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Engineering Conflict for Organizational Innovation through Social Capital and Relational Structure in Hybrid School Governance for Advancing SDG 16

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine conflict engineering as a proactive organizational practice that deliberately structures naturally occurring tensions into a repeatable cycle of organizational learning and innovation, rather than merely resolving conflict after it emerges. **Method:** Using a qualitative multi-site case study, the research investigates governance practices in two hybrid schools combining academic and residential functions in Lamongan Regency, Indonesia. Data were collected from 34 purposively selected informants through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed using within-case coding and cross-case synthesis. **Result:** The findings reveal that conflict engineering operates through six interconnected stages: detection, diagnosis, intervention design, facilitation, evaluation, and learning. Social capital, manifested in trust, shared norms, and informal networks, enables organizational actors to channel tension into constructive competition and collaborative problem-solving. The findings further identify relational structure as a provisional boundary condition: horizontal conflicts among peers were more amenable to engineering and were associated with organizational innovation, whereas vertical conflicts tended to encourage avoidance under conditions of high power distance. **Novelty:** The study's novelty lies in conceptualizing conflict engineering as a cyclical governance mechanism enabled by social capital and conditioned by relational structure, while repositioning the classical POAC functions (Planning, Organizing, Actuating, and Controlling) as its operational mechanism rather than its theoretical foundation. The study thus extends conflict management from reactive resolution toward deliberate organizational learning and innovation.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict in educational organizations has conventionally been treated as a problem requiring rapid resolution. Sociological theory, however, has long challenged this assumption. Simmel (1955) and Coser (1967) argued that conflict performs integrative social functions, reinforcing normative boundaries, testing group solidarity, and enabling the formation of new relational structures. Within organizations, task-based disagreements, when structured appropriately, can improve decision quality, stimulate creativity, and sharpen the evaluation of alternatives (Baron, 1991; Jehn, 1997; DeChurch et al., 2013).

This study takes that insight a step further by reframing organizational conflict through the lens of paradox theory (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradox theory treats organizing as the ongoing management of contradictory yet interrelated demands that persist over time and cannot be resolved once and for all. Conflict, on this reading, is not a deviation to be eliminated but a recurring tension to be engaged. Productive organizing therefore depends less on resolving tension than on holding and channeling it through cyclical responses (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Weiser & Laamanen, 2022). This reframing motivates the paper's central construct: conflict engineering as the deliberate

design of the conditions that channel naturally arising organizational tension toward innovation.

Despite a broad theoretical consensus that conflict can be productive, educational institutions in Indonesia tend to treat it as a deviation requiring immediate suppression. This reactive tendency is especially pronounced in boarding-based settings, where academic and residential mandates overlap, authority boundaries are often contested, and high-density collective life amplifies latent tensions (de Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Tjosvold et al., 2022). Rather than framing such schools as a religiously bounded special case, we analyze them as hybrid schools, a category of high-density hybrid organization in which two distinct governance logics, academic and residential, operate over the same population within a single physical setting. So conceived, the case speaks to a broader class of hybrid organizations in which overlapping mandates routinely generate structural tension, from teaching hospitals to integrated care facilities and live-in training institutions. Common friction points include jurisdictional ambiguity between school administration and residential management, seniority-based hierarchies, and disputes mediated through digital platforms such as WhatsApp groups. Because the principal is the pivotal governance actor in this setting, the feasibility of any proactive conflict practice is closely tied to the principal's professional capacity, which research on principal preparation in Indonesia identifies as a key determinant of institutional quality and school organizational culture (Sholeh & Trihantoyo, 2019).

The dominant conflict management literature remains oriented toward post-hoc intervention, responding after tensions become visible (de Dreu & Weingart, 2003; DeChurch et al., 2013). Proactive approaches, in which conflict is structured as an organizational resource, remain comparatively underexplored, particularly in non-Western educational contexts (Yaseen et al., 2021). A parallel gap exists at the intersection of social capital and conflict governance: although trust, norms, and relational networks strengthen institutional adaptive capacity (Bodin & Crona, 2009; Niedlich et al., 2021), few integrative frameworks connect these relational resources with a clearly specified operational mechanism in educational settings, and fewer still situate that mechanism within the cultural configuration, notably the high power distance and collectivism documented across Indonesian organizations that shapes how conflict is expressed in practice (Hofstede et al., 2010).

This study addresses these gaps through conflict engineering, a proactive organizational practice in which naturally arising tension is deliberately structured through cycles of detection, diagnosis, intervention design, facilitation, evaluation, and learning. Two research questions guide the study: (1) How does conflict engineering develop within boarding-based Islamic senior high school organizations? (2) How do social capital and relational structure shape whether this process generates institutional innovation? Rather than asserting causal necessity, the study develops three theoretical propositions, grounded in two information-rich cases, that specify the conditions under which structured conflict becomes innovation-generating; given the two-case design, these propositions are offered as provisional and in need of testing across a larger and more diverse sample, not as an established general rule.

The problem also carries relevance beyond organizational theory. Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) commits states and institutions to building effective, accountable, and inclusive structures at every level, with Target 16.7 specifically calling for responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making. A school that habitually suppresses conflict along hierarchical lines, rather than designing a legitimate, cyclical channel through which it

can be expressed and worked through, falls short of that participatory aspiration at the institutional scale, whatever its formal governance documents may say. Conflict engineering, read in this light, is not only a management technique but a small-scale, empirically grounded illustration of what SDG 16-consistent institutional practice can look like inside a single hybrid school: it echoes Indonesia's own deliberative tradition of *musyawarah-mufakat*, in which legitimacy is built through structured, inclusive deliberation rather than either top-down suppression or unmanaged confrontation. The present study accordingly treats SDG 16 not as an add-on frame but as a normative horizon against which the practical value of conflict engineering can be assessed, a connection developed further in the Literature Review and revisited in the Discussion.

Conflict as organizational resource

Contemporary organizational scholarship no longer treats conflict as inherently dysfunctional. Task-based conflict, disagreements over work content, methods, and goals has been linked to improved decision quality (Jehn, 1997; DeChurch et al., 2013), enhanced team creativity (Liu et al., 2022), and greater innovation output when managed constructively, although the relationship is not always linear: at the top-management level, task conflict has been found to improve firm-level outcomes mainly when behavioral integration is high, and to level off rather than increase indefinitely (Kim et al., 2026), a reminder that conflict's productive potential is conditional rather than automatic. The constructive controversy tradition similarly shows that openly explored opposing positions can elevate team creativity and innovation, and a parallel literature establishes psychological safety as the interpersonal condition that allows such disagreement to be voiced without fear of sanction (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). The foundational argument, rooted in Simmel (1955) and Coser (1967), is that conflict performs integrative functions: it tests boundaries, prevents structural stagnation, and can prompt organizational adaptation. This study builds on this foundation by asking not whether conflict can be productive, but under what relational conditions and through what mechanism it produces institutional outcomes.

Conflict as paradoxical tension: A paradox-theoretic foundation

To clarify why conflict can be engineered rather than merely resolved, we anchor the construct in paradox theory. Lewis (2000) and Smith and Lewis (2011) characterize organizational paradox as contradictory yet interdependent elements that persist over time and resist permanent resolution. From this vantage, the demands that generate conflict in hybrid organizations—stability versus change, control versus autonomy, exploitation of existing routines versus exploration of new ones—are not problems to be solved but tensions to be held in dynamic equilibrium (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Weiser & Laamanen, 2022). Managing such tensions productively is closely tied to the capacity to pursue competing demands simultaneously, a capacity central to organizational ambidexterity and the dynamic capabilities that underpin it (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Conflict engineering can thus be read as the applied, cyclical practice of paradox management: conflict is the manifest tension, and engineering is the governance work of channeling that tension toward innovation rather than allowing it to collapse into either suppression (false resolution) or fragmentation (destructive escalation). This process-oriented reading connects directly to Pondy's (1967) classical model of organizational conflict, which describes conflict as unfolding through latent, perceived, felt, manifest, and aftermath stages, with managerial intervention most effective before tension escalates into a costly manifest form. Where Pondy's model is principally diagnostic,

explaining how conflict episodes unfold, conflict engineering treats each of these stages as an intervention point: detection corresponds to Pondy's latent and perceived stages, diagnosis and intervention design correspond to the felt stage, facilitation corresponds to the manifest stage, and evaluation and learning correspond to the aftermath stage that determines whether the next episode is easier or harder to manage. This paradox-theoretic, Pondy-informed framing distinguishes the present study from conventional conflict management, which is oriented toward dissolving tension. It provides the theoretical mechanism-cyclical responses to persistent tension through which the empirical model operates.

Conflict engineering: Definition and theoretical boundary

Conventional conflict management frameworks, including the Thomas–Kilmann model (Thomas & Kilmann, 1978) and Rahim's (2010) Organizational Conflict Inventory typology, focus on responding to conflict once it has surfaced. This study employs the concept of conflict engineering to describe a qualitatively different practice: one in which organizational leaders deliberately design the structural conditions, competition criteria, evaluation forums, and recognition mechanisms through which conflict that already exists, or is latent within overlapping mandates, is channeled as a repeatable, managed process, rather than responding to it reactively once it becomes disruptive. This is an important clarification of scope: conflict engineering, as observed in these cases, does not manufacture tension where none existed; it operates on tension that arises naturally from overlapping mandates and structural ambiguity, and adds deliberate, ex-ante design to how that tension is expressed and used. The distinguishing criteria, as opposed to conventional conflict management, are therefore not the origin of the tension but intentionality (the channel for expressing conflict is deliberately designed in advance rather than improvised after the fact), systematicity (the process is cyclical, not one-off), and orientation toward innovation rather than mere resolution. The unit of analysis is the organizational process; minimum indicators include a formal detection mechanism, a typological diagnosis stage, and a designed intervention pathway.

To forestall the concern that conflict engineering is merely a relabeling of conflict management, Table 1 specifies its theoretical boundary along five dimensions. The distinction is not one of degree but of orientation: Where conflict management seeks to restore a prior equilibrium, conflict engineering treats persistent tension as a resource and organizes around it.

Table 1. Theoretical boundary: Conflict management versus conflict engineering

Conflict Management	Conflict Engineering
Reactive	Proactive
Responds to conflict	Designs the channel through which existing tension is expressed
Restores equilibrium	Generates innovation
Event-based	Cyclical
Leader intervenes after the problem emerges	Leader deliberately structures how tension will be worked through

This framing extends the proactive governance literature (O'Neill et al., 2013) by grounding it in an empirical case context and specifying the social capital conditions, relational-structural boundary, and POAC mechanisms through which it operates.

Social capital as an enabling condition

Coleman (1988) defines social capital as resources embedded in social structures; Putnam (2000) emphasizes networks, norms, and trust as conditions enabling collective action; and Woolcock and Narayan (2000) distinguish bonding (ties within homogeneous groups), bridging (ties across heterogeneous groups), and linking (ties to actors holding greater authority) dimensions. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) further organize social capital into three analytically distinct dimensions widely used in organizational research: structural (the pattern of ties and network connectivity among actors), cognitive (shared language, codes, and narratives that make coordinated interpretation possible), and relational (trust, norms, obligations, and identity built through a history of interaction). These dimensions map directly onto the operational indicators used in this study's coding scheme: Networks and the Bridging & Linking category correspond to the structural dimension; shared Norms correspond primarily to the cognitive dimension; and Trust and Cohesion correspond to the relational dimension. This mapping situates the study's empirical categories within an established theoretical typology rather than treating them as an ad hoc list.

In school contexts, trust has been identified as a core element of educational governance (Niedlich et al., 2021), collaborative teacher networks contribute to its institutionalization (Kolleck et al., 2021), and school social capital has been linked to organizational agility, the capacity to respond effectively to disruption (Garipagaoglu, 2025). The present study treats social capital not as a background variable but as an enabling condition: within the studied cases, a functional baseline of trust and relational cohesion appeared to determine whether deliberate conflict activation produced innovation rather than fragmentation. Consistent with paradox theory, this relational infrastructure is what allows actors to hold competing demands together without the tension collapsing into open rupture.

POAC as the operational mechanism

Whereas paradox theory supplies the theoretical foundation and conflict engineering the governing construct, the classical POAC framework (Terry, 1977) is positioned here as the operational mechanism through which conflict engineering is enacted, not as the study's core theory. Applied to conflict governance, each function requires reinterpretation. Drawing on Simon's (1997) bounded rationality and Mintzberg's (1994) emergent strategy, planning shifts from goal-setting to relational sensing; Organizing moves from structure-building to network activation; Actuating extends beyond resource mobilization to the structured facilitation of conflict; and Controlling evolves from feedback monitoring toward reflective organizational learning (Senge, 1990; Weick, 1995). So reinterpreted, POAC describes the concrete managerial routines that operationalize the cyclical responses paradox theory prescribes.

Cultural-structural context: Power distance and conflict expression in Indonesian schools

A full theoretical account of why vertical conflict behaves differently from horizontal conflict in this setting requires situating the two cases within Indonesia's distinctive cultural configuration. Hofstede's framework places Indonesia at high power distance and low individualism, with moderate uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010), a configuration that recent comparative work confirms is more pronounced than in several neighboring Southeast Asian countries (Tantawi et al., 2026). High power distance predicts that subordinates conform to superiors' expectations to preserve stability, so that

latent conflict across hierarchical lines is more likely to be disguised as harmony than openly negotiated, a pattern the literature terms false harmony. Collectivism, meanwhile, favors deliberative, face-preserving resolution over confrontation, which can support constructive handling of conflict among peers but can also mean that harmony is performed rather than genuine when the parties are unequal in authority. Read together, these cultural tendencies offer a theoretical explanation, in addition to the structural argument developed below, for why vertical conflict in Indonesian schools specifically tends toward guarded compliance rather than open engagement. In contrast horizontal conflict among peers is comparatively freer to be expressed and, in these cases, channeled into competition.

Conflict engineering and SDG 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development positions Goal 16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, as a governance goal that applies not only to states but to the organizations that constitute them, calling for institutions at every level that are effective, accountable, and inclusive (United Nations, 2015). Two of its targets bear directly on the present study. Target 16.6 calls for developing effective, accountable, and transparent institutions, while Target 16.7 calls for ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. Read at the scale of a single school rather than a national government, these targets translate into a concrete institutional question: does the organization possess a legitimate, inclusive channel through which internal tension and disagreement can be expressed and processed, or does it rely on suppression, avoidance, or informal power to keep tension out of view? Conflict engineering, as developed above, speaks directly to this question. Its cyclical structure of detection, diagnosis, intervention design, facilitation, evaluation, and learning is, in institutional terms, a mechanism for accountable and responsive governance (Target 16.6): Tension is not left to accumulate invisibly but is routed through a designed, repeatable process with clear evaluative feedback. Its orientation toward channeling rather than suppressing conflict, particularly among horizontally positioned actors, is, in turn, a small-scale expression of participatory decision-making (Target 16.7), since it depends on giving contesting parties a legitimate voice in shaping the outcome rather than having outcomes imposed from above. This connection is not incidental to the Indonesian setting: *Musyawarah-mufakat*, the deliberative, consensus-oriented practice already discussed above as a cultural resource for handling disagreement among peers, is itself a longstanding, culturally embedded instantiation of the participatory principle that Target 16.7 articulates in global governance language. Where conflict engineering succeeds in these cases, it does so by operationalizing something close to *musyawarah* at the organizational level: Structured, inclusive deliberation rather than either top-down suppression or unmanaged confrontation.

This framing also clarifies why the boundary condition identified in Proposition 2 matters for SDG 16, not only for organizational theory. Vertical, high-power-distance conflict resists engineering precisely because the participatory infrastructure that Target 16.7 presupposes - a channel in which subordinate actors can safely voice disagreement with authority is weakest exactly where power asymmetry is greatest. In that sense, the study's finding that horizontal conflict is more amenable to engineering than vertical conflict is also, read through an SDG 16 lens, a finding about where participatory governance is currently feasible within Indonesian hybrid schools and where it is not yet institutionally supported a gap that a more deliberate application of *musyawarah*-

consistent practice across hierarchical lines, not only among peers, might in principle help to close.

Conceptual framework and propositions

Figure 1 integrates these elements into a single model. Conflict engineering occupies the apex as the core governing construct, expressing the paradox-theoretic logic of managing persistent tension. It rests on two conditioning elements arranged in parallel: social capital, which functions as the enabling condition, and relational structure, which functions as a boundary condition determining whether engineering is feasible at all, a condition itself shaped by the power-distance and collectivism dynamics described above. These conditions are operationalized through the adaptive POAC mechanisms (Planning–Organizing–Actuating–Controlling), which in turn produce institutional innovation. A dashed recursive arrow returns the output of evaluation and learning to the detection stage, making the process cyclical rather than linear; it is through repeated cycles, conflict experience accumulates into sustained institutional learning.

This structure differs from a simple linear chain (social capital → POAC → innovation) by placing conflict engineering, not POAC, at the theoretical center, and by introducing relational structure as a parallel condition rather than treating it as incidental. The framework yields three propositions, refined further in the Discussion and offered as provisional given the two-case design:

- P1. Conflict becomes innovation-generating when it is embedded in a sufficient level of organizational social capital; absent that relational infrastructure, the same intervention tends toward fragmentation.
- P2. Relational symmetry moderates the relationship between conflict and innovation: horizontal (symmetric) conflict is amenable to engineering, whereas vertical (asymmetric) conflict, reinforced by high-power-distance cultural norms, tends to suppress it.
- P3. Conflict engineering transforms organizational tension into learning through cyclical governance rather than through one-off resolution.

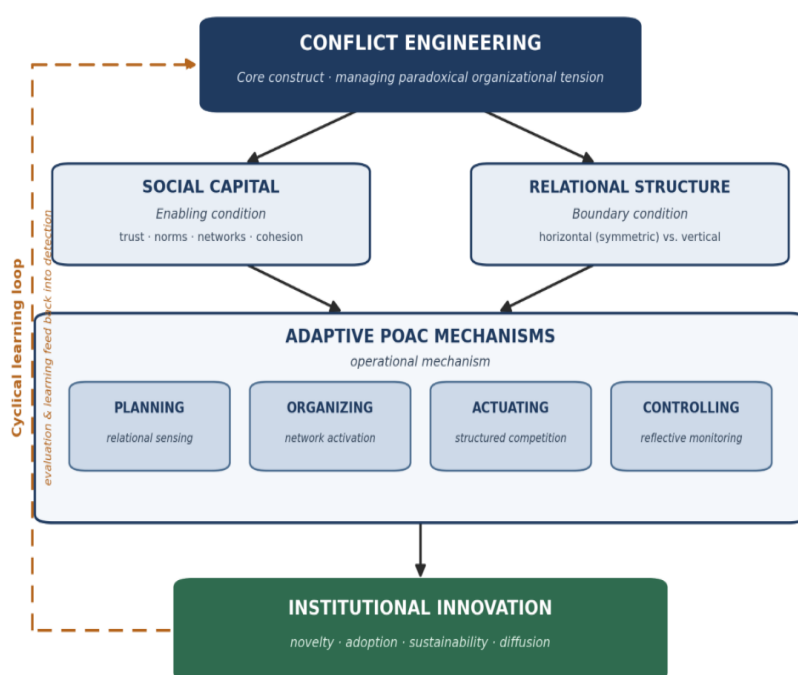


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of conflict engineering

Conflict engineering is conditioned by social capital (enabling condition) and relational structure (boundary condition), operationalized through adaptive POAC mechanisms, and oriented toward institutional innovation; the dashed loop denotes the cyclical feedback through which evaluation and learning re-enter detection.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design and site selection

A qualitative multi-site case study design was employed, selected for its capacity to examine contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts and to support cross-case comparison through replication logic (Yin, 2014). Two hybrid school institutions in Lamongan Regency, Indonesia, were selected through theoretical and literal replication: Site A (urban) and Site B (suburban). Both operate under the Ministry of Religious Affairs and implement integrated residential (ma'had) systems, and both are treated analytically as hybrid schools, high-density hybrid organizations that combine academic schooling with a residential boarding function. Despite shared structural characteristics, the two sites exhibit contrasting leadership approaches and conflict dynamics, making them suitable for comparative analysis. Both sites also offered conditions for intensive fieldwork engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data collection and participants

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews (one interview per informant, yielding 34 interviews in total, 17 per site; average duration [authors to confirm exact mean/range, e.g., 45–75 minutes]), non-participant observation conducted over [authors to confirm fieldwork period, e.g., approximately three months per site] covering routine settings such as staff and coordination meetings, morning briefings, and residential shift handovers, and organizational document review, including school policy and task-allocation documents, meeting minutes, and competition/evaluation criteria referenced by informants. Triangulation across these three sources strengthened evidence quality (Yin, 2014). Informants were selected purposively to represent diverse roles and levels of experience. Teaching and administrative staff were categorized as senior (more than five years of service) or junior (five years or fewer), following the OECD TALIS threshold (OECD, 2019), a distinction relevant in Islamic school settings where service length is frequently associated with differences in pedagogical orientation and digital literacy. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, until additional interviews and observations no longer yielded new thematic categories but instead reproduced patterns already recurring across stakeholder groups and across the two sites.

Research informant profile

This multi-site study used purposive sampling to select 34 informants, evenly distributed with 17 participants from Site A and 17 from Site B. The cohort represents both internal and external institutional stakeholders, comprising 2 Principals (1 per site), 4 Vice Principals (2 per site), 4 Senior Teachers (2 per site), 4 Junior Teachers (2 per site), 4 Senior Staff (2 per site), 4 Junior Staff (2 per site), 8 Students spanning grades 10–12 (4 per site), and 4 Parents/Committee representatives (2 per site), a distribution that sums to 34 informants and to 17 per site across all eight categories.

Each informant category was selected for its distinct data significance in mapping the dynamics of conflict engineering. Principals possess the authority for strategic decision-making, whereas Vice Principals provide insight into daily operational friction across

overlapping academic, student, and residential mandates. Categorizing teaching and administrative staff into senior and junior cohorts, demarcated by the OECD TALIS service-length threshold, captures the professional tensions between procedural custodians and early-career, innovation-oriented staff navigating workload disputes. Students supply grounded accounts of the live residential and academic climate, while the Parent/Committee category reflects external expectations regarding character development. This stakeholder diversification establishes the basis for data triangulation, supporting the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Analysis proceeded in two stages: within-case thematic coding, followed by cross-case synthesis to identify convergent and divergent patterns (Yin, 2014). Coding was performed independently by [authors to confirm, e.g., two members of the research team] using a shared codebook derived from the conceptual framework; intercoder agreement was assessed on a sample of transcripts (authors to report the agreement statistic, e.g., a percentage-agreement or Cohen's κ value), and coding disagreements were resolved through discussion against the codebook, with a third team member consulted where consensus could not be reached. Because coded-segment counts can visually suggest a quantitative, survey-like logic that this qualitative design does not support, a single informant, for instance, could generate multiple coded segments on the same theme. The relative density and organizational salience of each theme are reported narratively in the Results and Discussion rather than in frequency tables, consistent with an interpretivist rather than a counting logic. Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility (source and method triangulation), dependability (procedural consistency and an audit trail linking codes back to source transcripts), confirmability (independent coding and cross-checking as described above), and transferability (contextually thick description) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations

This study received ethical clearance from [authors to insert: name of institutional/faculty research ethics committee and approval number] before data collection. All adult informants, principals, vice principals, teachers, administrative staff, and parents/committee members provided written informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the confidentiality procedures used. Because the study involved students under the age of majority, participation followed a dual consent procedure: written parental/guardian consent was obtained in addition to the student's own assent, with both informed in age-appropriate language that they could decline to participate or withdraw at any point without consequence for the student's standing at school. All interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were de-identified and referenced only by role-based codes (e.g., P-1, VP-3, JT-2) before analysis; recordings were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. No information that could identify individual students, staff, or the two institutions is reported in this article, and school names are withheld in favor of the Site A / Site B designation used throughout.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

As noted in the Method, values in the typology tables represent frequencies of coded segments from thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and documents, not the number of individual respondents. High frequencies indicate thematic density and organizational salience rather than respondent counts.

Conflict typology and structural distribution

Table 2. Conflict typology and coded segment frequency by site

Relational	Conflict Typology	Site A (Urban)	Site B (Suburban)
VERTICAL (Asymmetric)	Workload and mandate distribution	22	13
	Policy information accessibility	14	6
	Management loyalists vs. independent factions	13	5
	Collective fatigue episodes	13	7
	Management-committee tensions	11	5
	Vertical Subtotal	105	56
HORIZONTAL (Symmetric)	Academic vs. residential (ma'had) supervision	10	18
	Senior-junior professional dynamics	8	12
	Residential shift scheduling	10	14
	Interpersonal friction among students	8	14
	Digital vs. face-to-face communication protocols	9	13
	Horizontal Subtotal	81	148

Table 2 reveals a marked structural difference between the two sites. Site A concentrates in vertical conflict (105 segments), characterized by power asymmetry between management and staff. Site B exhibits a higher density of horizontal conflict (148 segments), occurring between actors of comparable hierarchical standing.

At Site A, the dominant tension concerned workload distribution and policy accessibility, issues shaped by an underlying management staff authority gap. Staff responses frequently took the form of avoidance or defensive subgroup formation. This pattern was captured directly by a junior teacher:

“There is a visible division in our WhatsApp group. Some colleagues support every administrative decision by default; others remain persistently critical. Most people end up staying quiet to avoid being seen as disloyal. The result is a staff meeting where agreement is performed rather than genuine.” (JT-1, Site A)

A senior teacher at Site A described the cumulative effect:

“After a few years, you learn which topics you can raise and which ones you avoid. It’s not that conflict disappears, it just goes underground. People vent privately, but nothing gets resolved.” (ST-2, Site A)

Site B presented a contrasting dynamic. The most prominent friction occurred between academic supervisors and residential (ma’had) staff, two units with overlapping responsibilities for student welfare but no formal authority relationship between them. The principal at Site B recognized this structural equality as an opportunity rather than a complication:

“The friction between the dormitory supervisors and classroom teachers is actually useful. Because they are on the same level, I can turn their disagreement into a competition. I gave both units the same problem, design the most effective student tracking system and they started racing to outperform each other. That race is what produced the system we are using now.” (P-2, Site B)

The contrast in segment distribution (105 vertical at Site A vs. 148 horizontal at Site B) supports a key analytical finding: conflict engineering, as described here, is more readily operationalized within horizontal, symmetrically structured conflict. Vertical conflict, with its inherent power differential, tended to generate avoidance and resistance rather than productive competition, and typically required conventional resolution approaches before any engineering could be attempted.

Social capital as an enabling condition for engineering

Coding organized the social capital data into five indicators, mapped onto the Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) typology introduced above. Trust (relational dimension), informal communication, perceived leader accessibility, and psychological safety was the most consistently salient indicator across both sites, enabling early conflict detection and open relational expression. Networks (structural dimension), peer ties, senior-junior interactions, and inter-unit relationships was similarly prominent, providing informal mediation channels at low relational cost. Norms (cognitive dimension), deliberative practices, procedural respect, and ethical boundaries in disagreement regulated how conflict was expressed and reduced the risk of destructive escalation. Cohesion (relational dimension), collective identity, group solidarity, and internal bonding, stabilized group dynamics and limited fragmentation during conflict, while Bridging & Linking (structural dimension), cross-unit coordination, leadership-staff interaction, and stakeholder ties was the least prominent of the five but still meaningfully present, enabling coordination across structural divisions and reducing isolated pockets of conflict.

Before any formal conflict engineering intervention was implemented, both sites exhibited established social capital resources. Trust, shared norms, and informal networks consistently mediated how tensions were expressed and initially managed across data sources.

Trust was particularly consequential for early conflict detection. At Site B, the principal described a regular practice of informal monitoring:

"I make it a point to have coffee in the staff room most mornings — not for any formal reason, but because that is where I pick up signals. If two colleagues stop sitting

together, or if a usually talkative teacher goes quiet, I notice. I follow up informally before anything needs to go on record." (P-2, Site B)

Shared norms functioned as a boundary-setting mechanism. At Site A, a vice principal described how deliberation norms constrained the expression of vertical conflict:

"We have an understood rule here: disagreements with management are raised in coordination meetings, not aired in front of students or in public groups. Most people follow this, which means tensions stay visible to us without becoming publicly damaging." (VP-3, Site A)

Importantly, strong social capital did not eliminate internal divisions; both sites had professional rivalries, subgroup loyalties, and divergent interests. What social capital provided was a relational boundary within which these tensions could be expressed without triggering systemic fragmentation. Within these cases, this is the condition that made conflict engineering possible: not the absence of conflict, but the presence of sufficient relational infrastructure to contain and direct it, consistent with Proposition 1.

POAC functions in practice: How conflict was engineered

Planning. Rather than reacting to conflict after the fact, leaders at both sites proactively designed the competitive context. At Site A, the principal established department-level innovation targets at the beginning of each semester, explicitly framing inter-departmental competition as a vehicle for school improvement:

"At the start of each term, I sit down with each department head and set a specific improvement target. They know that at the end of term, we will compare results. I frame it as professional development, but the competitive dynamic is intentional – it keeps people moving forward rather than settling." (P-1, Site A)

Organizing. Both principals reported deliberate decisions to preserve informal subgroup structures rather than impose organizational uniformity. Existing social groupings, senior cohorts, junior teams, departmental units were assigned distinct responsibilities, effectively formalizing them as competitive units. P-1 explained:

"I don't try to break up the informal circles that form naturally. Instead, I give each circle a specific task that plays to their strengths. The senior group handles continuity and institutional memory; the junior group handles digital innovation. By keeping them separate but with overlapping goals, the competition between them becomes a management tool." (P-1, Site A)

Actuating. Three intervention mechanisms were identified across both sites. First, project-based competition: departments or homeroom teams received limited dedicated budgets to develop programs addressing specific student needs, which were then presented at school-wide forums, redirecting latent horizontal friction toward concrete output. Second, system improvement challenges: academic and residential units were given identical operational problems to solve independently, for example, designing a student attendance monitoring system with leadership intentionally avoiding coordination between units to preserve competitive pressure. Third, recognition-based stimulation: selective public acknowledgment of one group's achievements was used to elicit a competitive response from peers. As P-2 described:

"I mentioned in a full staff meeting that the junior team had built a class reporting template that cut the teachers' administrative time by half. I watched the senior teachers' expressions. The following week, three of them came to me with proposals for their own improvements. I hadn't asked them to – the recognition of the juniors was enough." (P-2, Site B)

Controlling. Management at both sites actively monitored competitive dynamics to prevent escalation. Control mechanisms included establishing transparent competition criteria, monitoring digital communication channels for inflammatory content, and conducting post-cycle feedback sessions. A recurring concern was managing WhatsApp group dynamics:

"We had an incident early on where a comment in the staff WhatsApp group about a colleague's project became personal. It spread quickly. After that, I established a clear norm: feedback on projects happens face to face, in structured sessions. The WhatsApp group is for logistics only. We've had no serious incidents since." (VP-1, Site A)

Conflict engineering outcomes: Distinguishing adaptation from innovation

Two organizational outputs were documented as direct results of the conflict engineering cycle. At Site A, an inter-unit system improvement competition produced a consolidated digital administrative dashboard, integrating attendance tracking, academic reporting, and residential data previously managed through separate, incompatible systems. At Site B, structured deliberation following a period of inter-unit competition produced a collectively authored ethics charter, a written normative document governing professional conduct across academic and residential units, which had not previously existed.

Because not every organizational change constitutes innovation, we assessed both outputs against four indicators that distinguish genuine organizational innovation from routine administrative adaptation: novelty (departure from prior practice), adoption (uptake by intended users), sustainability (persistence beyond the initiating cycle), and diffusion (spread across units). On this basis, both outputs exceeded mere administrative adjustment. The dashboard was novel in integrating previously siloed systems, was adopted across academic and residential units, and continued in use beyond the competition cycle; its cross-unit technical collaboration had no precedent at the site. The ethics charter was novel as the first negotiated normative document spanning units whose authority boundaries had been a primary source of friction, was adopted as a governing reference, and diffused into routine professional conduct. Their sustainability and longer-term diffusion, however, can only be provisionally assessed given the study's cross-sectional design (see Research Limitations).

Thematic coding of communication climate, the nature of innovation, leader-member exchange, and psychological outcomes reveals sharply differentiated patterns across the two sites. At Site A, restrained and guarded communication clearly dominated the organizational climate, reflecting a compliance-oriented dynamic associated with vertical hierarchy; innovation correspondingly tended toward stability-oriented procedural adjustment rather than novel development, leader-member exchange leaned toward compliance-based interaction, and psychological outcomes centered on modest, compliance-linked satisfaction. At Site B, the pattern reversed on every dimension: open, performance-driven competition and achievement-based satisfaction were the clearly dominant organizational climate and psychological outcome; innovation was weighted

toward novel idea generation and prototyping; and leader-member exchange leaned toward strategic challenge and developmental coaching rather than compliance.

Informants at Site B consistently linked structured competition to a sense of professional recognition:

"Before this system, the junior teachers were just following instructions. When the principal started asking us to compete on actual projects, it changed things — we had to show what we could actually do, not just comply. When our project was acknowledged in front of the whole staff, that was the first time I felt like a genuine contributor rather than a beginner." (JT-2, Site B)

Several informants at both sites also reported that structured deliberation, particularly the post-cycle feedback sessions reduced interpersonal tension that had accumulated during the competitive phase. These sessions appear to have served a dual function: reinforcing a shared institutional stake in the outcome, and restoring relational alignment after periods of directed friction.

Extending the theory of constructive conflict

The findings are broadly consistent with accounts of productive conflict in the organizational literature (Coser, 1967; Jehn, 1997; Liu et al., 2022; Simmel, 1955). This study adds specificity: it identifies the conditions, horizontal conflict structure, enabling social capital, and active POAC management under which conflict produced not only improved team dynamics but also concrete organizational outputs (a digital dashboard; an ethics charter) that met established indicators of innovation. This moves the empirical contribution beyond prior work, which has tended to focus on perceptual or attitudinal outcomes such as creativity or satisfaction, toward demonstrable institutional change, while also echoing the caution that task conflict's benefits are conditional rather than automatic (Kim et al., 2026).

A paradox-theoretic reading

Interpreted through paradox theory, the two sites illustrate contrasting responses to persistent organizational tension. Site B held the academic-residential tension open and worked it cyclically, consistent with the dynamic-equilibrium logic in which competing demands are sustained rather than dissolved (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Weiser & Laamanen, 2022); the result was exploration, novel prototypes and a negotiated charter. Site A, by contrast, tended to defensively suppress vertical tension, producing the stabilization and guarded compliance that paradox scholarship associates with defensive, either/or responses. Read this way, conflict engineering is the practical management of a learning-and-organizing paradox, and its feasibility depends on the relational conditions that allow actors to tolerate sustained tension, echoing the role of psychological safety in enabling productive disagreement (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023) and the ambidextrous capacity to pursue competing demands simultaneously (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

Discussion

Social capital as an enabling condition

The findings support and extend the established role of trust, norms, and networks in organizational governance (Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Niedlich et al., 2021; Putnam, 2000). Rather than asserting that social capital is a necessary cause, a claim two cases cannot establish we advance the more defensible position that, within the studied cases, social capital functioned as a foundational enabling condition for conflict

engineering. Where sufficient relational infrastructure was present, conflict could be directed without triggering fragmentation; where it was weaker, comparable interventions appeared to risk accelerating breakdown. The practical implication is correspondingly conditional: administrators considering proactive conflict governance would be well advised to assess and build relational capital before activating structured competition, a capacity that itself depends on the professional preparation of the principal, which research in the Indonesian context links to the ability to cultivate a constructive school organizational culture (Sholeh & Trihantoyo, 2019) (P1).

Relational structure as a boundary condition

The study's principal theoretical contribution concerns the role of relational structure in determining conflict outcomes. The meta-analytic literature has differentiated conflict primarily by type (DeChurch et al., 2013; de Dreu & Weingart, 2003). The present findings identify relational structure, specifically, the power distribution between conflicting parties as a further boundary condition of constructive conflict, complementing rather than replacing the task/relationship typology. Horizontal conflict (between actors of comparable standing) consistently enabled productive competition and innovation; vertical conflict (between actors in authority asymmetry) produced avoidance, defensive behavior, and factional formation, a pattern consistent with the high-power-distance cultural configuration documented for Indonesian organizations (Hofstede et al., 2010; Tantawi et al., 2026). This suggests that, within these two cases, the structural and cultural conditions of a conflict are at least as consequential as its content type in determining whether engineering is feasible, and that approaches effective for horizontal conflict would likely require modification before they could be applied to vertical contexts (P2). We frame relational symmetry as a boundary condition of constructive conflict as a theoretical refinement offered for further testing, rather than as a context-bound result or an established general rule, a two-site qualitative design cannot adjudicate between a genuine boundary condition and a feature specific to these two schools, and confirming which is the case will require replication across a larger and more structurally diverse sample of organizations.

POAC as adaptive operational mechanism

The empirical reinterpretation of POAC functions observed here aligns with critiques of classical linear management models (Mintzberg, 1994; Simon, 1997) and converges with organizational learning frameworks (Senge, 1990; Weick, 1995). Planning as relational sensing, organizing as network activation, actuating as structured competition design, and controlling as reflective monitoring together constitute the operational machinery of conflict engineering, the routines through which the cyclical management of paradoxical tension is enacted. The contribution is to position these adaptive functions as mechanism rather than theory, and to demonstrate how they operate in combination to convert tension into learning (P3).

Conflict engineering as a contribution to SDG 16

Returning to the SDG 16 framing introduced in the Literature Review, the empirical pattern documented here offers a modest but concrete illustration of what participatory, accountable institutional governance (Targets 16.6 and 16.7) can look like inside a single organization rather than at the level of national policy. At Site B, the principal's decision to treat academic-residential friction as a shared, competitively structured problem, rather than adjudicating it unilaterally gave both units a legitimate stake in the outcome;

the resulting ethics charter was, in effect, a negotiated institutional document produced through inclusive deliberation, in the spirit of *musyawarah-mufakat* extended into an organizational governance context. At Site A, by contrast, the vertical concentration of unresolved tension, and the guarded, performed harmony it produced, illustrates the institutional cost of falling short of that participatory standard: decisions continued to be made, but without the responsive, inclusive process that Target 16.7 envisions.

This reading should not be overstated: the study was not designed as an SDG 16 evaluation, and the propositions above remain about organizational innovation rather than about institutional accountability as such. Still, the cyclical, evaluative structure of conflict engineering, particularly its Controlling function, reframed here as reflective organizational learning gives schools and comparable hybrid organizations a concrete governance mechanism through which they can move closer to SDG 16-consistent practice: a repeatable process for surfacing tension, deliberating on it inclusively, and learning from how it was resolved, rather than relying on informal authority or enforced silence. Extending this mechanism deliberately to vertical, hierarchical conflict, where it is currently weakest, per Proposition 2 is accordingly one of the more direct practical levers available to school leaders who wish to strengthen participatory governance within their own institutions.

Conflict engineering versus conflict management: A boundary revisited

Consistent with the boundary specified in Table 1, the evidence supports a distinction between conflict management, reactive, resolution-oriented, event-level, and conflict engineering proactive, cyclical, and oriented toward using conflict as organizational input. It is worth being explicit, however, about what the empirical material does and does not show. In both illustrative accounts (P-1's department-level targets; P-2's system-improvement challenge), the principal's practice was to recognize tension that was already present, arising from overlapping mandates or informal subgroup structure and to design a structured, forward-looking channel for it, rather than to introduce tension into a conflict-free unit. On a strict reading, this places the observed practice closer to proactive, structurally embedded conflict management than to the literal manufacture of conflict the term "engineering" might imply. We retain conflict engineering as the operative construct because the defining features documented here, the ex-ante design of competitive structures, the systematic, cyclical repetition of the practice across terms, and the explicit orientation toward innovation rather than restored equilibrium go beyond what conventional conflict-management accounts describe. But we flag this boundary explicitly so the contribution is read as a refinement of proactive conflict governance rather than as a claim that leaders in these cases fabricated conflict de novo. The key differentiators, so specified, are intentionality of design, systematicity, and the explicit goal of generating organizational learning rather than restoring equilibrium. Offered as a preliminary conceptual contribution, the distinction warrants further empirical testing across institutional types and national contexts.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study examined how conflict engineering operates as a proactive governance practice within two hybrid school organizations that combine formal academic and residential functions. The findings show that conflict engineering is not simply an alternative form of conflict resolution, but a cyclical governance process through which organizational tension can be detected, diagnosed, deliberately structured, facilitated, evaluated, and converted into organizational learning. Across the

two cases, social capital, particularly trust, shared norms, and informal relational networks, emerged as a central enabling condition that allows tension to be channeled into constructive competition and collaborative problem-solving rather than avoidance or escalation. The study further identifies relational structure as a provisional boundary condition: horizontal conflict among actors of relatively comparable standing was more amenable to deliberate engineering and associated with organizational innovation, whereas vertical conflict characterized by greater relational asymmetry tended to encourage avoidance and conventional conflict management. These findings support three theoretical propositions: conflict is more likely to become innovation-generating when embedded in sufficient social capital (P1); relational symmetry conditions the feasibility of constructive conflict engineering (P2); and conflict engineering converts organizational tension into learning through cyclical governance rather than one-off resolution (P3). The study therefore repositions conflict management from a predominantly reactive practice toward the deliberate governance of tension as a potential organizational resource. In this framework, paradox theory provides the primary theoretical foundation, Pondy's conflict process model provides a processual lens, and the classical POAC functions are repositioned as the operational mechanism through which conflict engineering is enacted. **Implication:** The framework developed in this study suggests that effective conflict management in hybrid school organizations requires more than the selection of an appropriate conflict-handling style. Organizational leaders need to cultivate the social conditions that make constructive engagement with tension possible, particularly trust, shared norms, and relational networks. The findings also indicate that participatory conflict governance cannot be assumed to operate equally across relational structures. Where actors occupy relatively symmetrical positions, organizational tension may be deliberately structured toward learning and innovation; where substantial hierarchical asymmetry exists, institutional mechanisms are needed to reduce avoidance and create safer channels for upward communication and participation. Read alongside SDG 16, particularly Targets 16.6 and 16.7, conflict engineering provides a school-level illustration of how deliberate, cyclical, and inclusive governance of internal disagreement can contribute to more accountable and participatory institutional practice. In the Indonesian context, this implication also resonates with the deliberative tradition of *musyawarah-mufakat*, while emphasizing that deliberation requires institutional conditions that enable disagreement to be expressed rather than merely suppressed in the pursuit of harmony. **Limitation:** The findings should be interpreted within the boundaries of the two hybrid Islamic boarding schools examined in a single Indonesian regency. Their distinctive academic-residential structures, authority relations, communal dynamics, and cultural context may limit direct transferability to secular schools, higher education institutions, corporate organizations, or other organizational settings. The qualitative and cross-sectional design also limits causal and longitudinal inference. Although triangulation through interviews, participant observation, and document analysis strengthened the credibility of the findings, interpretive subjectivity cannot be completely eliminated. Moreover, the association between horizontal conflict and innovation, and between vertical conflict and avoidance, remains a contextually grounded pattern rather than an empirically established universal boundary condition. Conflict engineering itself also remains an emerging construct; its six-stage cycle and three propositions have not yet been subjected to quantitative validation, formal measurement development, or systematic mixed-methods testing. **Future Research:** Future studies should empirically test the three propositions across a wider range of organizational and cultural contexts, including

schools with different governance structures and non-educational hybrid organizations. Comparative and longitudinal research is particularly needed to determine whether the conflict-engineering cycle produces sustained organizational learning and innovation and whether its effects extend beyond the immediate actors involved. Mixed-methods studies could further operationalize the construct of conflict engineering, develop and validate measurement instruments for its six stages, and examine the relative contribution of social capital and relational structure to conflict outcomes. Further research should also distinguish analytically between the deliberate structuring of pre-existing organizational tension and the intentional manufacture of conflict, as these represent substantively different organizational practices with different ethical implications.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Alif Firdaus Zamzam contributed to the conceptualization of conflict engineering, development of the theoretical framework, research design, field data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript drafting. **Yatim Riyanto** contributed to the research design, theoretical validation, methodological review, interpretation of findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. **Muhamad Sholeh** contributed to the literature search, empirical documentation, data and reference management, and manuscript review. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, or preparation of this manuscript.

ETHICAL COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with applicable research and publication ethics. The authors affirm that the research was conducted with academic integrity and that appropriate procedures were followed in collecting and reporting the empirical data. The manuscript is original and does not contain plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, or other forms of unethical research practice.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI OR DIGITAL TOOLS IN WRITING

The authors acknowledge the use of digital tools, including AI-based technologies, as supporting tools during the research and manuscript preparation process. Specifically, ChatGPT, Claude was used for language editing, organization of literature, and refinement of manuscript structure. All AI-assisted outputs were critically evaluated, verified, and revised by the authors to ensure accuracy, academic rigor, and compliance with research ethics. The authors retain full responsibility for the content, arguments, interpretations, and final version of the manuscript.

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