visited every single year… when people felt that they were going to stir things up, that they would realise that this isn't the way we do things around here… It can't be something that sits on a shelf in the principal's office, it needs to be a working document".

One school was in the process of drawing up a dignity in the workplace policy with Derek saying: "Given that I've had a couple of situations that I could have seen, if they had gone further, and things hadn't been resolved, that was really an impetus to get it up and running."

Alongside the dignity in the workplace policy, The Teaching Council Code of Conduct was emphasised by two of the principals, with Breege saying that:

> "If staff were aware of the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers, things would be an awful lot easier. They forget, or they don't read it. I mean dignity, respect, professional obligations of people in relation to their co-workers and in relation to students, integrity, trust and care."

Participants commended the good practice espoused in policy documents. However, because they were never openly discussed principals were left trying to figure matters out for themselves. Participants maintained that principals were reluctant to initiate mediation since it entailed engaging external professionals, indicating failure on their part. There was also a sense that negative publicity, which may result in reputational damage, and which was to be avoided at all costs. Anne noted the role of the Workplace Relations Commission:

> "They provide an outstanding mediation facilitation process, and it is free to schools. We would always say that to principals, but when people hear the words Workplace Relations Commission, people will think we're gone to the WRC. But outside of the section where they deal with investigating breachers, and the rules, and the law and the legislation. They have an outstanding mediation service, and the people who engage in and do it are very, very skilled. It is free to schools. It is a free service. But people are blinded by the WRC."

The mention of the Workplace Relations Commission and the potential reluctance of principals to engage external professionals indicates the influence of external factors on the evolution and implementation of policies. The decision-making process regarding policy evolution in school settings is not solely influenced by internal considerations but is also shaped by external regulatory bodies and perceived barriers to external support. Such insights emphasise the need for a nuanced understanding of both internal and

external dynamics when examining policy implementation and evolution within school contexts.

Participants interviewed commented that some schools' young teachers are influenced and perhaps indoctrinated by existing school culture, with Margaret acknowledging that "a senior member can have a toxic influence". Therefore, many staff members' behaviours and values can be changed or moulded by the environment they initially find themselves in. Derek concluded: "I always say, the best way I can get the best for students is to have the staff operating or performing at their best day to day. But if there is conflict involved, that's not happening".

It was evident that all the principals were driven to create an inclusive and productive school environment. This drive wasn't solely for their personal gain, but rather for the betterment of both the students and staff. This inherent motivation was frequently highlighted during the interviews, as the participants shared their achievements and challenges as school principals. Anne shared that,

> "Once you're part of a staff or on a staff where the conflict is rife, it can be difficult to deal with at that point. For me I would take time to deal with it when the school is not in conflict, where you set the tone of the school, where you set the tone of relationships, where you set the tone of interactions, and where you speak openly".

Anne highlighted The Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Prevention and Resolution of Bullying at Work, under the Industrial Relations Act 1990, was issued in 2020 through a collaboration between the Health and Safety Authority and the Workplace Relations Commission. This "New legislation… takes account of that statutory instrument, it does put a greater obligation on people to try and resolve the matter informally." Anne also noted that the code identifies "good leadership, proper communication and staff training, and the resolution of complaints in a supportive, effective and fair manner."

In exploring principals' experience of staff conflict and an emphasis on the importance of school culture, the wellbeing of staff was highlighted by all principal participants. Throughout the responses of all participants, the importance of living out the values of respect, care, integrity and trust came through. Margaret surmised,

> "Create a respectful school, be approachable, understanding and show respect. As principal you have a duty of care to the school community. There are very few things that as a school we haven't resolved through listening and being genuine. Conflict is a reality, have the conversation".

The subtheme of adaptive leadership and policy evolution uncovered in this research study resonates deeply with the overarching aims explored. The dynamic and responsive nature of policy development, implementation, and revision highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by post-primary principals in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture. As the study delves into conflict resolution strategies employed by principals and examines their perceptions of staff conflict, it becomes evident that adaptive leadership and policy evolution are essential components in navigating these complexities. Adaptive leadership, with its focus on collaborative problem-solving utilising multiple perspectives, is especially applicable to organisations faced with solving complex problems involving many stakeholders (Nelson and Squires 2017). The policy context outlined sheds light on the various legislative frameworks and organisational policies that shape the landscape within which principals operate, highlighting the need for adaptability and contextual responsiveness. Moreover, the exploration of conflict management strategies, school culture, and the role of principals emphasises the importance of fostering a positive and inclusive environment conducive to addressing staff conflicts.

6.4.2 Subtheme: Impact of staff conflict on school culture and teaching

While all participants discussed the effect that conflict has on them as principal (discussed in the next theme), participants interviewed also highlighted the influence staff conflict has on teaching. With students being central to school life, the principals interviewed were firmly of the view that students pick-up on tensions among staff. A school culture that influences teaching and learning positively sees students engaged in their learning and accelerating with their academic performance. Fink and Resnick (2010) cautioned that when the culture fails to foster learning, it can detrimentally impact student achievement. Breege experienced staff conflict having an impact on the staff member's self-esteem, how they related to students, classroom practice, and which resulted in absenteeism. Derek described that staff conflict has a long extending influence on teaching and learning over time, "I see the influence of staff conflict on students, on those students that the staff teach, it becomes obvious if something hasn't been dealt with, it festers, you can see how it impacts students, and the learning in the classroom". The principal's observation of the influence of staff conflict on students shows the interconnectedness of the school community. The emotional tone set by conflicts among educators was seen to significantly influence the classroom atmosphere, student wellbeing, and the overall quality of the learning experience. Thus, addressing staff conflicts becomes, for them, not

only a matter of interpersonal dynamics among adults, but also a crucial factor in fostering a positive educational environment for students.

Participants highlighted the multi-faceted nature of what is meant by school culture along with the impact on school development. Rita explained that conflict may have a positive outcome on the culture of teaching and learning, when as a result of conflict and discussion, practices within the school are for the better. Rita explained that there's a longstanding conflict between the traditional teaching methods favoured by some veteran teachers and the innovative, technology-driven approaches advocated by a group of younger teachers. This conflict has led to heated discussions during staff meetings and a noticeable divide among the teaching staff. Conflict, when used constructively, can lead to positive outcomes for the culture of learning and teaching within a school, prompting discussions, reflections, and compromises that ultimately contribute to a more inclusive and adaptable teaching culture. This adaptability, in turn, positively influences school development by fostering professional growth, enhancing student engagement, and instigating a broader shift towards continuous improvement.

However, when conflicts among staff members arise and remain unresolved, it can detract from the primary focus of the school community: teaching and learning. Catherine felt staff productivity was affected because of staff conflict, "Teaching and learning are a case of productivity, if an issue is being dealt with, then time is not spent on things that maybe it should be spent on. That's a cost there".

Rita agreed stating "Staff conflict can eat into your time, and you just want to support staff and students" (Rita). When educators are preoccupied with resolving interpersonal disputes, they may have less time and energy to dedicate to their core responsibilities, ultimately affecting student learning outcomes. Both Catherine and Rita expressed that when staff members are engaged in conflict, their attention and energy are diverted away from the primary responsibilities in teaching and facilitating student learning. The time and effort that could be invested in lesson planning, student support, and professional development are compromised. The conflict-related stress and tension among staff may permeate the classroom environment and teachers, may find it challenging to create a positive and focused atmosphere for students. This, in turn, can affect the quality of teaching and student engagement. The impact of staff conflict on staff productivity and time management is multifaceted. Therefore, creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning necessitates proactive conflict resolution strategies to mitigate disruptions and maintain focus on educational goals. This interconnectedness between

staff dynamics and student experiences shows the importance of proactive conflict management strategies in fostering a positive educational environment.

Furthermore, conflict, when managed constructively, can lead to positive outcomes for the culture of learning and teaching within a school. Rita's example of a longstanding conflict between traditional and innovative teaching methods highlights how constructive conflict can prompt discussions, reflections, and compromises that contribute to a more inclusive and adaptable teaching culture. Additionally, Julie's proactive mediation between staff members and a student exemplifies efforts to foster a supportive and inclusive school environment. Her investment in training related to conflict management highlights the importance of continuous professional development in addressing interpersonal conflicts effectively. Overall, the subtheme shows the multifaceted impact of staff conflicts on school culture and teaching practices. It highlights the interconnectedness between staff dynamics and student experiences, emphasising the need for proactive conflict management strategies and a supportive school culture conducive to teaching and learning. By addressing conflicts promptly and fostering a positive educational environment, schools can enhance student wellbeing, academic performance, and school culture.

6.5 Theme 3: Perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship

Rita expresses the realisation that principals, despite their efforts, cannot do everything and conflicts may impact their perceived competence. Rita shared her experience:

> "The more I read about what leaders look like, and how they influence the culture of a school, I realise we can't do everything, you're trying to do everything, so if you have conflict, does that me look bad as a leader? Rather than saying as leaders it makes us more competent, because we have opened discussion, that people have opinions, that people feel they can express their opinions."

The interviewees expressed a realisation that principals cannot do everything, indicating an acknowledgement of their own limitations.

Regrettably, the data from this study provides evidence that dealing with conflict can have a negative impact on the school, but also on the professional ability of the principal, making the role potentially untenable. In the 2022 survey by the RAND Corporation titled, "Are Principals on the Brink of a Breakdown?", some 85% of principals reported experiencing job-related stress; 48% said they were struggling with burnout; and 28% reported symptoms of distress (Fullan 2023). Anne shared situations where principals "retired, a few resigned or decided to take early retirement", and went on to explain that

staff conflict is the most stressful factor on a principal with many stating staff conflict "wasn't worth the mental hardship of trying to deal with it". Participants also emphasised that staff morale is affected, with conflict a huge drain on the productivity of staff, and the challenge this brings for the principal. Derek spoke about not being able to plan for every eventuality and "some conflicts come across your table; you couldn't possibly foresee that it would become an issue. I suppose that's why it's so stressful".

Anne highlighted the importance of: "Good practices, good policies, good procedures, and very effective communication from the principal and deputy principal … fostering good communication". Mary described the principal's duty of care to the school community by "creating a respectful school and being approachable, understanding, showing respect and finding a balance." There is no shortage of statutory provisions which taken together, provide a comprehensive legal and policy framework for the role of principal. The way the participants interviewed were empathetic towards principals and acknowledged the breadth of the role of school principal. The empathetic stance taken by the participants during the interviews highlights a deep understanding of the challenges inherent in the role of a school principal. By validating the challenges faced by principals and emphasising their importance within the educational ecosystem, the support body representatives signalled a commitment to providing meaningful support and resources to help principals succeed in their demanding role.

Overall, the impact of dealing with staff conflict on principals was emotional, and for most of them, it affected them in and outside of school in various ways. Some reported a strain on their personal relationships, while others relied on family members to pick them up when they are down. Several principals mentioned experiencing sleepless nights as a result of the emotional toll taken by staff conflicts. The weight of resolving issues and maintaining a positive school culture can lead to heightened stress levels, impacting their overall wellbeing. Some principals reported that the emotional burden of dealing with staff conflict spilled over into their personal lives, potentially straining relationships with family and friends. The spill-over effect can lead to a challenging balance between professional and personal spheres. However, the over-arching outcome was that principals are incredibly resilient at taking care of themselves. On the positive side, principals highlighted the importance of having a strong support system. Family members played a crucial role in providing emotional support. They served as a source of encouragement and understanding, helping principals navigate the challenges they faced. Engaging in self-reflection and learning from experiences was shown to contribute to

personal development and enhanced conflict resolution skills. The emotional impact of dealing with staff conflict on principals was undoubtedly profound, affecting their wellbeing within the school environment and permeating into their personal lives. The ability to balance these emotional challenges with coping mechanisms, support systems, and self-reflection is crucial for principals to navigate the complexities of conflict resolution while maintaining their overall emotional resilience. Pat valued the skill of school principals,

> "Principals become very skilled at dealing with it [conflict], they learn a lot about themselves, learn a lot about the other person, and learn about the way things are done. It can be a huge skill that they use in other parts of their lives…The principalship is a unique position because you are dealing with so many people in different situations, you get quite skilled at dealing with people, it can be a very positive thing and development".

While principals often demonstrate resilience in navigating the complexities of their position, the expectation that they should solely bear the burden of emotional strain raises concerns about sustainability and support mechanisms. Principals are tasked with creating a respectful and approachable school environment, yet the emotional toll of dealing with staff conflicts can be significant, affecting their personal lives and relationships. The acknowledgment of this emotional impact is crucial, as it highlights the human element in leadership and highlights the need for coping mechanisms and support systems. However, the notion that principals are inherently resilient may inadvertently perpetuate the expectation that they should manage their emotional challenges independently, potentially overlooking the need for systemic support and resources. While some principals may indeed develop resilience through experience and self-reflection, it's essential to recognise that resilience should not be equated with enduring emotional strain in isolation. Instead, fostering resilience should involve a holistic approach that prioritises self-care, professional development, and supportive organisational structures. Additionally, the emphasis on principals' resilience should not overshadow the importance of competency in conflict resolution and interpersonal skills, as highlighted by Anne's cautionary example: "I mean we all know the principal that goes into their office and lock their door, don't answer a teacher, won't return or answer a phone-call, won't answer very plausible emails, won't clarify anything… That gives grounds to people building up resentment."

The cross-sectional analysis of female principal interviews painted a comprehensive picture of the theme of unsustainability in post-primary principalship, highlighting key challenges, emotional toll, and the lack of adequate support. Margaret spoke of the

systemic pressure on principals to conform to rules, contributing to the perceived unsustainability. She spoke convincingly about the profound emotional toll that conflict has taken on school principals, and her interview was full of description of stress, uncertainty, aggression, and pressure. Her interview, like others, vividly illustrated the personal cost of conflict, emphasising the heavy emotional burden that principals often carry while navigating interpersonal disputes within their school communities. However, beyond the emotional strain, there is a deeper layer of complexity regarding the sustainability of principals' roles in managing conflicts. The lack of comprehensive Conflict Management Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs points to a potential gap in preparing school principals for the intricate challenges they face, contributing to the perceived unsustainability of their role. Orla's perspective on conflicts as time-consuming further amplified this theme of unsustainability, highlighting the ongoing nature of conflict resolution and the significant time investment it demands from principals. Staff conflict is both emotionally taxing and time-consuming , suggesting that the unsustainability of their roles stems not only from the emotional toll of conflicts but also from the relentless demand on their time and resources. Moreover, the recurring theme of the Department of Education's lack of support adds another layer to the perceived unsustainability, emphasising the need for external assistance and resources to help principals manage conflicts and alleviate the burden they face in maintaining school harmony.

The cross-sectional analysis of male principal interviews provides a comprehensive insight into the theme of the perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship, with a central focus on the significant challenges associated with conflict management. James, in his interview, spoke of the personal toll of dealing with conflict. particularly an aspiring assistant principal who failed to secure promotion. Though aggressive she came to understand that she hadn't demonstrated the required competencies for the role. As a result, she resolved to take proactive steps to address this shortfall before the next interview process. Though resolved satisfactorily he revealed the personal toll this conflict had on him: "There's the lack of sleep that comes with it. It takes away from all the other activities I have, family, etc. Even my own physical health." This loss of sleep is attributed to the emotional strain and stress caused by conflicts, which permeated into various aspects of his life, including family and physical health.

The theme of the perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship, particularly in the context of managing staff conflict, serves as a critical link outlined in this research

study. The qualitative data sheds light on the demanding nature of the principal's role, requiring a diverse skill set and constant adaptation to various leadership challenges. Rita's reflection on the perceived competence of principals amidst conflict underscores the intricate dynamics at play, where traditional expectations clash with the realities of leadership limitations. This tension resonates with the policy context outlined, where gaps in explicit guidance on staff conflicts leave principals to navigate complexities independently. Moreover, the emotional toll highlighted by Anne and the reliance on personal support systems echo the need for a comprehensive approach to address the perceived unsustainability of principalship. The emphasis on resilience, as observed in Pat's perspective, underscores the importance of acknowledging principals' coping mechanisms while also recognising the necessity for systemic support and continuous development. This theme aligns with the research objectives by providing insights into conflict resolution strategies employed by principals and their experiences of staff conflict on school culture. Ultimately, addressing the unsustainability of post-primary principalship requires a multifaceted approach that integrates policy frameworks, professional development initiatives, and a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics shaping school culture and teaching practices.

This theme delves into the challenges surrounding the perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship, aligning closely with several research aims of the study. Firstly, explores conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture. This theme sheds light on the difficulties principals encounter in handling conflicts among staff, emphasising the emotional strain they endure. It also hints at various strategies utilised by principals, including informal conflict resolution methods and the necessity for proactive measures and structured policies to address these issues.

6.5.1 Subtheme: Impact of principal turnover on school stability and culture

The research findings reveal a noteworthy subtheme concerning the repercussions of frequent turnover in principal positions on school stability and culture. Through interviews conducted with school principals, it became evident that the persistent departure of principals has significant ramifications for the school culture. High rates of principal turnover threaten school stability, school improvements that advance achievement and equity, and school working conditions that support effective teaching and meaningful relationships with communities and families (DeMatthews et al.

2021). The observation of numerous principals leaving their roles, coupled with a scarcity of applicants for principal positions and the necessity to readvertise vacancies, highlights the challenges faced by principals. Principal James's candid testimony encapsulates the essence of this finding, as he candidly expresses his reluctance to recommend the principalship to family members. "Get a deputy principal's job if you can but under no circumstances take the principal's job, because there is so much conflict, so many nights awake". His stark advice, citing the prevalence of conflict and sleepless nights, serves as a poignant illustration of the profound stress and emotional strain experienced by principals. This finding directly links the turnover in principal positions to the arduous task of managing staff conflict, highlighting how such challenges contribute to the reluctance of individuals to assume leadership roles.

The research findings uncover a recurring theme surrounding the consequences of frequent turnover in principal positions on school stability and culture. Through interviews with school principals, it becomes evident that the persistent departure of principals significantly impacts the school culture. Principal James's candid testimony serves as a poignant illustration of this conflation, as he openly expresses his reluctance to recommend the principalship due to the prevalence of conflict and sleepless nights. His advice not only highlights the personal toll of the role but also reflects the systemic issues contributing to principal turnover. Thus, the principal's warning against assuming the role becomes intertwined with the broader issue of turnover, highlighting how challenges such as managing staff conflict contribute to the reluctance of individuals to take on leadership roles.

The cost of workplace stress-related sick leave and premature resignations of school principals have contributed to rising costs of the education sector as a whole (Bruce et al. 2022), with Jacqueline identifying stress, which leads to

> "a distraction from leading teaching and learning, core time is given up to meeting the board of management, and staff member, and teacher, an hour meeting, a two-hour meeting, you're distracted from your role. You must still turn around and deal with child protection issues, deal with the measured staff, affirming the measured staff. Staff conflict can actually drain you, and the amount of time it can take up is phenomenal".

Jacqueline's remarks shed light on the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by school principals. The demands of the role often lead to a significant diversion of time and energy away from core responsibilities such as leading teaching and learning. The prevalence of meetings with various stakeholders, including the board of management,

staff members, and teachers, further compounds the issue by consuming valuable time that could otherwise be dedicated to educational leadership tasks. Moreover, Jacqueline's mention of the need to address child protection issues and manage staff conflicts shows the complex nature of the principalship role. These additional responsibilities not only contribute to the workload but also exacerbate the stress experienced by principals. Staff conflict, in particular, is highlighted as a significant drain on time and energy, further amplifying the challenges faced by principals in maintaining a positive and productive school environment. Overall, Jacqueline's insights highlight the urgent need for proactive measures to address workplace stress and its associated consequences in principals. By prioritising strategies to mitigate stress, supporting principals in managing their workload, and promote a positive school culture, schools can work towards fostering healthier work environments for principals and, ultimately, improving educational outcomes for students.

The negative consequences highlight the broader impact on the education sector, with stress and conflict draining the time and focus of principals. It emphasises the importance of stable leadership for learning and teaching. The increasing numbers of principals leaving their positions result in negative outcomes for their schools and indirectly impacting the education sector in the wider sense. Margaret acknowledges that the impact of principal turnover in a school varies depending on the replacement, citing, "a number of principals jobs being readvertised leading to speculation as to why a principal has not been appointed to the school, again the students and the school aren't the focus". The impact goes beyond the immediate school community, influencing perceptions in the wider community. The instability resulting from frequent turnover raises concerns about the school's ability to provide a positive and focused educational experience. Principal turnover is concerning because of the pivotal role that principals play and are expected to play in leading school improvement and because of the time research indicates that improvement can take five to seven years (Snodgrass Rangel 2018; Fullan 2001). A constant churn of principals can make it hard for schools to implement new policies and programs and to commit to improvement (Smith and Miller 2013; Holme and Rangel 2012).

Margaret's insights further emphasise that the repercussions of principal turnover extend beyond the confines of the school environment, influencing perceptions within the wider community. This contrasts starkly with scenarios where stable leadership is maintained, fostering a more positive and focused educational experience for students. Through the

research analysis, it becomes evident that the themes of resentment, loneliness, and isolation, as identified, are deeply intertwined with the challenges posed by principal turnover. This highlights the emotional and social complexities faced by principals, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the broader implications of leadership instability within schools. Arising throughout the principals' interviews was a sense of isolation or loneliness associated with the principalship and Brian reports that: "I suppose as principal, you're in a very isolated and very lonely position. You don't have friends, we didn't sign up to be their friend, we signed up to be their boss". The emotional and social aspects of the principalship are highlighted. The feeling of isolation can contribute to the challenges of the role, emphasising the need for support structures and a balanced approach to professional and home life.

6.5.2 Subtheme: Continuous professional development as crucial for principals

Continuous professional development emerged as a subtheme throughout all interviews with principals. While the nature of the professional development varied as described below, all acknowledged that opportunities to engage with relevant continuous professional development was significant for school principals. The interviews highlighted that that the nature of professional development varied among the principals. This diversity suggests that there isn't a one-size fits all to continuous professional development. Principals may engage in a range of professional development activities tailored to their unique needs and challenges, including those related to staff conflict. Principals worked on the cultivation of a culture that champions perpetual personal growth and development, the nurturing of a collaborative learning community, and the provision of essential resources and support (Abbaspour et al. 2024). The subtheme of continuous professional development is a recurring and crucial aspect of the interviews, underscoring its varied nature and universal importance for school principals. The proposed link between continuous professional development, staff conflict, and school culture opens avenues for further exploration, shedding light on how professional growth contributes to leadership in the face of complex interpersonal challenges. Participants highlighted the significance of continuous professional development for principals, offering them networking and knowledge-sharing opportunities. Interviews with participants emphasised the value of networking and learning from more experienced peers. This facilitated the sharing of experiences and problem-solving strategies, aiding in conflict resolution and enhancing overall learning. Continuous professional development allows principals to enhance their skill sets, ranging from in-

service training to more formal education, encompassing courses from one-day sessions to those aligned with the national qualifications' framework. The content of the continuous professional development concerned with staff conflict included specific conflict training, mentoring, attendance at conference, training in dignity in the workplace, child protection, ethos, restorative practice and mediation. Derek described: "The mediation training, I did was outside of the normal continuous professional development we would attend as school leaders… I certainly would feel that we probably need more training in how we deal with particularly challenging conflict situations".

With respect to staff conflict, all principals interviewed expressed the importance of conflict prevention as opposed to addressing conflict reactively. As Anne put it:

> "Take the time to deal with conflict when the school is not in conflict, where you set the tone of the school, where you set the tone of relationships, where you set the tone of interactions, and where you speak openly…. Preventative to me, would be the best solution to it, if I was giving any advice to a principal starting off in a school".

This statement highlights the preventative aspect of conflict resolution and the need for principals to proactively address potential conflicts before they escalate. It highlights the role of continuous professional development in equipping principals with skills and strategies for conflict prevention, emphasising the importance of training in this area.

Continuous professional development was deemed in this research to be essential for principals, especially those new to their roles, to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, and strategies for conflict resolution. Conversely, experienced principals encounter people management challenges centred on handling behaviours and fostering relationships among staff, parents, external stakeholders, and students. Therefore, continuous professional development for experienced principals in these areas was crucial. Jacqueline succinctly captured the general views of others: "Staff conflict is huge, there isn't enough in-service given for principals from the Department of Education, they do nothing to support principals in the line of conflict. A principal is on their own".

The subtheme of continuous professional development emerged as a recurring and crucial aspect in the interviews, emphasising its varied nature and universal importance for school principals. It is seen as instrumental in providing the necessary skills, knowledge, and networking opportunities to handle conflicts and contribute to positive school culture. The interviews show that while principals may express confidence in their ability to handle conflicts, various challenges, such as the need for preventative strategies,

disciplinary authority, and lack of support, highlight the ongoing importance of continuous professional development. Continuous professional development becomes a crucial tool for principals to navigate the complexities of staff conflict, ensuring they are well-equipped, informed, and capable of fostering a positive school culture.

6.6 Theme 4: Reflective practice in the context of staff conflict

The identified theme of reflective practice in the context of staff conflict, shows that principals engage in reflective practices to make sense of, learn from, and navigate staff conflicts. In order to build relationships, participants spoke of the importance of being "personally reflective about how we are in relationships" (Mary), what we feel and think and how this affects our way of being. This statement emphasises the significance of personal reflection in building relationships. Principals recognised the need to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, highlighting the introspective aspect of their professional development. Professional conversations and the importance of reflection on one's practice was highlighted as an element in the redress of staff conflict for principals. The excerpts compiled below exemplify the active reflection and learning which occurred with the participants.

"I never thought about it (conflict) before, it's good to take the time to think back and talk about it, I hadn't done it before" (Mary). The theme extends to the active role of reflection in addressing staff conflicts. Reflective practices are positioned as a key element in the resolution process, emphasising the connection between introspection and conflict management. Mary's realisation emphasises the value of reflection in unpacking experiences with conflict. The acknowledgement of not having considered it before highlights the transformative power of introspection. It suggests that engaging in reflective practices allows principals to reconsider their experiences, leading to new insights and understanding.

"Well, I never thought about that when …" (Brian) Brian's acknowledgement of not having previously considered certain aspects of conflict suggests that the reflective dialogue prompted him to explore dimensions he hadn't actively thought about, contributing to a deeper understanding. "Making sense of what it meant for me is that it's difficult…" (Julie). Julie's statement reflects the ongoing sensemaking process, indicating that understanding the implications and complexities of conflict is an ongoing and challenging endeavour. The term sensemaking implies a continuous effort to understand and interpret experiences. Julie's acknowledgement highlights that dealing

with conflict involves an ongoing process of sensemaking, emphasising the complexity of interpersonal dynamics. "So, after all this, now I understand that she was going through a lot of the same things" (Catherine). Catherine's learning journey involves gaining insights into the experiences of others involved in conflict. This empathetic understanding suggests a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted nature of interpersonal dynamics. "One interesting thing I learned about conflict is we see ourselves with halos, so I didn't see sort of my own role in it" (Michael). Michael's recognition of self-bias and the tendency to perceive oneself favourably in conflicts is a profound revelation. This acknowledgement opens the door to increased self-awareness and a more nuanced understanding of personal contributions to conflicts. Michael's acknowledgement points to the awareness of personal biases and the tendency to perceive oneself in a positive light. This recognition opens the door to increased self-awareness and a more nuanced understanding of one's contribution to conflicts. The field of education leadership perceive self-awareness to be of importance and value. This can likely be attributed to the claims that self-awareness enhances leader effectiveness (Showry and Manasa 2014).

The provided excerpts collectively underscore the dynamic nature of learning and reflection in the context of staff conflict. Principals engage in this continuous process of sensemaking, self-discovery, and empathetic understanding, highlighting the transformative potential of reflective dialogue in educational leadership. The theme of reflective practice in the context of staff conflict highlights how principals actively engage in reflection as a transformative and ongoing process, contributing to their understanding of conflicts, relationships, and their roles as principals. Given the demands of the principal role, reflection often takes place in informal or quiet moments amid their busy schedules. Principals reflect during solitary activities, including commuting, after challenging meetings, or at the end of the day when they can pause to process events. Some also use formal opportunities like leadership meetings, mentoring sessions, or professional development workshops to engage in reflective dialogue. Despite the busyness, principals intentionally carved out time for reflection, recognising it as essential for understanding conflicts, improving relationships, and refining their leadership approach. This reflective practice becomes an ongoing, transformative process that enhances their sensemaking and decisions-making.

In the cross-sectional analysis of male interviews with principals, the themes of reflective practice in the context of staff conflict highlight the proactive engagement of male

principals in introspective learning and dialogue. Participants emphasised the significance of personal reflection in building relationships and navigating conflicts, recognising the need to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Through professional conversations and reflection on their practices, male principals actively addressed conflicts, demonstrating a commitment to ongoing learning and self-discovery. Excerpts from the interviews highlighted instances where principals gained new insights and understanding through reflective dialogue, such as Brian's acknowledgment of previously unconsidered aspects of conflict and Michael's recognition of personal biases. The analysis revealed that participant male principals engaged in active listening, asked questions, and demonstrated honesty in their reflections, contributing to a continuous learning journey. Overall, the findings highlighted the transformative potential of reflective practice in equipping male principals with the skills and understanding necessary to navigate staff conflicts and foster positive relationships within educational leadership roles.

The cross-sectional analysis reveals gender-specific nuances in the reflective practice of school principals regarding staff conflict. Female interviewees delved into the intricate nature of conflicts, emphasising emotional toll and multifaceted challenges, while male interviews showcased proactive measures and the recognition of practical challenges in conflict resolution. Together, these perspectives contribute to a comprehensive understanding of reflective practices in the context of staff conflict within educational leadership roles.

The exploration of conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster reveals insightful practices used to manage staff conflict and its influence on school culture. Through interviews, it becomes evident that principals engage in reflective practices to navigate conflicts, emphasising personal reflection and professional dialogue as essential components. These strategies highlight the proactive approaches principals adopt to address conflicts, thereby influencing school culture positively. Through reflective practices, principals navigate conflicts, promote understanding, and cultivate empathetic relationships, contributing to a more effective approach to conflict resolution in school settings.

6.6.1 Subtheme: Emotional toll and time constraints in managing staff conflict

The identified theme of the impact of emotional toll and time constraints in managing staff conflict balance highlights the multifaceted consequences of staff conflicts on the

emotional wellbeing, personal lives, and work-life balance of school principals, but also can lead to skill development and personal growth.

Pat recognised that: "Sometimes I see that people don't have a fear of conflict, the principalship is a unique position because you are dealing with so many people in different situations, you get quite skilled at dealing with people, it can be a very positive thing and development."

While Pat emphasised the potential positive aspects and skill development associated with conflict management in the principalship role, it's important to acknowledge potential counterpoints or challenges in these self-declared abilities. Pat's observation implies a certain level of confidence in dealing with conflict. However, an overestimation of one's conflict resolution abilities might lead to overlooking the complexity of certain conflicts or underestimating the emotional toll they can take. Not all conflicts are the same, and the ability to manage conflicts can vary depending on the nature and intensity of the conflict. Some conflicts may be deeply rooted or systemic, presenting challenges that go beyond individual interpersonal skills. Dealing with conflict can be emotionally taxing, and, while Pat suggests it can be positive for development, there's a potential counterpoint in terms of the toll it may take on the emotional wellbeing of principals. Constant exposure to conflicts may contribute to stress and burnout. While Pat highlights skill development, there may be limitations in terms of resources available for ongoing professional development. Principals may face constraints in accessing training or support systems that enhance their conflict resolution skills. In exploring how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, it's crucial to consider these counterpoints to Pat's observations to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

The findings highlighted the profound concern regarding the wellbeing and mental health of principals. Balancing work and personal life were identified as pivotal to managing the workload. Staff conflict significantly impacted the self-efficacy of principals, with various examples highlighting both effective and detrimental approaches to workload management. Principals described personal stressors leading to exhaustion, frustration, and various physical symptoms, weaving their personal narratives into responses while addressing the challenges of staff conflict. When asked about the cost of conflict on the principal, participants identified stress, sleepless nights, and the demanding impact on family life. Margaret commented that:

> "It's the kind of thing that stays with you 24 hours a day. Sometimes, as a principal you feel very alone when dealing with staff conflict, because other members of the staff can gang up on you as well… it's a lonely place to be, it's very time consuming, and sometimes it can undermine the whole staff morale, which of course affects you as principal as well."

All the other roles and relationships and impact on time were identified by Jacqueline:

> "You're distracted from your role as principal of the school. You must still turn around and deal with child protection issues, deal with other really good staff, affirming them. It can actually drain away from the role you should be in the school, but really teaching and learning, the amount of time the conflict can take up is phenomenal".

Principals interviewed highlighted the critical role of family and friends in providing the only really support in alleviating the consequences staff conflict. In any professional setting, distinguishing between work and family life is challenging. Principals in this study encountered difficulties in managing the balance between their work responsibilities and family commitments. This included feeling a sense of guilt due to time constraints affecting their ability to spend quality time with family members, as well as being unable to fulfil job expectations due to family commitments. While participants appreciated home support as crucial, they were also concerned about the negative impact staff conflict exerted on family members and home life:

"It takes away from family time", noted James, who succinctly captures the direct impact of staff conflict on his personal life. Indeed, the statement suggests that the time and energy spent dealing with conflicts at work directly impede his ability to allocate time for his family. This indicates a tangible and immediate consequence on work-life balance.

"It (the conflict) spilled over into how I was at home and with my family". Here, Mary's comment goes beyond time allocation, delving into the emotional spill-over effects of conflicts. The term spilled over suggests an uncontrollable flow, indicating that the emotional strain from conflicts does not neatly compartmentalise but, instead, affects her demeanour and interactions with family members. Rita stated: "I find if I go home, and one of the kids say something to me, I get annoyed and tell them they have to do as I say. I'm not that kind of a parent, … that's me frustrated … it can take over my mind"

These comments provide a vivid illustration of how conflicts impact her emotional state. The frustration from dealing with conflicts at work spills over into her interactions with her children, leading to an emotional response that contradicts her usual parenting style. This highlights the toll conflicts take on her mental and emotional wellbeing.

Julie concurs "I was difficult at home, it was all consuming, it has an effect on home life and family life". Here, Julie's comment reinforces the pervasive nature of conflicts, describing them as all-consuming. This choice of words suggests that conflicts become a dominant force in her life, overshadowing other aspects, including her home and family life. The term difficult at home, emphasises the strain on her personal relationships.

Catherine agreed "Carrying a conflict home definitely weighs on your mind, you're not as engaged in conversations with others". Her statement articulates the mental burden of carrying conflicts home. The metaphor "weighs on your mind" conveys the psychological impact, and the observation about being not as engaged in conversations with others, indicates how conflicts create a distraction and emotional distance even in personal interactions.

All of the comments highlight the emotional toll of staff conflicts on principals. The emotions include frustration, annoyance, and a sense of being difficult at home. This emotional burden affects their interactions with family members. The use of phrases like "spilled over" and "weighs on your mind" suggests that the impact of conflicts is not easily contained within the professional realm. It spills over into personal life, affecting attitudes, behaviours, and mental wellbeing at home. Principals express a sense of conflicts taking away not only their time but also their mental and emotional energy, leaving them less able to engage fully with family members or enjoy personal time. Some comments touch on the effect conflicts has on parenting styles and relationships with family members. Principals find themselves responding to their families in ways that are atypical, indicating the disruptive influence of conflicts. These comments highlight the deep and intricate ways in which staff conflicts impact the overall wellbeing and work-life balance of principals, reaching beyond mere time constraints to influence emotions, interactions, and relationships in their personal lives. Indeed, the toll on their mental and emotional health is evident in the narratives shared by the principals.

The degree of handling conflict varied among participants, with all expressing evident emotional distress. Principals also highlighted experiencing exhaustion, impacting the staff's wellbeing and consequently affecting the overall school performance. Participants mentioned difficulties such as sleepless nights, weight loss, and strained relationships, emphasising the toll workplace conflicts took on their personal lives. The theme highlights the intricate relationship between staff conflicts, principals' wellbeing and work-life balance. It emphasises the emotional toll conflicts take on principals, the

challenges in managing personal and professional responsibilities, and the need for prioritising the wellbeing of school principals to create a positive school environment.

The identified subtheme delves into the multifaceted impact of staff conflict on the emotional wellbeing, personal lives, and work-life balance of school principals, juxtaposed with the potential for skill development and personal growth. Pat's acknowledgment of the unique position of principals in navigating conflicts highlights the potential positive outcomes of such experiences, emphasising skill acquisition and development. However, the self-confidence in managing conflicts may sometimes overshadow the complexities and emotional toll associated with them. The emotional strain is evident in the narratives of principals, reflecting feelings of loneliness, distraction, and time constraints. Margaret's depiction of conflict as a constant companion, coupled with Jacqueline's observation on the draining effect of conflicts on time management, highlights the pervasive nature of such challenges. These sentiments are echoed in the experiences shared by other principals, including James, Mary, and Rita, who express frustration, emotional spill-over, and difficulty in managing personal relationships due to the burden of conflicts. Catherine's metaphor of conflicts weighing on the mind encapsulates the psychological toll, highlighting the distraction and emotional distance experienced even in personal interactions. Collectively, these narratives illuminate the intricate interplay between staff conflicts, principals' emotional wellbeing, and work-life balance, emphasising the need for holistic support systems and prioritisation of principals' mental health to foster a positive school environment.

6.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a comprehensive examination of how post-primary principals in Munster construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. By organising the findings around four central themes – staff conflict, the interplay between school culture and conflict resolution, the perceived unsustainability of post-primary principalship, and reflective practice in the context of staff conflict – the study offers nuanced insights into the complex dynamics at play. These themes, emerging from detailed thematic analysis, are closely tied to the broader policy context, theoretical framework, and methodological approaches outlined in earlier chapters. Together, they contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies involved in managing staff conflict and fostering a positive school culture. The

insights gained from this research provide a foundation for developing more effective approaches to conflict resolution in school settings.

Chapter 7: **Discussion and Conclusion**

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the findings outlined in the previous chapter, interpreting their significance in the context of research questions and existing literature, and exploring their implications for theory, practice, and future research. Firstly, it explores the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture. Secondly, it delves into the conflict resolution strategies employed by these principals and its influence on school culture. Thirdly, the chapter develops recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture. The theoretical framework provides an understanding of these dynamics by integrating relational leadership and sensemaking theories. Following the examination of these aims, the chapter will present the key findings, discuss the limitations of the study, and offer recommendations for future research and practice.

7.2 Objective: To examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster of staff conflict on school culture.

The first objective of this study was to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster regarding staff conflict and its influence on school culture. Specifically, the research sought to explore how these principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. The findings, derived from extensive interviews, offer relevant insights into these dynamics, revealing both the challenges and opportunities presented by staff conflict in school settings.

Understanding the nature of conflict

The study found that principals experience staff conflict as an inevitable aspect of school life, as influenced by various factors such as personality clashes, differing values, and power dynamics. The acknowledgement by nine out of fourteen participants, that conflict can yield both positive and negative outcomes, which shows, that conflict when managed well, can lead to growth and improved relationships (Safeena and Velnampy 2017). Margaret's distinction between positive and negative conflict shows this duality. Positive conflict involves dignified disagreements that can foster growth and collaboration, while

negative conflict is marked by persistent opposition and undermines school culture. This differentiation is crucial for principals as it guides them in identifying and nurturing constructive conflicts while mitigating harmful ones. Margaret's insights emphasise the need for conflict resolution strategies to enhance school culture. Catherine's and Pat's comments highlight that, while conflict is challenging, it can also lead to personal and professional growth. Catherine noted that conflicts could strengthen relationships, while Pat recognised that dealing with various people and situations enhances conflict management skills. These perspectives are supported by Yin et al. (2022), who noted that staff conflict could lead to both instability and positive organisational results.

The distinction between positive and negative conflict helps principals identify opportunities for growth and areas requiring intervention. The ability to distinguish between positive and negative conflicts is essential in fostering a healthy school culture. Differentiating between positive and negative conflicts is a critical skill for principals in school settings, as it significantly influences school culture. Constructive conflicts typically involve respectful, open communication where individuals focus on resolving issues collaboratively rather than engaging in personal attacks. According to Rahim (2001), integrative negotiation – where parties work together to achieve mutually beneficial solutions – is a hallmark of positive conflict. Eligobar et al. (2016) and Tjosvold (2008) further support this view, asserting that constructive conflicts foster organisational innovation and productivity through a collaborative culture.

To nurture constructive conflicts, principals can encourage open dialogue, ensuring that staff feel safe to express diverse viewpoints without fear of retribution. Almost et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of psychological safety and trust in promoting healthy conflict, suggesting that a supportive environment is crucial. Additionally, providing training in conflict resolution and emotional intelligence is essential. Chen and Guo (2020) highlight the role of emotional intelligence in managing interpersonal relationships and conflicts constructively, suggesting that principals should invest in professional development that enhances these skills. Principals were shown in this research to implement collaborative decision-making processes as a deliberate strategy to foster a culture where conflict is approached constructively. By involving staff in decisions, principals aimed to create an environment where differing opinions could be expressed openly, encouraging productive dialogue and solutions. This approach not only mitigated tensions but also strengthened relationships and collective problem-solving within the school. By involving staff in decision-making, potential conflicts are

transformed into opportunities for collaborative problem-solving. Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) and Yukl (2008) advocate for inclusive leadership practices that engage staff in decision-making, enhancing their commitment and reducing the likelihood of negative conflicts.

In contrast, principals address negative conflicts through direct intervention and the establishment of clear policies. Negative conflicts are marked by personal antagonism and hostility, often requiring immediate attention to prevent escalation. Fisher et al. (1981) recommends principled negotiation, which involves separating people from the problem and addressing underlying interests to resolve conflicts. Moreover, Rahim (2001) highlights the importance of organisational policies in providing a structured approach to conflict management, ensuring that all staff understand the procedures for reporting, mediating, and resolving conflicts.

In practice, principals like Margaret and Pat differentiated between positive and negative conflicts by evaluating the nature of disagreements and their influence on school culture. Margaret's distinction between positive and negative conflict, as noted in recent findings, helps guide principals in identifying and nurturing constructive conflicts while mitigating harmful ones. Positive conflicts, which involve dignified disagreements, are seen as opportunities for growth and collaboration, whereas negative conflicts, characterised by persistent opposition, were seen to undermine school culture. By promoting open dialogue, emotional intelligence, and inclusive decision-making, principals can effectively nurture constructive conflicts. These strategies helped to prevent conflicts from becoming destructive, fostering a school culture where disagreements were addressed openly and collaboratively. This approach allowed for better conflict resolution, strengthened relationships among staff, and contributed to a more positive and cohesive school environment. At the same time, they must be prepared to intervene in negative conflicts promptly and implement clear policies to manage them. This balanced approach ensures that conflicts contribute positively to the school environment, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and mutual respect.

Understanding and managing school culture

The interviews show that school culture plays a central role in how conflicts are perceived and managed, with principals recognising the importance of fostering trustful relationships. Nehez and Blossing (2020) assert that challenging existing cultural features and fostering trust are pivotal for successful change. This aligns with the findings that the

principal's role in sensemaking processes significantly influences the cultural dynamics within the school, either maintaining the status quo or catalysing transformative change. The cultural context within a school, therefore, not only affects the occurrence of conflicts, but also shapes the strategies used for conflict resolution. School culture plays a pivotal role in shaping conflict management strategies, as it encompasses the shared beliefs, values, norms, and practices that influence how conflicts are perceived and addressed within an educational environment (Raju 2024). The culture of a school can either exacerbate or mitigate conflicts, depending on how it aligns with principles of trust, communication, and collaboration.

One critical cultural aspect that influences conflict management is the level of trust among staff members. This study has shown that in schools where trust is prevalent, conflicts are more likely to be managed constructively. Principals who fostered trust through open communication, emotional intelligence, and inclusive decision-making created an environment where staff felt safe expressing differing viewpoints. As a result, conflicts were approached collaboratively, leading to resolutions that strengthened relationships and enhanced school culture. Nehez and Blossing (2020) assert that successful cultural change is dependent on trustful relationships between principals and staff. This trust enables open communication and a willingness to engage in collaborative problem-solving. In a case study from the interviews, Principal Anne emphasised the importance of trust and open dialogue in resolving a conflict involving resource allocation between departments. By fostering a culture of transparency and mutual respect, Anne was able to mediate a solution that was acceptable to all parties, thus mitigating the conflict and reinforcing a positive school culture.

The presence of explicit and well-communicated policies can significantly influence conflict management. This study found that schools with clearly defined policies on conflict resolution, dignity in the workplace, and professional conduct handled conflicts more efficiently. These policies provided a structure framework for addressing disputes, ensuring that conflicts were managed swiftly and fairly, reducing tension and promoting a more harmonious work environment. These policies provide a framework for addressing disputes and set expectations for behaviour. Fullan (2023) highlights the importance of a comprehensive legal and policy framework in supporting the principal's role in conflict management. For instance, Margaret's insistence on revisiting the dignity in the workplace policy annually ensures that it remains relevant and actively guides behaviour, helping to prevent and address conflicts proactively. In another example from

the interviews, Rita's use of restorative practices such as circle time and restorative conferences illustrates how cultural norms of respect and restorative practice can mitigate conflicts. By focusing on factual, depersonalised discussions, Rita was able to address conflicts without allowing them to escalate into personal grievances, thus maintaining a positive and supportive school culture.

Challenges in managing staff relationships

The issue of promotions emerged as a significant source of conflict, particularly following the introduction of Circular 0003/2018. The circular introduced new guidelines for posts of responsibility, leading to dissatisfaction among staff who felt overlooked. James and Anne described scenarios where staff members were abusive or frustrated due to perceived unfairness in promotion processes. This finding echoes the results of Räsänen et al. (2020), which highlighted the impact of organisational changes on staff morale and conflict. The dissatisfaction stemming from promotions shows the need for transparent and fair processes, aligning with Circular 0003/2018's guidelines. The introduction of Circular 0003/2018, which provided new guidelines for posts of responsibility in Irish schools, has significantly impacted staff dynamics, leading to specific conflicts related to promotions and responsibilities. The circular aimed to create a more transparent and equitable system for assigning responsibilities among school staff. However, this change has resulted in dissatisfaction and conflict, particularly among staff members who felt overlooked or unfairly treated under the new system. James and Anne described scenarios where staff members expressed frustration and even became abusive due to perceived injustices in the promotion processes. This dissatisfaction has been a considerable source of conflict, affecting staff morale and the overall school environment.

To manage these conflicts, principals in this study have employed a variety of strategies. Transparency and open communication have been crucial in addressing concerns related to the circular. By clearly explaining the rationale behind decisions and involving staff in the process, Anne sought to reduce feelings of injustice and promote a more collaborative atmosphere. Additionally, mediation and conflict resolution training have been essential tools. For instance, Derek emphasised the importance of mediation training, which has helped him navigate disputes and foster a more positive school culture. These strategies align with the findings of Räsänen et al. (2020), who highlighted the importance of transparent and fair processes in managing organisational changes and mitigating conflict.

Comparing these findings with other regions or countries provides a broader context for understanding the impact of policy changes on school dynamics. For example, similar conflicts have been observed in the United States following the implementation of new evaluation systems for teachers. Research by Kraft and Gilmour (2016) in the US found that new evaluation policies often led to tensions and conflicts among teachers, particularly those who felt the evaluations were unfair or biased. Principals in the US addressed these conflicts through professional development programs focused on evaluation practices and by creating forums for open discussion and feedback. In the UK, the introduction of performance-related pay for teachers has also led to significant conflicts. According to a study by Perryman et al. (2018), this policy change caused stress and dissatisfaction among teachers, particularly those who felt disadvantaged by the new system. To manage these conflicts, UK principals emphasised the importance of clear communication, fairness, and support systems, similar to the strategies employed by Irish principals in response to Circular 0003/2018.

These comparisons illustrate that while the specific policies and contexts may vary, the underlying issues and conflict management strategies often share commonalities. Principals across different regions have recognised the importance of transparency, fairness, and open communication in managing the conflicts arising from policy changes. By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, school principals can mitigate the negative influence of such changes and promote a more positive school culture. The experiences of principals in Munster, as well as those in other regions, highlight the critical role of leadership in navigating the complexities of educational reforms and maintaining a cohesive and motivated staff.

Terms and conditions

Conflicts related to terms and conditions, especially concerning timetabling and class assignments, were prevalent. Breege and Derek highlighted ingrained practices and perceptions of entitlements as common sources of dispute. These conflicts often arise from logistical issues and perceived inequities in workload distribution, necessitating clear policies and open communication to resolve. The systemic nature of these issues is highlighted by the recurring nature of such conflicts, suggesting that without structural changes and clear guidelines, these disputes are likely to persist (Wallensteen 2018). The study reveals that unresolved conflicts over terms and conditions can negatively influence school culture and emphasises the importance of principals employing conflict resolution strategies. Systemic issues are a primary factor, as schools often lack standardised

processes for creating timetables and assigning classes. This absence of standardised procedures can lead to arbitrary decision-making, further exacerbating feelings of inequity. According to Nehez and Blossing (2020), trust and transparency are crucial in school settings, and the lack of these elements in the timetabling process can lead to significant discord. The absence of well-defined policies means that decisions may appear subjective or biased, undermining trust among staff. The study demonstrates that principals need to address these issues through transparent decision-making and conflict resolution strategies to rebuild trust and maintain a positive school culture.

Policies and communication strategies suggested by principals can vary significantly. For example, some principals have found success by implementing transparent and inclusive processes for timetabling and class assignments. This involves creating clear criteria for decision-making and ensuring that all staff members are aware of and understand these criteria. By fostering open communication and involving teachers in the decision-making process, principals can mitigate feelings of unfairness and build trust. Derek's emphasis on the importance of mediation and professional development in conflict resolution aligns with the findings of Kraft and Papay (2014), who argue that ongoing professional growth and collaborative environments contribute to more effective conflict management in schools. An important practice identified is communication. Principals who maintain open lines of communication and actively listen to staff concerns are better positioned to address and resolve conflicts. As highlighted by Fullan (2020), leadership in schools involves building relationships and fostering an environment of trust and collaboration. Principals who excel in communication can pre-emptively address issues before they escalate into significant conflicts. Principals who prioritise these practices not only resolve conflicts more efficiently but also contribute to a more collaborative and trusting school environment, ultimately enhancing school culture.

Influence of staff conflict on school culture

The influence of staff conflict on school culture is profound, influencing both the staff and student experiences significantly. The interviews illustrate the interconnectedness between sensemaking and broader school dynamics, revealing how conflicts can ripple through the entire school community. For instance, Anne stressed the necessity of "open dialogue and explicit communication to foster understanding of the school's ethos." This highlights how effective communication is pivotal in managing and resolving conflicts, ensuring that all staff members are aligned with the school's values and goals. Pat, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of "creating a caring school community,"

emphasising that nurturing relationships and emotional intelligence are essential for a harmonious school environment (Skordulis et al. 2020).

The broader implications of staff conflict extend beyond immediate interpersonal issues, potentially affecting long-term student outcomes and the school's reputation. James pointed out, "students are perceptive of staff conflicts, which can influence their learning experience." This observation highlights the idea that unresolved conflicts among staff can create a tense and negative atmosphere that students can sense, potentially impacting their academic performance and overall school experience. This aligns with the research by Kraft and Papay (2014), which indicates that a positive school environment is crucial for student achievement (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey 2018).

Moreover, this study has shown how unresolved staff conflicts can lead to long-term consequences for the school's reputation. Margaret mentioned, "Negative talk in the community about the school can lead to falling enrolment." This highlights how conflicts, if not managed, can spill over into the broader community, damaging the school's image and making it less attractive to prospective students and parents. This notion is supported by Nehez and Blossing (2020), who assert that trust and transparency are fundamental in maintaining a positive school culture and reputation. Additionally, the findings suggest that conflicts related to timetabling and class assignments, as noted by Breege and Derek, often arise from ingrained practices and perceptions of entitlements. These systemic issues necessitate clear policies and open communication to resolve. This study has shown that principals who successfully managed these conflicts, such as those implementing transparent decision-making processes, demonstrate the importance of involving staff in policy development to mitigate feelings of unfairness and build trust.

Overall, this study has shown how the influence of staff conflict on school culture is multifaceted, affecting not only the immediate work environment but also having broader implications for student outcomes and the school's reputation. Conflict management strategies, including fostering open communication, building trustful relationships, and involving staff in decision-making processes, are essential for maintaining a positive and productive school culture. As Fullan (2020) suggests, leadership in schools involves building relationships and fostering an environment of trust and collaboration, both of which are crucial for mitigating the negative influence of staff conflicts.

Gender differences in conflict management strategies among school principals are influenced by a variety of factors, including societal expectations, leadership styles, and inherent personal traits. The study found that female principals often adopt proactive and innovative approaches, such as restorative practices and mentorship programs. This can be attributed to societal expectations that women can be more nurturing and collaborative in their leadership styles (Kulkarni and Mishra 2022; Eagly and Carli 2007). In contrast, the male principals tended to prefer passive strategies, focusing on active listening and minimal intervention, which aligns with traditional views of male leadership that emphasise stoicism and problem-solving from a distance (Stango 2022; Kellerman and Rhode 2007).

Female principals delved deeply into the emotional and multifaceted challenges of conflict, emphasising the personal and professional toll it takes. Margaret's vivid description of the emotional influence of conflicts— "the sweat was coming out through me" —highlights the intense emotional engagement women often feel in conflict situations. Similarly, Rita's recognition of the inevitability of conflict due to diverse expectations shows the emotional strain inherent in their roles. These examples align with findings by Chaudhary and Dutt (2022), who suggest that female principals are more likely to engage in emotionally intelligent conflict resolution strategies, which can lead to more innovative and restorative outcomes. In contrast, male principals, while also proactive in their ways, tend to emphasise personal reflection and professional dialogue. Brian and Michael's experiences illustrate how reflective dialogue, and self-awareness can lead to new insights and a more nuanced understanding of conflicts. This aligns with the findings of Valente and Lourenço (2020) and Yukl (2008), who posit that male principals often adopt a more analytical approach to conflict resolution, focusing on understanding the root causes of conflict through personal reflection.

To address these gender differences, tailored conflict resolution strategies should be developed. For female principals, strategies could include enhanced support systems that acknowledge the emotional toll of conflict management and provide resources for stress management and emotional intelligence training. Programs that foster peer mentorship and collaborative conflict resolution techniques can further enhance their proactive approaches. For male principals, conflict resolution strategies should include training in active listening and empathy to complement their reflective practices. Encouraging the use of structured mediation and dialogue can help them manage conflicts more directly

while maintaining their preference for minimal intervention. Additionally, workshops that blend analytical and emotional intelligence approaches can help bridge the gap between different conflict management styles. By aligning conflict resolution strategies with the strengths and preferences of male and female principals, schools can foster a more inclusive and adaptive environment for both staff and students (Yukl 2008; Eagly and Carli 2007).

7.3 Objective: To explore conflict resolution strategies employed by post-primary principals in Munster in managing staff conflict and its influence on school culture

Emotional and relational dynamics

The findings show the importance of emotional intelligence in conflict resolution. Principals recognised schools as human relational places where managing emotions, moods, and personal baggage is vital. Skordulis et al. (2020) reinforce this by highlighting how emotional intelligence offers opportunities for conflict resolution. In practice, principals apply emotional intelligence by remaining aware of their own emotions and those of their staff, enabling them to handle conflicts with sensitivity and understanding. Henry and Johnathan (2024) and Goleman et al. (2013) emphasise that emotional intelligence involves self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills — all essential for leadership and conflict management. These skills help principals navigate interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically, which is crucial in a school setting where emotions can run high. Mayer et al. (2002) argue that emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to handle stress, build stronger teams, and create a positive work environment. Their research shows that principals who demonstrate high levels of emotional intelligence can foster trust and collaboration among their teams, which is essential for resolving conflicts. Jordan and Troth (2021; 2004) supports the notion that emotional intelligence is critical in conflict resolution. Their study found that individuals with higher emotional intelligence are more adept at managing conflicts and maintaining positive relationships. This ability to navigate the emotional landscape of a conflict is essential in a school environment, where the wellbeing of both staff and students can be impacted by unresolved tensions.

Staff and student wellbeing

Participants noted the profound influence of staff conflict on both staff and students. For instance, James pointed out that students are perceptive of staff conflicts, which can

influence their learning experience. This emphasises the ripple effect of staff dynamics on the entire school community, highlighting the need for proactive conflict management to maintain a conducive learning environment.

In the interviews, several principals shared specific examples of how staff conflict affected student learning experiences. Anne observed that during periods of intense conflict between staff members, students exhibited increased anxiety and decreased engagement in their schoolwork. She noted, "When teachers are not getting along, it creates a tense atmosphere that the students can sense. They become more distracted and less motivated to participate in class." This observation aligns with research by Darling-Hammond and De Paoli (2020) and Greenberg (2009), who found that a positive and supportive school climate is critical for student engagement and academic success.

To address these issues and maintain a conducive learning environment, principals have employed several strategies. Brian emphasised the importance of maintaining open lines of communication with both staff and students. He stated, "We have regular meetings where teachers can voice their concerns, and we encourage them to find common ground. By involving students in some of these discussions, we ensure they feel heard and understand that we are working towards a positive resolution." This approach is supported by Fullan (2011), who advocates for inclusive and transparent communication as a means to foster a collaborative school culture.

Restorative practices have been instrumental in mitigating the influence of staff conflicts on students. Derek implemented restorative circles and mediation sessions, allowing teachers to address conflicts in a structured and supportive environment. He observed, "Restorative practices helped to rebuild trust among staff, and students quickly noticed the change. They felt more secure and focused in their learning." This aligns with research by Thorsborne and Blood (2013), who found that restorative practices contribute to a positive school climate by promoting accountability and empathy.

In critically analysing these strategies, it is evident that proactive and inclusive conflict management approaches are essential in mitigating the negative impact of staff conflicts on student learning experiences. Open communication, conflict resolution training, and restorative practices not only resolve disputes but also enhance the overall school environment, fostering better academic outcomes and student wellbeing. These strategies underscore the importance of addressing staff conflicts comprehensively to ensure that the educational environment remains supportive and conducive to learning.

Adaptive leadership and policy evolution

The implementation of conflict resolution policies in schools has seen varying degrees of success, influenced by factors such as leadership style, school culture, and stakeholder engagement. For example, Anne successfully implemented a conflict resolution policy by fostering a culture of open dialogue and mutual respect. Anne's approach included regular training sessions on conflict management for staff and establishing clear procedures for reporting and addressing conflicts. This proactive and inclusive strategy, supported by the principles of Fullan's (2020) relational leadership, helped in mitigating conflicts and maintaining a positive school environment. Indeed, as Anne observed, "By ensuring everyone knows the procedures and feels comfortable expressing concerns, we've created a more cohesive and supportive atmosphere."

The success of conflict resolution policies also hinges on the school's ability to adapt and respond to evolving challenges. Margaret's suggestion to revisit policies annually highlights the need for dynamic and responsive leadership. Regular policy reviews allow schools to address emerging issues, incorporate feedback from staff, and adjust strategies to remain relevant. This practice is beneficial in maintaining conflict resolution frameworks, as it ensures that policies evolve alongside changes in the school environment. As Margaret stated, "By revisiting our policies every year, we can ensure they are still relevant and effective, and make necessary adjustments based on new challenges and feedback."

However, there are challenges associated with the annual review of policies, with frequent revisions often leading to policy fatigue among staff, where the potential constant changes may be perceived as instability or lack of clear direction. This can then undermine the credibility of the leadership and reduce compliance with the policies. Additionally, the process of reviewing and updating policies requires significant time and resources, which can strain the school's administrative capacity. However, as shown in this study, despite these challenges, the benefits of keeping policies current and reflective of the school's needs generally outweigh the drawbacks. As suggested by Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2019), reflective and adaptive leadership practices are crucial in navigating the complexities of school management and fostering a positive organisational culture.

In evaluating the benefits of revisiting policies annually, it is clear that this practice supports continuous improvement and responsiveness to new challenges. Regular updates can help address issues that were previously overlooked and incorporate new insights and

best practices in conflict resolution. Moreover, involving staff in the review process can enhance their sense of ownership and commitment to the policies (Afshari et al. 2020). However, to mitigate the challenges, schools should ensure that the review process is structured and well-communicated, with a clear rationale for changes and sufficient support for implementation.

The implicit moral code and broader societal implications

The formation and maintenance of an implicit moral code within schools are central to shaping behaviour and relationships among staff and students. This moral code, often unwritten, encompasses shared values, norms, and expectations that guide how individuals interact and conduct themselves within the school environment. It is fostered through consistent leadership, the modelling of ethical behaviour by staff, and the reinforcement of positive interactions and mutual respect. As Nehez and Blossing (2020) point out, trustful relationships between principals and staff are pivotal in embedding this moral code into the school's culture.

Unresolved conflicts can severely undermine this implicit moral code, leading to a breakdown in trust and collaboration. For example, Margaret observed that persistent conflicts among staff led to a toxic work environment, where "negative behaviour became normalised, and respect for colleagues diminished." This erosion of the moral code can have a ripple effect, impacting students' mental health and academic performance. The long-term societal consequences of unresolved conflicts within schools can be profound. When the moral code is compromised, the negative influence extends beyond the immediate school community, potentially affecting broader societal norms and values. For instance, unresolved conflicts that result in a toxic school environment can contribute to higher turnover rates among teachers, leading to instability and a loss of experienced educators. This instability can diminish the overall quality of education, which in turn can affect students' preparedness for higher education and the workforce. Moreover, as Fullan (2020) suggests, the failure to address conflicts can erode public trust in the educational system, leading to a lack of confidence in schools' ability to provide a safe and supportive learning environment.

From the current interviews, it was evident that when conflicts are not managed properly, they can set a negative precedent for students, teaching them that conflicts are to be avoided rather than resolved constructively. Indeed, Rita noted that "students pick up on the lack of cohesion among staff and it affects how they handle their own disputes," an

observation which aligns with the findings of De Dreu and Gelfand (2008), who emphasise the importance of conflict resolution skills in promoting social harmony and cooperation.

Overall, the formation and maintenance of an implicit moral code within schools are crucial for fostering a positive and supportive environment. Unresolved conflicts can undermine this code, leading to detrimental effects on both staff and students, and have broader societal implications by weakening the quality of education and public trust in the system. Conflict resolution strategies are essential in maintaining this moral code and ensuring that schools remain conducive to learning and personal development. Aligning individual behaviours with established professional standards and fostering a culture of mutual respect are key to mitigating the negative impacts of conflicts and promoting a healthy school environment (Fullan 2020; Nehez and Blossing 2020; Kraft and Papay 2014). In practice, this might involve regular training sessions on professional behaviour, setting expectations for respectful communication, and creating policies that promote fairness and transparency. Principals could also model these behaviours by consistently treating all staff with fairness and holding themselves accountable to the same standards. Additionally, creating opportunities for collaboration, such as team-building activities or professional learning communities, can reinforce mutual respect and trust. In doing so, principals can cultivate a culture where conflicts are less likely to escalate and where the professional standards serve as a guiding framework for positive interactions within the school community.

Gender differences

The comparison of conflict resolution strategies employed by male and female principals reveals notable differences rooted in their approaches and underlying philosophies. Female principals, such as Margaret and Rita, often employ evolving and adaptive strategies, placing significant emphasis on active listening, seeking support, and continuous learning. For instance, Margaret's approach shows the importance of adapting strategies to the severity and nature of conflicts. She highlighted the need to "be a good listener and to keep learning how to handle conflicts better." Similarly, Rita utilises restorative practices like circle time and restorative conferences, which focus on factual and depersonalised discussions. These methods align with a pragmatic and empathetic approach, aiming to address the root causes of conflicts while maintaining positive relationships. In contrast, the strategies employed by male principals tended to be more varied, combining reflective and structured techniques. James, for instance, adopted a

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patient and reflective approach, often involving personal contemplation and dialogue to understand the nuances of conflicts. He emphasised that "taking the time to reflect on the issues helps in finding a more effective resolution." On the other hand, Michael prefers proactive and structured methods, such as mediation training and seeking legal advice. His strategy involves "preparing for conflicts by understanding the legal aspects and being ready with mediation techniques."

The differences in conflict resolution strategies between male and female principals can be attributed to various factors, including societal expectations, leadership styles, and personal traits. Chikwe et al. (2024) suggest that societal expectations often shape female principals to be more collaborative and nurturing, which is reflected in their conflict resolution strategies that emphasise empathy and support. This aligns with the findings of Chaudhary and Dutt (2022), who noted that women leaders are more likely to engage in emotionally intelligent and innovative conflict resolution practices. Conversely, traditional views of male leadership emphasise stoicism and problem-solving from a distance, which can explain the more structured and analytical approaches seen in male principals (Kellerman and Rhode 2014).

The influence of gender on conflict resolution strategies, shows that each approach has its strengths and challenges. Female principals' strategies, which focus on empathy and continuous learning, are particularly effective in building trust and fostering a supportive school culture. For example, Rita's use of restorative practices not only resolves conflicts but also strengthens relationships and promotes a sense of community. However, these approaches can sometimes be seen as time-consuming and may require a high level of emotional investment, which can be challenging in high-stress environments. Michael's emphasis on mediation training and legal advice provides a clear framework for conflict resolution, which can be particularly effective in addressing complex or legally sensitive conflicts. Derek's focus on formal mediation techniques highlights the importance of having a structured process to ensure fairness and clarity. However, these approaches may sometimes lack the relational depth that characterises the strategies employed by female principals, potentially leading to resolutions that are less holistic.

The interviews provide further insights into these dynamics. For instance, Margaret's evolving approach to conflict resolution highlights the necessity of adapting strategies to serious conflicts, emphasising the importance of being flexible and responsive. In contrast, James' patient and reflective approach highlights the value of taking time to understand conflicts deeply before acting. These examples demonstrate that both male

and female principals bring valuable perspectives to conflict resolution, and the most effective strategies may involve a combination of empathy, reflection, and structured techniques.

Support systems and self-care

This study has shown how systemic support is crucial in helping principals manage stress and maintain their wellbeing. Specific types of systemic support include professional development programs, access to counselling services, and structured peer support networks. Professional development programs focusing on conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, and stress management can equip principals with the necessary skills to handle conflicts and maintain their mental health. For example, Kraft and Papay (2014) found that continuous professional development enhances teachers' and principals' skills, leading to better conflict management and a more positive school culture.

Counselling services provide a safe space for principals to discuss their challenges and receive professional guidance on managing stress. These services play a crucial role in helping post-primary principals navigate the complexities of staff conflict and its influence on school culture. By addressing their own stress and emotional wellbeing, principals are better equipped to employ conflict resolution strategies. In contexts outside education, such as corporate environments, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have proven effective in supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing. Implementing similar programs in schools can offer principals the necessary psychological support to cope with the demands of their role (Mahfouz 2020). Peer support networks, where principals can share experiences and strategies with colleagues, are another form of support. These networks can provide emotional support, reduce feelings of isolation, and facilitate the sharing of best practices. For example, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) in the United States has established mentorship programs that pair experienced principals with newcomers, fostering a supportive community and enhancing leadership competencies (Levin et al. 2020). Balancing resilience and competency in conflict resolution is essential for maintaining a positive school environment. While resilience enables principals to endure and recover from stressful situations, competency in conflict resolution ensures that they can address and mitigate conflicts. Developing both resilience and competency requires a multifaceted approach. Principals can build resilience through self-care practices, such as mindfulness and physical exercise, which help manage stress and prevent burnout (Klap et al. 2021).

Competency in conflict resolution can be developed through targeted training programs that enhance skills in negotiation, mediation, and emotional intelligence. Goleman et al. (2013) highlight the importance of emotional intelligence in managing interpersonal relationships and conflicts constructively. Training that focuses on recognising and managing one's emotions, as well as understanding others' emotions, can significantly improve conflict resolution outcomes. Anne, who experienced the detrimental effects of poor conflict management, highlight the importance of combining resilience with conflict resolution skills. Conflict resolution not only addresses immediate issues but also contributes to a healthier school culture, reducing long-term stress. Indeed, Fullan (2023) emphasises that recognising the broad scope of the principal's role and providing comprehensive support is critical for fostering a positive school environment. This study shows that conflict resolution strategies employed by principals directly influence the culture of the school, reducing stress and improving collaboration.

Emotional impact and learning from conflict

The emotional impact of dealing with staff conflict on principals is profound, affecting principals wellbeing both in and out of school. For instance, Margaret vividly described the constant stress, stating, "The sweat was coming out through me; I couldn't sleep, and it was always on my mind." Similarly, Jacqueline noted, "Conflict management can be draining. Sometimes I feel like I'm carrying the weight of the entire school on my shoulders." These statements show the pervasive impact that conflicts have on principals' mental and physical health, often leading to sleepless nights and chronic stress.

Despite these challenges, many principals acknowledged the learning and growth that come from navigating conflict situations. For example, Brian shared, "I've learned to approach conflicts with more empathy and patience. It's not just about resolving the issue but understanding the underlying concerns of my staff." This insight reflects a significant development in emotional intelligence, which is crucial for conflict resolution. Similarly, Rita noted that through restorative practices like circle time and restorative conferences, she has learned to "focus on the facts and not let personal feelings cloud judgment." This pragmatic approach helps in maintaining objectivity and fairness in conflict resolution. These experiences align with the findings of Sanchez Fernández et al. (2019), who indicate that training in conflict management generates positive results for all school community members. For example, James mentioned, "After attending a mediation training, I realised the importance of active listening and creating a safe space for dialogue. It has made a significant difference in how I handle conflicts." This training not

only improved his conflict resolution skills but also enhanced his overall leadership by fostering a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

Overall, while the emotional toll of conflict management on principals is significant, the learning and growth that come from these experiences are equally profound. By developing emotional intelligence, improving communication skills, and adopting proactive conflict resolution strategies, principals can navigate conflicts and create a more positive school culture. This continuous learning process is essential for their personal and professional development, ultimately benefiting the entire school community.

Challenges in disciplining staff

Principals often face significant limitations when it comes to disciplining staff, which complicates their ability to manage conflicts. James expressed this frustration by stating, "Ultimately, I have no right to discipline anyone really. When it comes down to it, people are actually free to say whatever they want to you, as long as they don't do something very egregious." This lack of authority to enforce disciplinary actions leads to a sense of powerlessness, making it difficult for principals to maintain order and address misconduct.

Training in HR processes would certainly equip principals with a better understanding of the legal and procedural frameworks governing staff discipline. Indeed, as Valante and Lourenço (2020) suggests, comprehensive knowledge of organisational policies and disciplinary procedures is essential for effective conflict management. Principals who are well-versed in these areas can navigate the complexities of disciplinary actions more efficiently and confidently.

Goleman et al. (2013) highlight the importance of emotional intelligence in managing interpersonal relationships and conflicts. Training programs that focus on developing skills such as active listening, mediation, and negotiation can provide principals with practical tools to handle conflicts constructively. For instance, Brian emphasised the positive impact of such training, stating, "After attending a mediation workshop, I felt more equipped to de-escalate conflicts and guide my staff towards collaborative solutions." In addition to improving conflict resolution skills, HR training can help principals understand the importance of maintaining detailed records and following due process. This knowledge can mitigate the risk of legal challenges and ensure that disciplinary actions are fair and justified. A thorough understanding of HR principles can

enhance a leader's ability to implement disciplinary measures that are beneficial and legally sound.

By addressing these limitations through targeted professional development, principals can enhance their capacity to manage staff conflicts. This, in turn, can lead to a more positive school culture, where conflicts are resolved constructively, and staff members feel accountable for their actions. Ultimately, this study has shown how equipping principals with the necessary HR and conflict resolution skills can improve their overall leadership and contribute to a healthier, more collaborative school environment.

7.4 Objective: To develop recommendations and approaches that will contribute to more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts which can influence school culture

Challenging existing cultures

Challenging existing cultures within schools is a critical component of fostering meaningful change and improvement. Nehez and Blossing (2020) highlight that trustful relationships between principals and staff are pivotal for transformation. Trust allows for an environment where open dialogue, mutual respect, and shared values can flourish, creating a foundation for addressing and reshaping entrenched cultural features. When principals foster trustful relationships, they empower staff to engage in honest discussions about the school's cultural dynamics and collaborate on finding innovative solutions. This study demonstrates that when principals build trustful relationships with staff, they create the foundation for honest conversations about the school's cultural dynamics, enabling collaborative efforts to address conflicts and implement lasting, positive changes. By fostering trust, principals not only resolve conflicts but also promote a culture of innovation and improvement.

Principals in this study demonstrated the importance of building trust through consistent and transparent communication, active listening, and showing genuine concern for the wellbeing of their staff. For example, some principals have implemented regular team meetings where every member's voice is heard and valued, creating a sense of belonging and mutual respect. Additionally, by recognising and addressing conflicts head-on, rather than avoiding them, principals can use these moments as opportunities for growth and development. This study has shown that conflict, when managed, can be a powerful catalyst for transformative change, as it encourages critical reflection and opens up pathways for new ways of thinking and acting.

It is important for principals to be adept at sensemaking, the process by which individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is crucial in understanding how culture within organisations can either reinforce the status quo or drive change. Principals who are skilled in sensemaking can better navigate the complexities of their school's cultural landscape, identify areas in need of change, and mobilise their staff towards a shared vision (Ganon-Shilon et al. 2022). Open dialogue is fundamental in this process, as it allows for the free exchange of ideas and fosters a culture of transparency and trust. Mutual respect ensures that all members feel valued and are more willing to contribute to the change process. Shared values, meanwhile, provide a common ground upon which the school community can unite and work towards common goals. Together, these elements create a robust framework for challenging and transforming existing cultural features within schools, leading to improved educational outcomes and a more positive school environment.

Sensemaking and school culture

The sensemaking process, as described by principals, involves navigating conflicts, negotiating the guiding ethos, and contributing to the school's cultural fabric. Principals play a pivotal role in interpreting and addressing conflicts in ways that can positively reshape the school culture. Explicit communication and collective understanding are essential in this process. For instance, principals often use staff meetings and one-on-one discussions to clearly articulate the school's vision and goals, ensuring that everyone is on the same page. By fostering an environment where staff feel heard and understood, principals help build a shared commitment to the school's objectives. This shared understanding is crucial in creating an environment conducive to resolving conflicts constructively.

Pat shares that school culture is fundamentally shaped by the interactions between staff and principals, with a strong focus on shared visions, goals, and behaviours. When principals successfully communicate the school's vision and collaboratively develop goals with their staff, it leads to a collective commitment to these objectives. This alignment in understanding helps to mitigate conflicts, as it ensures that all members of the school community are working towards the same end. For example, a principal might address a conflict about teaching methods by facilitating a workshop where staff collectively explore best practices and agree on a unified approach that aligns with the school's goals.

Moreover, principals contribute to the cultural fabric of the school by modelling desired behaviours and reinforcing the values they wish to see reflected throughout the institution. This might involve recognising and celebrating staff achievements, encouraging professional development, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. As Atasoy (2020) notes, leaders shape organisational culture through their actions and decisions, and in schools, this is no different. When principals engage in sensemaking, they help staff make sense of their roles and the broader mission of the school, thus aligning individual efforts with the collective vision.

7.5 Objective: To provide a theoretical framework for understanding these dynamics.

Relational leadership

The exploration of how post-primary principals in Munster construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture, guided by relational leadership theory, has been pivotal in this study. The theoretical framework has provided a nuanced lens through which the dynamics of leadership and conflict resolution within the school context are examined. Relational leadership theory emphasises the social and dynamic nature of leadership, highlighting it as a process of social influences where emergent change is constructed through interactions (Ospina et al. 2020; Uhl-Bien 2006). This approach highlights the individuality and contextual specificity of each principal's experience, aligning with the study's objectives to examine the unique experiences of post-primary principals in Munster regarding staff conflict and to explore conflict resolution strategies within their specific school settings.

However, while relational leadership theory offers valuable insights into the social aspects of leadership and conflict resolution, it has limitations when used alone. It primarily focuses on the interactions and relationships within the school community but may overlook the cognitive processes principals use to interpret and navigate these interactions. This is where sensemaking theory complements relational leadership theory. Sensemaking, as described by Weick (1995), involves the process of constructing meaning from experiences. It adds a cognitive dimension to understanding how principals process and interpret conflicts, providing a more comprehensive view of their leadership practices. For instance, sensemaking theory helps explain how principals interpret, and experience conflicts based on their previous experiences and personal beliefs. One

principal in the study shared how they re-evaluated a conflict situation by reflecting on similar past experiences, which helped them devise a resolution strategy. This cognitive process of making sense of the conflict is crucial for developing appropriate responses and adapting to the complex social dynamics within the school.

Sensemaking

The theoretical framework chapter positioned sensemaking theory as central to understanding the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster dealing with staff conflict. By integrating sensemaking with relational leadership theory, the study emphasised leadership as a social, context-specific process, moving beyond a static, one-size-fits-all model of leadership. This integration is significant, as it highlights the continuous and retrospective nature of sensemaking, where principals reflect on past experiences to navigate current conflicts (Reid 2021; Weick 1995).

Sensemaking theory provides a cognitive dimension to understanding how principals deal with conflicts by focusing on how they construct meaning from their experiences. This cognitive process involves interpreting events, understanding their implications, and deciding on actions based on past experiences and current contexts. For instance, one principal shared how they revisited a particularly challenging conflict involving staff disagreements over teaching methodologies: "By reflecting on what worked and what didn't in previous similar situations, I was able to approach the current conflict with a clearer strategy." This reflection illustrates how principals use their past experiences to inform their current decision-making, a core aspect of sensemaking.

The study's use of sensemaking to explore identity construction aligns with Weick's (1995) assertion that sensemaking is grounded in identity. Principals' professional identities shape how they experience and manage conflicts, contributing to their personal and professional growth. This focus on identity construction provides a nuanced understanding of how leadership practices are influenced by past experiences and interactions. Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2019; 2016) support this perspective, arguing that principals need to function as reflective leaders, adapting flexibly within dynamic environments. For example, a principal might identify as a collaborative leader and thus prioritise inclusive and participatory approaches to conflict resolution, which aligns with their professional self-concept and past successes in similar situations.

By emphasising the retrospective nature of sensemaking, the study explored how principals reflect on past conflicts to shape their current understanding and responses.

This retrospective lens is crucial for understanding the evolving dynamics of conflicts and their influence on school culture. The iterative process of reflecting on past experiences aligns with the work of Spillane and Anderson (2014) and Coburn (2001), who highlight the importance of prior knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs in shaping leaders' sensemaking processes. A principal might recall a previous conflict resolution that involved bringing in a neutral mediator and see its success as a cue to adopt a similar approach in a current dispute.

The study highlighted the social aspect of sensemaking, recognising that principals engage in collective sensemaking processes with their colleagues. This social constructivist perspective, as emphasised by Weick et al. (2007), shows that organisational realities are co-constructed through interactions and communication. By acknowledging the continuous and ongoing nature of these evolving situations, the study highlighted how collective reflections and discussions among principals and their teams contribute to more effective conflict resolution and a positive school culture. For example, regular team debriefs, and collaborative problem-solving sessions help principals and staff align their interpretations and actions, fostering a more cohesive and supportive environment.

The current study's focus on extracted cues and the plausibility-driven nature of sensemaking provides a practical understanding of how principals navigate complex conflicts. Principals rely on cues from their environment to construct plausible interpretations of conflicts, which inform their decision-making processes. This approach aligns with Weick's (1995) emphasis on plausibility over accuracy, allowing for a flexible and adaptive response to conflicts. One principal noted, "I often gather input from various stakeholders to get a sense of the underlying issues before deciding on a course of action." This strategy demonstrates how principals use environmental cues to develop a plausible and context-specific response to conflicts.

Addressing the objectives and theory overview

The first objective, to examine the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster regarding staff conflict, is well-served by the relational leadership framework. This approach captures the individualised aspects of leadership roles in conflict resolution, acknowledging that each principals' experience is shaped by their unique interactions and relationships within the school environment (Ospina et al. 2021). This study uses relational leadership theory to highlight how these experiences contribute to shaping

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school culture, emphasising the social construction of leadership. The second objective, to explore conflict resolution strategies employed by principals, is well-supported by the relational leadership framework. The study provides insights into how principals' personal experiences influence their approach to managing staff conflicts. By focusing on relational dynamics, the research uncovers the nuanced ways in which principals engage with staff to resolve conflicts and maintain a positive school culture (Hallinger and Truong 2016). The emphasis on relational interactions and social processes is particularly relevant in understanding these strategies. The third objective, to develop recommendations for more effective ways of addressing staff conflicts, is justified through the relational leadership lens by recognising the importance of context-specific solutions. The study acknowledges that conflict resolution approaches must be tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities within each school. Reflecting the individuality of post-primary principals and their contexts. This perspective is crucial in formulating practical and relevant recommendations that can enhance the overall school culture.

Findings and theoretical contributions

The study's findings show the importance of relational leadership in understanding the dynamics of staff conflict and its influence on school culture. By employing relational leadership theory, the research highlights several critical aspects. Firstly, relational leadership emphasises leadership as a process of social influence, where relationships and interactions play a crucial role in shaping outcomes (Uhl-Bien 2006). This perspective is vital in understanding how principals navigate staff conflicts and influence school culture. The study recognises schools as intersubjective realities, continuously constructed through communication and interaction. This view aligns with the social constructivist perspective and shows the role of principals in shaping these realities through their relational engagement (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). The research highlights that conflicts are inherently social processes that require relational strategies for resolution. By focusing on the interactions and relationships involved, the study provides a deeper understanding of how principals manage conflicts and foster a positive school culture (Endres and Weibler 2017; Denis et al. 2012).

Relational leadership plays a critical role in fostering a positive school culture by creating an environment of trust, respect, and mutual support. By valuing relationships and social interactions, principals can establish a culture where conflicts are seen as opportunities for growth rather than threats. However, there are potential challenges and limitations. For instance, fostering such a culture requires significant time and emotional investment

from principals, which can be challenging to sustain, especially in large schools or those with high staff turnover. Additionally, not all staff members may be equally receptive to relational approaches, necessitating a nuanced and adaptable leadership style.

Identity construction plays a crucial role in shaping principals' conflict resolution approaches. Principals' self-perception and professional identity influence how they handle conflicts. Those who see themselves as collaborative leaders are more likely to employ inclusive and relational strategies. This identity construction is part of the iterative process of sensemaking, where principals continuously interpret and re-interpret their roles and actions based on new experiences and feedback. This process significantly influences school culture, as principals who regularly engage in sensemaking can adapt and improve their conflict resolution tactics, fostering a more resilient and positive environment.

Relational leadership and sensemaking

By integrating sensemaking with relational leadership, the study provided a comprehensive framework that captures the complex, social, and context-specific nature of leadership in schools. Relational leadership emphasises the importance of social influence, relationships, and interactions in shaping leadership dynamics (Uhl-Bien 2006). When combined with sensemaking, which focuses on how leaders construct meaning from their experiences (Weick 1995), this integration allows for a deeper understanding of how principals navigate conflicts and influence school culture. The focus on plausibility and extracted cues offers practical insights into how principals can develop conflict resolution strategies, making this approach particularly relevant for recommendations aimed at improving school culture. Emphasising the retrospective and continuous nature of sensemaking aligns with the real-world experiences of principals, who must constantly reflect on and adapt to new challenges.

For instance, a principal dealing with a conflict between two teachers might use relational leadership principles to foster open communication and mutual respect. By engaging both teachers in a dialogue and encouraging them to express their perspectives, the principal leverages relational strategies to build trust and find common ground. Concurrently, the principal uses sensemaking to reflect on past conflicts, drawing on previous experiences to inform their approach. They might recall a similar situation where a collaborative problem-solving session led to a positive outcome, thus applying this strategy in the

current conflict. This dual approach allows the principal to address the immediate social dynamics while also considering the broader context and past experiences.

The practical implications of integrating these theories are significant for developing conflict resolution strategies. Principals can use relational leadership to create an environment of trust and collaboration, which is essential for effective conflict resolution. For example, by regularly holding staff meetings where issues can be discussed openly, principals can pre-emptively address potential conflicts and foster a culture of transparency. Additionally, the sensemaking component enables principals to continuously learn from their experiences, adapt their strategies, and improve their conflict management skills. This iterative process helps principals remain flexible and responsive to the evolving needs of their school communities.

7.6 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of post-primary principals in Munster regarding staff conflict and its influence on school culture, limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study's focus on school principals exclusively, without incorporating the perspectives of students and staff, might be seen as a limitation. A more comprehensive understanding of school culture and conflict resolution could be achieved by including the viewpoints of all members of the school community. However, the aim of this research was to prioritise the lived reality of principals, who play a pivotal role in managing school culture and conflict. Understanding their experiences and strategies provides a foundational perspective that can be further enriched by future studies involving staff and students.

Secondly, the study did not gather extensive data on the specific impacts of staff conflict on learning and teaching outcomes. This omission limits the understanding of how conflicts among staff directly affect educational processes and student performance. Again, the primary focus of this research was on the leadership practices and conflict resolution strategies of principals. Future research could build on these findings by exploring the direct correlation between staff conflicts and teaching or student achievement.

Additionally, the research was conducted within a specific geographical and educational context — post-primary schools in Munster. This regional focus may limit the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. However, the insights gained are still valuable, as they highlight universal challenges and strategies that can inform broader educational practices. Future studies could replicate this research in different regions or educational levels to compare and expand upon these findings.

Finally, the study's qualitative nature, while rich in detail and depth, limits the ability to quantify the prevalence or impact of specific conflict resolution strategies across a larger population. Future research could employ mixed method approaches to combine the depth of qualitative insights with the breadth of quantitative data, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study.

In conclusion, while these limitations highlight areas for future research, they do not diminish the value of the insights gained from this study. The focus on principals' experiences provides a critical foundation for understanding the dynamics of leadership and conflict resolution in school settings, and the recommendations offered can serve as a basis for further exploration and application in diverse educational contexts.

7.7 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of conflict management strategies among post-primary principals and to provide the necessary socio-emotional support to address the emotional toll they face. These recommendations encompass educational policy, support services, and principals' professional development.

Principals often carry the burden of very challenging information related to staff conflicts, which they frequently keep private. To support their emotional wellbeing, it is crucial to provide comprehensive socio-emotional support systems. These supports should include regular access to professional counsellors who specialise in school settings, helping principals process the emotional strain of managing conflicts. These services can be provided through partnerships with Employee Assistance Service. Establishing peer support networks where principals can share experiences and strategies in a confidential and supportive environment is also vital. These groups can be facilitated by experienced educational leaders and can meet regularly to discuss ongoing challenges and successes.

Additionally, pairing new or struggling principals with seasoned mentors who can provide guidance, share insights, and offer emotional support can be beneficial. The mentorship programs being run by Oide for newly appointed principals, could also be developed to support principals in these important ways. This can include continued support for principals after the newly appointed timeframe, with training sessions focused on emotional intelligence, stress management, and reflective practices, all of which can equip principals with the skills to manage their own emotions and support their staff.

The study highlights the need for a more in-depth understanding of staff conflicts, their forms, and their impacts. To achieve this, the Department of Education should conduct regular surveys and in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and other staff to capture detailed information about the nature and impact of conflicts. This data can inform targeted interventions and support strategies. Schools could implement periodic audits of conflict resolution practices, documenting the types of conflicts encountered, resolution strategies used, and outcomes. This practice would help create a robust picture of conflict dynamics within schools.

Educational policies should be revised and developed to support principals in managing conflicts. The Department of Education should develop and regularly update policies related to conflict resolution, dignity in the workplace, and professional conduct, providing clear guidelines and procedures for managing conflicts. Policies should mandate regular training for principals and staff on conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, and reflective practices as part of the continuous professional development required for all school principals. The Department of Education should allocate funding to ensure that all schools have access to necessary support services, such as counselling and professional development workshops. The Teaching Council could play a key role in this by embedding conflict resolution training and emotional intelligence development within its framework for professional standards. By doing so, the Teaching Council would ensure that these essential skills are part of the professional growth of both current and future school principals, further supporting a positive school culture and conflict management.

Support services need to be tailored to address the specific needs of principals in managing staff conflicts. Establishing teams of conflict resolution specialists who can provide direct support to schools experiencing significant conflict is essential. These teams can offer mediation services, training, and follow-up support. Additionally, developing online platforms where principals can access resources, tools, and training

materials related to conflict management and emotional intelligence would be beneficial. These platforms can also facilitate virtual support groups and mentorship connections.

Principals themselves can take proactive steps to manage conflicts and maintain their wellbeing. Engaging in reflective practice by regularly reflecting on their conflict management experiences can help principals understand what strategies worked, what didn't, and why. Journaling, peer discussions, and professional coaching can support this reflective practice. Developing emotional intelligence through training, self-assessment, and feedback from peers and mentors is also crucial. Understanding their own emotional triggers and responses can help principals manage conflicts. Additionally, creating a school culture that encourages open dialogue and collaborative problem-solving can help prevent conflicts from escalating. Principals should model transparency and inclusivity in their interactions with staff.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is a crucial component in professional development programs for principals, aiding them in navigating conflicts through introspection and self-awareness. When principals engage in reflective practice, they can develop greater empathy and a deeper understanding of their actions and decisions, which enhances their effectiveness as leaders. Reflective practice involves a continuous cycle of examining one's experiences, understanding the underlying factors, and making informed adjustments. By integrating reflective practice into professional development programs, principals are better equipped to handle conflicts (Gümüs and Belibas 2020).

Reflective practice has proven to be invaluable in conflict resolution for principals. For instance, a principal might reflect on a recent disagreement with a teacher, considering how their communication style or decision-making process contributed to the conflict. This reflection can lead to a more empathetic and informed approach in future interactions, thereby improving relationships and reducing tensions, as reflective practice encourages principals to question their assumptions and biases, leading to more thoughtful and effective conflict resolution strategies. Moreover, the importance of personal accountability in conflict resolution cannot be overstated. Thus, when principals model accountability, it sets a powerful example for their staff. Encouraging staff to take ownership of their behaviour and promoting a culture of accountability can significantly improve conflict management within the school (Harris and Jones 2018). For example, implementing regular reflective sessions where staff can openly discuss their challenges

and successes can foster an environment of continuous learning and personal growth. These sessions might involve staff members sharing their experiences with conflict, reflecting on their actions, and discussing potential improvements. Strategies to encourage personal accountability among staff include setting clear expectations, providing constructive feedback, and creating opportunities for professional development. For instance, a principal might establish a system where teachers regularly self-assess their performance and set personal goals for improvement. Such practices not only enhance individual accountability but also contribute to a more cohesive and supportive school environment.

In practice, schools that have embraced reflective practice and personal accountability have seen significant improvements in conflict management (Marshall et al. 2022). For example, a school that implemented a reflective practice program reported that teachers became more proactive in addressing issues and resolving conflicts independently, leading to a more positive and collaborative school culture. Reflective practice cultivates a mindset of continuous improvement, which is essential for leadership and conflict resolution.

Enhancing emotional intelligence

Enhancing emotional intelligence through targeted training programs is essential for improving conflict resolution and fostering a positive school culture. Fernandez-Perez and Martin-Rojas (2022) found that emotional intelligence indicators, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, are positively linked with team performance and conflict resolution methods. Therefore, training programs for principals and staff should include modules on recognising and managing emotions, both in oneself and in others, as well as developing empathy and effective communication strategies. These programs could incorporate activities such as role-playing scenarios to practice responding to emotional triggers, reflective journaling to increase self-awareness, and workshops on active listening and nonverbal communication. For example, principals could participate in exercises that simulate common school conflicts, allowing them to practice de-escalation techniques and empathic responses. Additionally, peer coaching sessions can provide opportunities for staff to give and receive feedback on their emotional intelligence skills, fostering a collaborative learning environment (Patti et al. 2015).

The influence of emotional intelligence training on conflict resolution and school culture is profound. Principals and staff with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to handle conflicts constructively, turning potential disruptions into opportunities for growth and understanding. For instance, a principal who can recognise their own stress responses and manage them is more likely to approach conflicts with a calm and open mindset, leading to more productive resolutions (Fullan 2023). This approach not only resolves immediate issues, but also builds trust and respect among staff, contributing to a more cohesive and supportive school environment.

Promoting respectful and open communication is another crucial element of these training programs. When principals and staff communicate openly and respectfully, it creates an environment where everyone feels heard and validated. This atmosphere of mutual respect can reduce misunderstandings and prevent conflicts from escalating. For example, establishing regular forums for staff to voice their concerns and share ideas can help in addressing issues before they become major conflicts. Training sessions on constructive feedback can also teach staff how to communicate their needs and concerns in a way that is respectful and non-confrontational. Incorporating these elements into training programs can significantly enhance the overall school culture. A positive school culture, characterised by trust, respect, and open communication, not only improves conflict resolution but also boosts morale and job satisfaction among staff. Emotional intelligence is a key factor in leadership and organisational success. Therefore, by investing in the emotional intelligence of principals and staff, schools can create a more harmonious and productive educational environment.

Systemic support and continuous professional development

The lack of conflict management Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs represents a significant gap in the support system for school principals. Addressing this gap requires the development of structured and comprehensive CPD opportunities that tackle the multifaceted nature of conflict management in school settings. Betoret (2006) highlights the critical importance of professional development in managing school conflicts. To support principals in their roles, tailored CPD programs focusing on conflict resolution strategies, reflective practices, and emotional intelligence are essential.

Specific recommendations for structured CPD programs include incorporating modules on conflict resolution techniques, such as mediation and negotiation skills, to equip principals with practical tools for addressing disputes. These programs should also

include sessions on reflective practices, enabling principals to engage in introspection and continuous improvement. For example, principals can benefit from guided reflection exercises that help them analyse past conflicts, understand their responses, and develop strategies for future situations.

Moreover, integrating emotional intelligence training into CPD programs can enhance principals' ability to navigate conflicts with empathy and self-awareness. Activities such as role-playing, peer feedback sessions, and workshops on active listening and nonverbal communication can help principals build the emotional intelligence necessary for managing school conflicts constructively. Gomez-Leal et al. (2022) emphasise that emotional intelligence is crucial for leadership, suggesting that such training can significantly improve a principal's capacity to foster a positive school culture.

The benefits of these tailored CPD programs are manifold. By focusing on conflict resolution strategies, principals are better prepared to handle disputes proactively, reducing the likelihood of escalation and promoting a more harmonious school environment. Reflective practices encourage a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, enabling principals to refine their approaches and improve their leadership over time. Emotional intelligence training helps principals understand and manage their emotions and those of others, leading to more empathetic and effective conflict resolution (Gomez-Leal et al. 2022). Tailored CPD programs are necessary because they address the specific challenges faced by principals in managing school conflicts. One-size-fits-all professional development does not adequately equip principals with the nuanced skills required for their unique contexts. Therefore, CPD programs should be designed to meet the individual needs of principals, considering factors such as the size and demographic of their schools, the nature of conflicts they typically encounter, and their personal leadership styles.

Implementing Continuous professional development

Reflective practice workshops are an essential component of CPD for principals. These workshops encourage principals to regularly engage in introspection and analyse their actions and decisions. The benefits of such workshops are manifold, as they help principals develop a deeper understanding of their leadership style and identify areas for improvement. For example, a principal who participates in monthly reflective practice workshops might discover a pattern in how they handle conflicts and, through guided reflection, learn new strategies to approach similar situations more effectively. This

continuous cycle of reflection and improvement, not only enhances their conflict management skills, but also contributes to their overall professional growth.

Peer support networks are also vital in providing principals with mutual support and shared learning opportunities, with these networks offering a platform for principals to share experiences, seek advice, and offer support to one another. The importance of these networks is highlighted by the collaborative nature of school leadership, where learning from peers can be incredibly valuable. For instance, a peer support network might involve regular meetings where principals discuss challenges they are facing, share successful strategies, and provide emotional support. This collegial environment can lead to a sense of community and shared responsibility, which is beneficial for individual principals and the school system.

Promoting distributed leadership

Promoting distributed leadership within schools can offer numerous benefits, particularly in enhancing conflict resolution and fostering a more inclusive environment. Adopting a distributed leadership model alleviates the pressure on principals by distributing decision-making and responsibility among teachers, staff and students. Kezar and Holcombe (2017) argue that shared leadership not only improves organisational effectiveness but also builds a sense of ownership and accountability among all stakeholders. For instance, in schools where decision-making is shared, teachers and staff feel more valued and are more likely to contribute positively to conflict resolution. This collective approach can lead to more sustainable solutions, as it leverages the diverse perspectives and expertise of the entire school community.

Empowering stakeholders to contribute to conflict resolution significantly impacts the school environment by fostering inclusivity and adaptability. When all members of the school community are encouraged to participate in resolving conflicts, the solutions are more likely to be comprehensive and accepted by everyone involved. Day et al. (2020) emphasise that trust and mutual respect are crucial for successful school leadership, and these elements are strengthened when stakeholders are empowered. For example, a school that implements peer mediation programs, where students are trained to mediate conflicts among their peers, often sees a reduction in disciplinary issues and an improvement in school climate. This approach not only resolves conflicts but also teaches students valuable life skills such as empathy, active listening, and problem-solving.

Enhancing Support Structures

Providing access to counselling services for principals can significantly help manage the emotional toll of conflicts. Principals often face high-stress situations that can lead to burnout if not properly addressed. Access to counselling services offers a confidential space for principals to discuss their challenges, process their emotions, and develop coping strategies. For example, in a study by Gillard et al. (2021), principals who engaged in regular counselling sessions reported improved emotional resilience and a better ability to handle conflicts effectively. These services can help principals maintain their mental health, allowing them to lead their schools and create a more positive environment for staff and students.

Work-life balance initiatives are crucial for supporting principals in managing their responsibilities without sacrificing their wellbeing. Implementing policies such as flexible working hours, wellness programs, and adequate vacation time can help principals achieve a healthier balance between their professional and personal lives. Principals who maintain a good work-life balance are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to perform their duties sustainably. For instance, a school district that introduced flexible scheduling and wellness programs for its principals saw a marked improvement in job satisfaction and overall performance. These initiatives can help principals recharge and stay focused, ultimately benefiting the entire school community.

Mentorship programs for principals offer numerous benefits by providing guidance and support from experienced leaders. Such programs can help new and seasoned principals navigate the complexities of school leadership, including conflict management and strategic planning. Yirci et al. (2023) emphasise that mentorship programs can enhance the professional growth of principals by offering personalised advice, feedback, and support. An example of successful implementation is seen in a school district that paired new principals with more experienced, resulting in improved leadership skills and better handling of school conflicts. The mentorship relationships also fostered a sense of community and shared learning, contributing to a more supportive and collaborative school environment.

Developing comprehensive policies

Developing comprehensive conflict resolution policies is essential for fostering a positive school culture. Schools should create clear policies that outline specific procedures and support mechanisms for addressing conflicts. These policies should detail steps for

reporting conflicts, the process for investigation, and the resolution methods available. Including provisions for mediation and support services, such as counselling, can ensure that all parties feel heard and supported throughout the resolution process. Sanchez et al. (2019) emphasise that well-defined conflict resolution policies can lead to a more harmonious school environment by reducing misunderstandings and providing a structured approach to resolving disputes. For instance, a school that implements a transparent conflict resolution policy might see a decrease in conflicts as staff and students feel more confident in the fairness of the process.

Regularly reviewing and actively implementing dignity in the workplace policies is crucial for maintaining a respectful and supportive school culture. These policies, which have evolved into anti-bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment policies, should be continuously updated to reflect current best practices and legal requirements. Ensuring that these policies are well-known and actively enforced can help create a safe and inclusive environment for all members of the school community. Schools with robust dignity policies experienced fewer incidents of bullying and harassment, as well as higher levels of job satisfaction among staff. For example, a school that conducts regular training sessions on anti-bullying and harassment policies, and has a clear reporting mechanism, is more likely to foster a culture of respect and dignity (Irby 2022).

Clear policies and open communication channels are also critical for mitigating conflicts that arise from logistical issues, such as timetabling and class assignments. Conflicts in these areas often stem from perceptions of unfairness and entitlements. By developing transparent and fair processes for resolving such conflicts, principals can reduce dissatisfaction and promote a collaborative work environment. For instance, involving staff in the decision-making process for timetabling can help ensure that the outcomes are perceived as fair and reasonable. Regular staff meetings and feedback mechanisms can also help address concerns promptly and transparently, fostering a culture of open communication and mutual respect.

Fostering a positive school culture

The research highlights the pivotal role of principals in shaping school culture by setting the tone for interactions and relationships within the school community. Principals act as the primary leaders and influencers of the school's ethos, creating an environment where staff feel valued and supported. This, in turn, fosters a positive school culture. For example, principals who prioritise regular, open communication with their staff and

demonstrate empathy and fairness set a tone of mutual respect and collaboration. Kouzes and Posner (2023) argue that leaders who model positive behaviour and recognise the contributions of others create a more engaged and committed workforce. A principal who initiates weekly staff meetings to celebrate successes, address concerns, and collaboratively solve problems is likely to cultivate a supportive and cohesive school community.

Recognising the broader societal and community implications of school culture is also crucial. The culture within a school does not exist in isolation but reflects and impacts the broader community. A positive school culture can promote inclusivity, equity, and social cohesion, extending its benefits beyond the school gates. Conversely, a negative school culture can exacerbate social issues such as discrimination and inequality. Principals who actively engage with the community, establish partnerships with local organisations, and encourage community involvement in school activities help bridge the gap between the school and its surrounding environment. This engagement can enhance the school's reputation and support network, benefiting both students and staff.

The impact of staff conflicts on student wellbeing and academic performance is significant. When staff are engaged in conflicts, it can create a tense and divided atmosphere that students often perceive and are affected by. According to research by Collie et al. (2012), unresolved staff conflicts can lead to decreased morale and productivity, ultimately affecting the quality of teaching and learning. Students in such environments may experience increased stress, lower engagement, and diminished academic performance. On the other hand, a harmonious and collaborative staff can model positive conflict resolution and cooperation for students, contributing to a supportive and effective learning environment.

In conclusion, addressing the emotional toll and complex dynamics of staff conflict requires a multifaceted approach involving enhanced support systems, comprehensive data collection, policy development, and proactive leadership practices. By implementing these recommendations, educational authorities and school leaders can create a more supportive and effective environment for managing conflicts, ultimately benefiting the entire school community.

7.8 Conclusion

This research has explored how post-primary principals construct, interpret, and make sense of the influence of staff conflict on school culture. By examining the experiences of these principals, we identified key themes including the nature and impact of staff conflict, the interplay between school culture and conflict resolution, the perceived unsustainability of principalship due to these conflicts, and the importance of reflective practice. The significance of this research lies in its focus on the lived realities of principals, providing insights that can inform educational policy, support services, and professional development. The findings show the complexity of managing staff conflicts and highlight the critical role of principals in fostering a positive and inclusive school culture.

The necessity for comprehensive socio-emotional support for principals is evident, given the emotional toll and the private nature of the challenging information they handle. Additionally, the study emphasises the importance of adaptive leadership and evolving policies to address conflicts effectively. The integration of relational leadership and sensemaking theories provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic processes involved in conflict resolution.

Ultimately, this research contributes valuable knowledge to the field of educational leadership, offering practical recommendations to support principals and improve school culture. By addressing these issues through informed policy-making and targeted support, we can create a more supportive environment for managing conflicts, ultimately benefiting the entire school community. The findings from this study are not only relevant for policymakers and educational authorities but also essential for principals who strive to lead their schools towards a more collaborative and positive future.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - **Ethical approval letter**

Maynooth University
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

25 March 2022

Andrea Mulhern
School of Education
Maynooth University

**Re: Application for ethical approval for a Project entitled: Conflict Competent
Leadership: Staff to staff conflict as experienced by school leaders in the Irish post-
primary school setting.**

Dear Andrea,

The above project has been evaluated under Tier 2 process, expedited review and we
would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require
further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 31/08/2023.

Kind Regards,

Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary,
Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

C.c. Dr Anthony Malone, School of Education

Reference Number
SRESC-2022-2459333

Appendix 2 - **Interview questions**

Understanding Perspectives:

How do you define or conceptualise "staff conflict" within the context of your school?

In your opinion, what elements or behaviours contribute to staff conflict within the school environment?

Can you describe a specific instance of staff conflict that significantly impacted the school culture?

Perception of Impact:

How do you believe staff conflict influences the overall school culture?

What observable changes or effects do you associate with staff conflict in shaping the school culture?

Can you identify specific aspects of school culture that are most affected by staff conflict?

Handling Conflict:

What approaches or strategies do you employ to address or mitigate staff conflict within the school?

How do you perceive your role in managing or mediating staff conflicts to maintain or improve school culture?

Can you share instances where successfully addressing staff conflict positively affected the school culture?

Interpretation of School Culture:

How do you interpret the current school culture in light of prevalent or recent staff conflicts?

In what ways do you believe staff conflict aligns or misaligns with the desired or intended school culture?

How do staff relationships and conflicts impact the broader aspects of school culture, such as student engagement, academic performance, or overall climate?

Challenges and Support:

What challenges do you face as a principal when addressing staff conflicts in the context of shaping school culture?

How does the broader school community (e.g., teachers, administrative staff, students, parents) impact or respond to staff conflicts, and how does this influence the school culture?

Are there support structures or resources you find particularly effective in managing staff conflicts and preserving a positive school culture?

Appendix 3 - **Information and consent form**

Information and Consent Form for Research Participants

Purpose of the Study.

I am Andrea Murphy, a doctoral student, in the Department of Education, Maynooth University.

As part of the requirements for Doctor of Education with Specialism, I am undertaking a research study` under the supervision of Dr Anthony Malone.

The study is concerned with staff conflict as experienced by school leaders in the Irish post-primary school setting.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve your individual experiences sought through invitation to semi-structured interviews. Interviews should last no more than 1 hour and will with your permission be audio –recorded and subsequently transcribed. As these are 'semi-structured', participants will be asked the same main questions. The main questions will lead to further supplementary questions based on your responses and particular experience. You will be provided with a copy of the main questions at the time of the interview. Interviews will be at a location of your own choosing and may be conducted in person or via Teams.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked because your experience and expertise are very relevant to the subject area and your input could make a valuable contribution to the process and outcomes.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, we hope that you will agree to take part and give us some of your time to participate in a one-to-one interview with a researcher. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings are anonymised and analysed. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with Maynooth University.

What information will be collected?

Interviews should last no more than 1 hour and will with your permission be audio –recorded and subsequently transcribed. As these are 'semi-structured', participants will be asked the same main questions. The main questions will lead to further supplementary questions based on your

responses and particular experience. You will be provided with a copy of the main questions at the time of the interview. Interviews will be at a location of your own choosing and may be conducted in person or via Teams. Participants will be entitled to a copy of the notes and recordings of the interviews. No one other than the interviewer and the interviewers' supervisor will have access to the raw data and interview material. The report will be written up in such a way that the anonymity of the interviewees will be maintained, unless specifically agreed otherwise and recorded in writing.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?
Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names will be identified at any time. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by Andrea Murphy.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give?
All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed (by the PI). Manual data will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by the PI in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results?
The research will be written up and presented as a summary report. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?
I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

What if there is a problem?
At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. You may contact my supervisor Dr. Anthony Malone anthony.malone@mu.ie if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Andrea Murphy. If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Consent Form

I……………………………………agree to participate in Andrea Murphy's research study titled 'Staff conflict as experienced by school leaders in the Irish post-primary school setting.'

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.
☐

I am participating voluntarily.
☐

I give permission for my semi-structured interview with Andrea Mulhern to be audio-recorded
☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.
☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to anonymization and analysis. ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request.
☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet
☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview
☐
I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview
☐

Signed………………………………….   Date……………….

Participant Name in block capitals …………………………………………...

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed…………………………………. Date……………….

Researcher Name in block capitals …………………………………………...

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie *or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.*

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie*. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at* https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection*.*

Appendix 4 - Invitation to participate

Dear National Support Body,

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Andrea Murphy and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Maynooth University. I am reaching out to you as a respected national support body acting as gatekeepers to disseminate an invitation to principals in the Munster region within your organisation.

My research focuses on the experience of staff conflict among school leaders in the Irish post-primary school setting. I believe that principals play a crucial role in navigating and resolving conflicts within their schools, and their insights are invaluable to understanding this complex phenomenon.

I am inviting principals to participate in one-to-one semi-structured interviews as part of this study. These interviews are designed to delve into their experiences, perspectives, and strategies concerning staff conflict. Each interview is expected to last no more than one hour.

Participation in this study provides an opportunity for principals to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of educational leadership and conflict resolution. Furthermore, the findings of this research may inform the development of support systems and interventions to address staff conflict in post-primary schools across Ireland.

If any principals within your organisation are interested in participating or would like more information about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at andrea.mulhern.2020@mumail.ie.

Your assistance in disseminating this invitation to principals would be greatly appreciated. Should you have any questions or require additional information, please feel free to reach out to me.

Thank you for considering my request, and I look forward to the possibility of collaborating with you and the principals within your organisation on this important research endeavour.

Warm regards,

Andrea Murphy