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BETWEEN HARMONY AND HONESTY: A CONFLICT SOCIOLOGY OF NEGOTIATION AND DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS IN ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

This study examines conflict as a sociological phenomenon in Islamic educational institutions, foregrounding negotiation and difficult conversations as central yet under-theorized practices of organizational communication. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on conflict management strategies or prescriptive Islamic values, this article treats conflict as a social process embedded in structures of authority, seniority, culture, and religious interpretation. A qualitative case study design was employed at an anonymized Islamic junior secondary school in Central Java (SMP Islam X). Data were collected in April 2026 through semi-structured interviews with four purposively selected informants, non-participant observation, and institutional document review. Thematic analysis was used, supported by source and method triangulation. Six interconnected themes emerged: multi-actor conflict patterns, conflict avoidance culture, informal mediation-based negotiation, difficult conversations constrained by seniority and hierarchy, structural power relations, and the ambivalent function of Islamic values. Conflict tends to be resolved through personal approaches and closed communication rather than documented institutional procedures. The study advances a Value-Based Conflict Negotiation Model that integrates conflict sociology, organizational communication theory, and Islamic educational ethics. It demonstrates that musyawarah, justice, and ukhuwah function ambivalently: as moral legitimators of dialogue and, when narrowly interpreted, as suppressors of honest criticism. Practically, Islamic schools require both a clear conflict management procedure and capacity building in negotiation and difficult conversations, cultivating a culture in which ethical criticism is understood as organizational responsibility rather than institutional disloyalty.

Keywords: Conflict Sociology; Islamic Education; Negotiation; Difficult Conversations; Organizational Communication

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic educational institutions are not merely sites for transmitting religious knowledge and moral values; they are complex social arenas in which authority, seniority, organizational culture, parental expectations, and religious norms intersect and sometimes collide. Schools, madrasahs, and pesantren involve multiple actors who carry different interests, emotional histories, professional identities, and moral vocabularies into everyday interactions. Conflict, therefore, should not be treated as an institutional accident or a sign of institutional failure. From a sociological perspective, conflict is a normal feature of

social life that reflects underlying tensions in how educational organizations distribute authority, allocate resources, negotiate legitimacy, and manage difference (Ballantine et al., 2021; Plummer, 2021). The question is not whether Islamic schools experience conflict, but whether they possess the cultural, communicative, and procedural capacity to transform conflict into constructive organizational learning.

The complexity deepens in Islamic educational settings because organizational expectations are shaped by moral-religious language. Values such as musyawarah (deliberation), ukhuwah (brotherhood), justice, patience, and adab (ethical comportment) are frequently invoked as the proper framework for conflict resolution. These values are educationally and spiritually significant: they orient actors toward dialogue, mutual respect, and repair rather than coercion or escalation. However, when harmony is interpreted as the absence of open criticism rather than as the achievement of genuine resolution, the same values can become mechanisms for suppressing difficult conversations. Actors may remain publicly silent not because they agree, but because the institutional culture constructs candid criticism as disrespectful, disloyal, or un-Islamic (Iswandi et al., 2025; Qodir et al., 2025). This ambivalence, values that simultaneously enable and constrain voice, is a central analytical problem addressed by the present study.

Organizational communication provides an indispensable analytical lens for understanding how conflict is managed in educational settings. Communication is not merely the transmission of information; it is the medium through which authority is exercised, relationships are repaired, and organizational norms are reproduced or challenged (Cheney et al., 2010; Mumby & Kuhn, 2018). Research on conflict in organizations consistently demonstrates that conflict affects psychological wellbeing, task performance, and relational trust (Krueger et al., 2022; Kundi et al., 2022). When conflict is not addressed constructively, it tends to produce silence, workplace deviance, relational fatigue, and organizational stagnation. In schools specifically, conflict often arises at the intersection of formal expectations and lived experience: teachers expect discipline, students seek recognition, parents demand fairness, and leaders attempt to preserve institutional stability (Kennedy & Junker, 2023; Hou et al., 2023).

The concept of difficult conversations is particularly relevant in this context. Difficult conversations occur when the topic is emotionally charged, the relationship is perceived as at risk, or the power differential between parties is substantial (Prober et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2025). In school settings, difficult conversations may involve correcting a student, challenging a senior colleague, addressing perceived unfairness in workload distribution, or responding to parental complaints. The hierarchy of voice framework (Pfrombeck et al., 2022) helps explain why not all organizational actors possess equal psychological freedom to speak: position, age, gender, tenure, and institutional status shape whether an actor feels safe to voice criticism or concern. Silence in this framework is not passive but strategic, a rational response to perceived relational risk within asymmetric power relations. Understanding how difficult conversations are initiated, avoided, deflected, or completed is therefore critical for understanding the quality of conflict management in any organization.

Research on conflict management in Indonesian Islamic educational institutions has grown in recent years, but a substantial portion remains normative and prescriptive in character, recommending musyawarah, compassionate leadership, and Islamic ethics as solutions without closely examining how these values are actually operationalized in specific communicative interactions. Tisnawati et al. (2023) highlight the importance of organizational communication in Islamic education, while Muslimin (2024) examines communication strategies as instruments for educational quality improvement. Amin and Muallimah (2024) as well as Goffar and Afidah (2025) address preventive and resolutive

strategies for conflict management in Islamic schools. However, these studies generally stop short of examining the micro-level communicative practices through which conflict is actually navigated: who speaks first, who mediates, who stays silent, and what the institutional cost of silence is. The sociological and communicative mechanisms that connect values to practice remain empirically underexplored.

The present study was designed to address this research gap. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on conflict management strategies or the prescriptive content of Islamic values, this study examines conflict as a sociological phenomenon embedded in power relations, organizational culture, and religious interpretation. It specifically investigates how negotiation and difficult conversations are practiced within organizational communication processes in Islamic educational institutions, attending to the roles of hierarchy, seniority, and value interpretation in enabling or constraining open dialogue. This focus constitutes the novelty of the study: rather than asking whether Islamic schools have conflict management policies, it asks how school actors actually communicate when navigating conflict, and what social forces shape the conditions under which candid communication is or is not possible.

The study addresses three research questions. First, what types of conflict appear in the daily organizational life of an Islamic secondary school? Second, how are negotiation and difficult conversations practiced when conflict involves teachers, students, parents, and leaders? Third, how do hierarchy, seniority, and Islamic values shape the possibility of open, constructive dialogue? These questions are theoretically significant because they connect conflict sociology, organizational communication theory, and Islamic educational ethics. They are also practically significant because educational transformation in Islamic institutions requires not only governance reforms or digital systems, but also the communicative competence to talk honestly about tensions without damaging the relationships that make institutional life possible.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate when the aim is to develop an analytical understanding of a complex social phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018; Cyr & Goodman, 2024). The case study design does not seek statistical generalizability; rather, it aims to construct analytical generalizations: theoretical propositions that can be tested, refined, or challenged in future research across different settings. The research site is an Islamic junior secondary school in Central Java, Indonesia, here anonymized as SMP Islam X in order to protect the identities of the institution and its organizational members. The site was selected because it represents a tension characteristic of many Indonesian Islamic educational institutions: the need to maintain religious and familial values while simultaneously responding to growing demands for professional accountability, organizational transparency, and participatory communication.

Data were collected in April 2026 through three complementary methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four informants selected purposively because of their direct involvement in organizational communication and conflict management (Brinkmann, 2022). The informants were: (1) the vice principal for public relations, who frequently functions as a communication broker and informal mediator; (2) the vice principal for student affairs, who manages conflicts involving students, teachers, and parents; (3) a senior teacher with approximately thirteen years of institutional experience, selected to provide a historical and structural perspective on organizational culture; and (4) a junior teacher with approximately five years of experience, selected to

capture perspectives on seniority dynamics, power relations, and the experience of navigating difficult conversations from a less secure position. The diversity of positions was intended to capture variation in how authority, seniority, and communicative agency are experienced across different organizational roles.

Second, non-participant observation was conducted to provide contextual data independent of informant self-report. Observation focused on daily interactions among school members, patterns of verbal and non-verbal communication, the handling of sensitive issues in formal and informal settings, the role of mediating actors, and the ways in which values such as musyawarah and familial solidarity were enacted or invoked in concrete situations. Third, documentary data, including school profiles, disciplinary regulations, meeting notes, and relevant administrative records, were reviewed to triangulate interview and observation findings. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Terry & Hayfield, 2021), proceeding through iterative cycles of coding, categorization, and theoretical interpretation. Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation (interviews, observation, documents), method triangulation, and limited member checking with key informants to verify that analytical interpretations accurately reflected participants' meanings and experiences (Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

Thematic analysis identified six interconnected themes: (1) multi-actor conflict patterns, (2) conflict avoidance culture, (3) mediation-based negotiation, (4) difficult conversations constrained by seniority and risk, (5) structural power relations, and (6) the ambivalent function of Islamic values. Table 1 summarizes their empirical indicators and analytical meanings.

Table 1.
Thematic Matrix of Conflict Management at SMP Islam X

No.	Theme	Empirical Indicator	Analytical Meaning	Key Expression
1	Multi-actor conflict	Conflict appears among leaders, teachers, students, and parents.	Conflict reflects networked authority and competing expectations.	“It can be principal-teacher, teacher-teacher, teacher-parent, teacher-student, or student-student.”
2	Avoidance culture	Actors choose silence, postponement, or giving in.	Harmony may conceal unresolved tension.	“The conflict is not expressed; people prefer to give in or avoid it.”
3	Informal mediation	Vice principals, homeroom teachers, and counseling teachers mediate cases.	Mediation works, but depends on trusted individuals.	“We always prioritize mediation.”

4	Difficult conversations	Criticism is delivered privately, indirectly, or through intermediaries.	Emotional risk and seniority shape who speaks and how.	"It is difficult because we worry about damaging the relationship."
5	Power relations	Seniority and structural authority affect participation.	Formal equality does not guarantee psychological safety.	"The younger usually adjust to the seniors."
6	Islamic values	Musyawarah, justice, and familial solidarity are invoked.	Islamic values legitimize dialogue but may also limit criticism if interpreted narrowly.	"Musyawarah and familial values really help."

Source: Authors' analysis based on interviews, observation, and documentation (2026).

Multi-Actor Conflict Patterns

The first finding confirms that conflict at SMP Islam X is not confined to dyadic interpersonal disputes but pervades the institutional network. The junior teacher explained that conflict can occur across multiple relational axes, principal–teacher, teacher–teacher, teacher–parent, teacher–student, and student–student, indicating that conflict is a structural feature of the school as a social organization rather than an exceptional event. A representative case involved a teacher whose disciplinary correction was perceived by a student as excessively harsh; the incident subsequently expanded into a teacher–parent–vice principal interaction when the student's family sought clarification. This case illustrates how a localized communicative event can rapidly acquire an institutional dimension, mobilizing multiple actors and authority levels within a single episode.

The senior teacher offered a broader historical perspective, noting that inter-staff conflicts often originate in misunderstandings, divergent professional orientations, and perceptions that institutional policies do not equally accommodate all organizational members. From a sociological standpoint, this suggests that conflict is frequently driven not by personal animosity but by perceived distributive injustice: when workloads appear unequal, decision-making appears exclusionary, or communication appears inadequate, organizational actors experience a gap between institutional ideals and institutional realities that generates tension (Ballantine et al., 2021). The vice principal for student affairs further extended the picture by documenting cases in which student behavior problems at school were traceable to family dysfunction, economic hardship, or absent parents, underscoring that conflict in educational settings is often ecologically nested: its symptoms appear within the school, but its roots extend into students' social and family contexts.

Conflict Avoidance Culture

The second finding concerns the institutional prevalence of conflict avoidance. Multiple informants independently reported that conflict tends to be managed by absorbing rather than addressing it: actors give way, postpone discussion, or maintain surface cordiality rather than initiating direct negotiation. The junior teacher noted that conflict among teachers is frequently not voiced; parties prefer to yield or circumvent conflict even when the underlying tension remains active. The senior teacher corroborated this by stating that inter-staff conflict is more often avoided than openly discussed, with the explicit

rationale of preserving collegial relationships. While this orientation provides short-term stability, preventing open confrontation from disrupting the school's daily functioning, it generates what may be termed pseudo-harmony: a surface calm that conceals unresolved tension and forestalls the organizational learning that could prevent recurrence (Mumby & Kuhn, 2018).

The junior teacher also identified a related temporal dimension: conflict resolution frequently undergoes indefinite postponement. When conflicts are not addressed openly, they do not disappear; they are deferred, sometimes indefinitely, accumulating as relational fatigue, diminished trust, and divergent informal accounts of what occurred. This pattern resonates with research on organizational silence, which demonstrates that the strategic withholding of voice, choosing not to articulate concern, dissent, or criticism, is not a neutral absence but an active communicative choice shaped by perceived risks to identity, relationships, and professional standing (Pfrombeck et al., 2022; Krishna et al., 2024). In the context of SMP Islam X, the organizational culture both motivates and rationalizes silence by framing it as an expression of adab, patience, and respect for seniority, values that, while intrinsically significant, can be deployed to render critique institutionally unwelcome.

Mediation-Based Negotiation

The third finding documents the dominant conflict management mechanism: informal mediation. In teacher–student and student–student cases, the vice principal for student affairs confirmed that the school consistently prioritizes mediation over immediate sanction. The typical sequence involves individual clarification with the student, consultation with the homeroom teacher or counseling teacher, and, when necessary, a separate conversation with parents. The separation of parent and student in initial discussions reflects a sophisticated communicative awareness: it allows each party to explain their position without the emotional amplification that may occur in joint confrontation, and it enables the mediating actor to calibrate information and manage expectations before a full meeting.

The corrective quality of the mediation process is particularly noteworthy. In the case described earlier, in which a student rejected a teacher's disciplinary correction as too harsh, the mediation outcome involved correction in two directions: the student acknowledged the behavioral infraction, while the teacher acknowledged that the communicative style had been unnecessarily confrontational. This bidirectional correction aligns with the theoretical conception of integrative negotiation, which seeks not to determine a winner and a loser but to identify a jointly acceptable resolution that addresses the substantive concerns of all parties (Heunis et al., 2023; Munduate et al., 2022). However, the findings also reveal a structural vulnerability in the school's mediation practice: it is heavily dependent on trusted individual actors, specifically the vice principal for public relations, who is repeatedly identified as the primary communication broker and informal mediator. When the resolution of conflict depends on the availability, skill, and relational capital of a single individual, the institutional capacity for conflict management is organizationally fragile.

Difficult Conversations Constrained by Seniority and Relational Risk

The fourth finding addresses the specific challenges associated with difficult conversations, those communicative events in which the topic is emotionally sensitive, the relationship is perceived as vulnerable, or the power differential between parties is consequential (Prober et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2025). The junior teacher recounted experiences of difficulty in articulating criticism or dissent, particularly when the response

was conditioned by generational differences in experience, professional status, and age. In such situations, the preferred strategy was to engage an intermediate third party who could convey the message more safely. The senior teacher described similar dynamics, noting that difficult conversations were particularly challenging when the interlocutor was a close colleague, because the relational stakes made direct criticism feel like a threat to the friendship and collegial bond.

The vice principal for student affairs added a contextual dimension to this picture by documenting how sensitive communications between teachers and parents are routinely managed through private channels rather than public forums. The vice principal for public relations explicitly articulated the preference for face-to-face communication over digital communication for sensitive matters, reasoning that digital messages are susceptible to misinterpretation, decontextualization, and uncontrolled dissemination. This communicative awareness aligns with research on difficult conversations that emphasizes the importance of channel selection, empathic presence, and the creation of psychological safety for all parties (Giacumo, 2025; Bodie, 2023). The ORANGE framework proposed by Giacumo (2025), which emphasizes Observation, Respect, Attention, Navigation, Goal orientation, and Evaluation, provides a useful procedural scaffold for these kinds of encounters, suggesting that difficult conversations are not merely matters of individual courage but of facilitated communicative practice.

Structural Power Relations

The fifth finding documents how formal and informal structures of power shape communicative participation in the organization. The school principal holds formal institutional authority but tends not to intervene directly in conflicts that vice principals can manage, preferring an indirect leadership style that works through delegation and information gathering. The junior teacher noted that the principal typically assesses situations by consulting multiple staff members before deciding whether to act, while the senior teacher observed that the principal tends to prioritize institutional stability over direct confrontation. This non-confrontational leadership orientation can be effective in de-escalating acute tensions, but it may also create a communicative distance that renders the formal leadership less visible and less accessible in moments of institutional uncertainty.

Beyond formal structural positions, seniority operates as a pervasive informal authority structure. The senior teacher described the organizational culture as one in which the young adjust to the established: junior teachers routinely moderate, qualify, or withhold their assessments when senior colleagues have expressed a contrary view. Seniority in this context confers not merely experiential authority but symbolic capital, what Addina and Hanif (2025), drawing on Bourdieu, identify as the embodied institutional prestige that shapes perception and deference without requiring explicit coercion. The consequence is that formal deliberative equality, the right of all teachers to speak in a staff meeting, does not translate into psychological equality: the junior teacher who possesses a legitimate concern may nonetheless withhold it because the social cost of challenging established professional judgment appears to exceed the organizational benefit of the correction.

The Ambivalent Function of Islamic Values

The sixth finding examines the role of Islamic values in conflict resolution and finds that they function ambivalently: simultaneously enabling and constraining open communication. On the enabling side, musyawarah, justice, and familial solidarity provide a shared moral vocabulary that legitimizes the mediation process and makes agreement more likely, because parties understand themselves as participating in a practice that is both institutionally sanctioned and religiously appropriate. The vice principal for public

relations observed that musyawarah and familial values substantially facilitate conflict resolution; the vice principal for student affairs linked the school's approach to justice and equal treatment of all students. When Islamic values operationalize a process of equal hearing, transparent reasoning, and relational repair, they function as genuine ethical assets for organizational communication.

On the constraining side, Islamic values can become obstacles when they are interpreted as requiring the preservation of surface harmony at the expense of substantive honesty. The conception of ukhuwah as familial solidarity, for example, can be deployed to delay or discourage critique by framing direct criticism as an act of institutional disloyalty or personal disrespect. This interpretation transforms a relational value into a communicative gag, suppressing the candid conversation that organizational learning and institutional accountability require. Observation data supported this reading: the school's communicative culture evidenced a consistent preference for private channels, indirect messaging, and the avoidance of open-forum critique, which, while consistent with certain interpretations of adab, also systematically limits the institutional feedback mechanisms available to organizational members.

Discussion

From Avoidance Culture to Negotiation: A Transitional Phase

The findings collectively support the characterization of SMP Islam X as an organization in a transitional phase: moving from a predominantly conflict-avoidant culture toward more open negotiation practices, but without yet having institutionalized the procedures, competencies, and cultural permissions that would make that transition durable and equitable. The school has adopted mediation, personal approach, and face-to-face clarification as legitimate conflict management practices, which represents a genuine advance beyond purely suppressive approaches. However, these practices remain informal, undocumented, and dependent on the relational capital of specific trusted individuals. Pramono et al. (2024) observe that new organizational practices require institutionalization to become stable routines; without documentation, role clarity, and evaluation mechanisms, good practice remains contingent rather than systemic.

This transitional character has implications for organizational resilience. When conflict management depends on the availability and competence of individual mediators, the organization is vulnerable to the departure, incapacity, or overextension of those individuals. Jaelani and Hanif (2025) document increasing parental participation and accountability expectations in Indonesian Islamic schools, suggesting that the relational demands on school communicators are intensifying. A conflict management system that remains informal and actor-dependent cannot easily scale to meet these demands. What the transition requires, therefore, is not merely more mediation but the institutionalization of mediation: the creation of documented procedures, trained personnel, accessible reporting channels, and regular evaluation mechanisms that distribute conflict management competence across the organization rather than concentrating it in a few individuals (Qodir et al., 2025; Irby et al., 2022).

Power, Voice, and the Psychology of Speaking in Hierarchical Organizations

The most analytically significant structural finding is that formal equality of participation does not translate into psychological equality of voice. The hierarchy of voice framework (Pfrombeck et al., 2022) provides the conceptual tools for understanding this gap: organizational actors evaluate the perceived benefits and costs of speaking before deciding whether to voice a concern, and this calculation is systematically skewed by

power, status, and relational risk. In SMP Islam X, junior teachers operate within a communicative field in which seniority, structural position, and the institutionally valorized norm of preserving harmony all function as implicit discouragement for honest critique. The result is not the absence of opinion but its strategic withholding, a condition that Mumby and Kuhn (2018) identify as organizational silence, distinguishable from genuine consent by its dependence on perceived coercive conditions rather than authentic agreement.

Critical organizational communication theory (Mumby & Kuhn, 2018) helps explain why this silence is difficult to recognize and address. Power in organizations operates not only through explicit commands but through normalized norms, taken-for-granted assumptions, and the internalized sense of what kinds of speech are appropriate, legitimate, and safe. In educational organizations, the authority of experience, age, and institutional seniority is particularly powerful because it is coded as both professional respect and religious obligation. Addina and Hanif (2025) demonstrate, drawing on Bourdieu, that symbolic capital in educational institutions can operate as a form of soft domination: it shapes the possibilities available to actors without requiring explicit sanction. Addressing this structural dimension of communication therefore requires more than training in assertiveness; it requires institutional redesign that creates multiple channels for voice, anonymous issue-mapping, structured reflection meetings, peer mentoring across seniority levels, and that explicitly reframes critical speech as organizational responsibility rather than institutional disloyalty (Kluger et al., 2023; Vinokur et al., 2024).

Islamic Values as Procedural Ethics: Toward a More Robust Interpretation

The ambivalent function of Islamic values identified in the findings suggests that the practical problem in Islamic schools is not a deficit of values but a deficit of value interpretation. Musyawarah, ukhuwah, and justice are neither inherently restrictive nor emancipatory; their effects depend on how they are interpreted and operationalized in institutional practice. Rahayu et al. (2025) argue that Islamic leadership values, when genuinely integrated into conflict management, can produce a more cohesive and ethically grounded organizational climate. The critical move is to shift from a decorative to a procedural understanding of these values: musyawarah not as the ritual of assembling participants but as the guarantee that each participant has an equal opportunity to speak and be heard; justice not as the formal application of rules but as the substantive hearing of all positions before any judgment; ukhuwah not as the suppression of disagreement for the sake of familial warmth but as the relational care that makes honest conversation possible without humiliation.

This reinterpretation has direct implications for how difficult conversations are framed in Islamic educational contexts. The dual requirement of adab and courage, ethical comportment and communicative courage, needs to be institutionally cultivated as a complementary rather than competitive pair. Adab disciplines how criticism is delivered: respectfully, with care for the person, and through appropriate channels. Courage ensures that the substantive content of the criticism is not lost in the process of delivering it politely. A school in which adab is valorized without courage will systematically lose important organizational information; a school in which courage is exercised without adab will damage the relationships through which cooperation is sustained. The synthesis of both is what this study terms ethically assertive communication: the capacity to speak honestly in ways that are respectful of persons, cognizant of power dynamics, and oriented toward collective institutional improvement (Giacumo, 2025; Williams et al., 2025).

Comparative Reflection and Contextual Positioning

The findings resonate with international research on conflict and voice in educational organizations. Hou et al. (2023) document the conflict experiences of novice teachers in professional learning communities in Chinese schools, finding that seniority norms and the expectation of hierarchical deference systematically constrain the honest peer communication that professional learning communities are designed to facilitate. Kennedy and Junker (2023) examine the escalation dynamics in teacher–student interactions, demonstrating that loaded moments, brief interactional episodes with high communicative intensity, can set the trajectory of long-term relational quality. Golubeva (2023) finds that awareness of one's own conflict communication styles, developed through reflection and dialogue, significantly improves intercultural communicative competence, suggesting a transferable principle: reflexive communication training can build capacity for difficult conversations across diverse relational contexts.

What distinguishes the Indonesian Islamic school context is the specific way in which religious values intersect with organizational hierarchy to shape communicative norms. The moral pressure to maintain harmony is not merely organizational but theologically grounded, making it more deeply internalized and more resistant to critique than in contexts where harmony norms are purely cultural. This suggests that intervention strategies for Islamic schools cannot be transplanted directly from secular organizational communication research; they need to engage the theological dimensions of communicative norms directly, reinterpreting Islamic values in ways that are both theologically coherent and organizationally functional. The Value-Based Conflict Negotiation Model developed in this article attempts to provide such an integrated framework.

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes three theoretical contributions to the literature on conflict management, organizational communication, and Islamic educational research. First, it advances the integration of conflict sociology and organizational communication theory in the study of Islamic schools. Previous research has tended to approach conflict in Islamic educational institutions either through the lens of managerial prescription, recommending specific Islamic practices, or through purely sociological description. The present study bridges these approaches by treating conflict as simultaneously a sociological phenomenon (shaped by power, structure, and culture) and a communicative phenomenon (enacted through dialogue, silence, mediation, and negotiation). This dual framing reveals that the sociology of conflict in Islamic schools cannot be adequately understood without attention to the specific communicative practices through which power asymmetries are reproduced or challenged, and that organizational communication theory in the Islamic educational context cannot be applied without attention to the sociological conditions that shape which voices are heard and which are suppressed.

Second, the study contributes an empirically grounded analysis of the ambivalent function of Islamic values in organizational communication. The existing literature on Islamic educational leadership tends to present Islamic values, musyawarah, ukhuwah, justice, as straightforwardly beneficial for conflict resolution and organizational cohesion. The present findings complicate this picture by demonstrating that the same values can enable open dialogue in one interpretive register while foreclosing it in another. This finding extends the theoretical account of values in organizations by showing that values do not have fixed communicative effects; their effects are contingent on their interpretation, the institutional contexts in which they are invoked, and the power relations that surround their application. This has implications beyond Islamic educational research: it speaks to

the broader theoretical question of how moral frameworks function in organizational life, and specifically to the conditions under which normative resources become tools for domination rather than emancipation.

Third, the study develops a conceptual model, the Value-Based Conflict Negotiation Model, that represents an original theoretical contribution to the intersection of Islamic ethics and organizational conflict management. The model (elaborated below) is not merely descriptive of current practice but normative and prescriptive: it proposes how Islamic values should be operationalized in organizational procedures to support constructive conflict resolution without suppressing honest voice. By situating individual communicative practices (difficult conversations, mediation) within structural conditions (hierarchy, seniority, organizational culture) and moral resources (Islamic values, institutional norms), the model provides a multi-level framework that addresses the complexity of conflict management in a way that neither purely institutional nor purely normative approaches can achieve alone.

The Value-Based Conflict Negotiation Model

Based on the empirical findings and theoretical analysis, this study proposes the Value-Based Conflict Negotiation Model (VBCNM) as a conceptual framework for understanding and improving conflict management in Islamic educational institutions. The model is structured as a dynamic, iterative process with seven sequential but interconnected stages:

(1) Conflict Trigger → A conflict-generating event arises from misunderstanding, perceived injustice, disciplinary correction, or relational tension within the organizational network.

(2) Conflict Avoidance Culture → The institutional default response is avoidance, postponement, or private management, shaped by seniority norms, hierarchical deference, and the valorization of harmony.

(3) Mediation Process → Trusted intermediaries, vice principals, homeroom teachers, counseling staff, are mobilized to facilitate clarification, emotional containment, and position negotiation between parties.

(4) Difficult Conversation → Where mediation involves emotionally sensitive content, difficult conversations must be navigated. The quality of these conversations depends on the communicative competence, psychological safety, and ethical intentionality of the participants.

(5) Islamic Values as Procedural Ethics, Musyawarah (equal hearing), Justice (procedural fairness), Ukhuwah (relational repair), provide the moral framework within which conflict is processed. These values must be interpreted procedurally rather than merely symbolically.

(6) Conflict Resolution → The parties reach a mutually acknowledged resolution: acknowledgment of error or misunderstanding, agreed-upon behavioral changes, or a renegotiated understanding of roles and expectations.

(7) Organizational Learning → The resolution is documented, reflected upon, and used to refine institutional procedures, reducing the probability of recurrence and building the collective communicative competence of the organization.

The model makes two key theoretical claims. First, it asserts that conflict avoidance is not merely a psychological trait of individual actors but an institutionally produced default that is maintained by structural conditions (hierarchy, seniority) and cultural norms (harmony as the absence of dissent). Changing the default therefore requires both individual-level capacity building and institutional-level redesign. Second, the model

argues that Islamic values occupy a structurally determining position in this process, they are not epiphenomenal but central, and that their effect depends critically on how they are interpreted. When musyawarah is interpreted as equal hearing, it functions as a democratic communicative value; when it is interpreted as ritualized consensus-building under the guidance of the most senior figure present, it reproduces existing power asymmetries. The VBCNM therefore requires not just the invocation of Islamic values but a deliberate and ongoing institutional hermeneutics that keeps their democratic and emancipatory potential alive against the pressure of deferential cultural norms.

Practical Implications

The findings and the Value-Based Conflict Negotiation Model generate several concrete implications for practitioners in Islamic educational institutions and for educational policymakers.

For School Principals

School principals need to develop what may be termed conflict leadership competence: the capacity to model openness to critique, to receive difficult feedback without defensiveness, and to create the institutional conditions in which honest communication is treated as a sign of organizational health rather than disloyalty. Practically, this may involve establishing a regular reflective staff meeting in which issues are surfaced without attribution, practicing transparent and consistent decision-making so that staff trust the fairness of institutional processes, and actively supporting middle leaders (vice principals, homeroom teachers) with communication training rather than assuming that their relational skills will be adequate to all situations. Adams and Forsyth (2024) demonstrate that teacher trust in the school principal is a distinct psychological state that significantly mediates institutional outcomes; building that trust requires consistent, honest, and responsive communication over time.

For Teachers

Teachers, and especially junior teachers, require capacity building in communicative self-efficacy: the belief that their voice matters and that expressing it constructively is part of their professional obligation. Institutional programs should include training in active listening, emotion regulation, assertive communication, and the facilitation of difficult conversations (McCarthy, 2025; Vinokur et al., 2024). Senior teachers, in turn, need structured opportunities for reflection on the unintentional ways in which their communicative authority may inhibit junior colleagues. Peer mentoring programs that pair junior and senior teachers in structured reflective dialogue, with explicit attention to the dynamics of seniority and hierarchy, could provide a space for developing more equitable communicative norms. Kluger et al. (2023) demonstrate that training in high-quality listening significantly improves conflict outcomes and relational quality, suggesting that listening, not only speaking, is a competence that requires deliberate development.

For Islamic Educational Institutions

At the institutional level, Islamic schools require a simple, clear, and documented conflict management procedure that specifies the sequential steps from initial identification through mediation, resolution, and institutional reflection. This procedure should be developed participatively, so that all stakeholders understand and own it, rather than imposed from above. The procedure should explicitly incorporate Islamic values as procedural standards: musyawarah as the guarantee of equal hearing, justice as the requirement to listen to all parties before reaching conclusions, and ukhuwah as the

commitment to repair rather than merely suppress the relational damage that conflict can cause. Critically, the procedure must also include mechanisms for documenting patterns, not personal cases, but structural tendencies, so that the organization can learn from conflict rather than merely managing it case by case. Rahayu et al. (2025) and Goffar and Afidah (2025) provide complementary recommendations for conflict management in Indonesian Islamic schools that are consistent with these prescriptions.

For Educational Policymakers

At the policy level, the findings suggest that Indonesian Islamic educational policy needs to move beyond the normative endorsement of musyawarah and Islamic ethics in school management guidelines toward the specification of concrete communicative competencies and structural conditions that support their genuine operationalization. Professional development programs for school leaders and teachers in Islamic schools should include conflict management, difficult conversation facilitation, and organizational communication as recognized competencies, not merely as peripheral soft skills. Irby et al. (2022) demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of virtual professional development on conflict management for school leaders, suggesting that scalable delivery modalities are available. National and regional educational authorities could also require schools to include conflict management evaluation in their annual institutional self-assessment processes, creating accountability for the quality of institutional communication rather than merely for academic outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that conflict in Islamic educational institutions is a sociological and communicative phenomenon shaped by authority, organizational culture, seniority, and interpretations of religious values. At SMP Islam X, conflict emerges across relations among leaders, teachers, students, and parents due to misunderstanding, perceived injustice, disciplinary incidents, workload disputes, and students' social and family conditions. The school is gradually moving from conflict avoidance toward negotiation and mediation; however, these practices remain informal, dependent on particular actors, and insufficiently documented. Difficult conversations are still constrained by hierarchy and the assumption that harmony requires the absence of dissent. Consequently, musyawarah, justice, and ukhuwah can support fair dialogue and relational repair, but may suppress honest communication when interpreted only as maintaining surface harmony.

The Value-Based Conflict Negotiation Model emphasizes that constructive resolution requires Islamic values to be institutionalized as equal hearing, procedural fairness, and relational repair, supported by ethically assertive communication. Islamic schools should establish documented conflict procedures, train school actors in negotiation and difficult conversations, and create reflective forums where constructive criticism is treated as a professional responsibility. The findings are limited by the single-site design and the purposive sample of four informants, so they are analytically suggestive rather than statistically representative. Future research should compare different Islamic educational institutions, involve more diverse participants including students and parents, use longitudinal designs, and examine how digital communication shapes conflict avoidance and difficult conversations.

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